

THE
STORY OF VALENTINE
AND HIS BROTHER

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IN THREE VOLUMES

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THE STORY OF VALENTINE; AND HIS BROTHER.

CHAPTER XVII.

DICK's mother sat upon the bank where he had left her, with her hands clasping her knees, and her abstract eyes gazing across the river into the distance, seeing scarcely anything before her, but seeing much which was not before her nor could be. A tramp has no room to sit in, no domestic duties to do, even were she disposed to do them; and to sit thus in a silent musing, or without even musing at all, in mere empty leisure, beaten upon by wind and sun, was as characteristic of her wandering life as were the long fatigues of the road along which at other times she would plod for hours, or the noisy tumult of race-

course or fair through which she often carried her serious face and abstract eyes — a figure always remarkable and never having any visible connection with the scene in which she was. But this day she was as she had not been for years. The heart which fulfilled its ordinary pulsations in her breast calmly and dully on most occasions, like something far off and scarcely belonging to her, was now throbbing high with an emotion which influenced every nerve and fibre of her frame. It had never stilled since last night when she heard Val's name sounding clear through the sunny air, and saw the tall well-formed boy, with his wet jersey clinging to his shoulders, moving swiftly away from her, a vision, but more substantial than any other vision. Her old heart, the heart of her youth, had leaped back into life at that moment ; and instead of the muffled beating of the familiar machine which had simply kept her alive all these years, a something full of independent life, full of passion, and eagerness, and quick-coming fancies, and hope, and fear, had suddenly come to life within her bosom. I don't know if her thoughts were very articulate. They could scarcely have been so, uneducated, untrained, undisciplined

soul as she was—a creature ruled by impulses, and with no hand to control her; but as she sat there, and saw her placid Dick go happily off, to meet the other lad who was to him “a young swell,” able to advance and help him, one to whom he had taken a sudden fancy, he could not tell why,—the strangeness of the situation roused her to an excitement which she was incapable of subduing. “It mayn’t be him after all—it mayn’t be him after all,” she said to herself, watching Dick till he disappeared into the distance. She would have given all she had (it was not much) to go with him, and look face to face upon the other. It seemed to her that she must know at the first glance whether it was *him* or not. But, indeed, she had no doubt that it was *him*. For I do not attempt to make any pretence at deceiving the well-informed and quick-sighted reader, who knows as well as I do who this woman was. She had carried on her wandering life, the life which she had chosen, for the last eight years, exposed to all the vicissitudes of people in her condition, sometimes in want, often miserable, pursuing in her wild freedom a routine as mechanically fixed as that of the most rigid conventional life, and bound, had she

known it, by as unyielding a lacework of custom as any that could have affected the life of the Honourable Mrs Richard Ross, the wife of the Secretary of Legation. But she did not know this, poor soul ; and besides, all possibility of that other existence, all hold upon it or thought of it, had disappeared out of her horizon for sixteen years.

Sixteen years ! a large slice out of a woman's life who had not yet done more than pass the half-way milestone of human existence. She had never possessed so much even of the merest rudimentary education as to know what the position of Richard Ross's wife meant, except that it involved living in a house, wearing good clothes, and being surrounded by people of whom she was frightened, who did not understand her, and whom she could not understand. Since her flight back into her natural condition, the slow years had brought to her maturing mind thoughts which she understood as little. She was not more educated, more clever, nor indeed more clear in her confused fancies, than when she gave back one of her boys, driven thereto by a wild sense of justice, into his father's keeping ; but many strange things had seemed to pass before her dreamy eyes since

then, — things she could not fathom, vague visions of what might have been right, of what was wrong. These had come to little practical result, except in so far that she had carefully preserved her boy Dick from contact with the evil around—had trained him in her way to truth and goodness and some strange sense of honour—had got him even a little education, the faculties of reading and writing, which were to herself a huge distinction among her tribe; and, by keeping him in her own dreamy and silent but pure companionship, had preserved the lad from moral harm.

She had however, in doing this, a material to work upon which had saved her much trouble. The boy was, to begin with, of a character as incomprehensible to her as were the other vague and strange influences which had shaped her shipwrecked life. He was good, gentle, more advanced than herself, his teacher, in the higher things which she tried to teach him, getting by instinct to conclusions which only painfully and dimly had forced themselves upon her, not subject to the temptations which she expected to move him, not lawless, nor violent, nor hard to control, but full of reason and sense and steady

trustworthiness from his cradle. She had by this time got over the surprise with which she had slowly come to recognise in Dick a being totally different from herself. She was no analyst of character, and she had accepted the fact with dumb wonder which did not know how to put itself into words. Even now there awaited her many lesser surprises, as Dick, going on from step to step in life, did things which it never would have occurred to her to do, and showed himself totally impervious to those temptations against which it had been necessary for her to struggle. His last declaration to her was as surprising as anything that went before it. The nomad's son, who had been "on the tramp" all his life, whose existence had been spent "on the road," alternating between the noisy excitement of those scenes of amusement which youth generally loves, and that dull semi-hibernation of the winter which gives the tramp so keen a zest for the new start of spring,—was it the boy so bred who had spoken to her of a "home," of steady work, and the commonplace existence of a man who had learned a trade? She wondered with a depth of vague surprise which it would be impossible to put into words

—for she herself had no words to express what she meant. Had it not happened to chime in with the longing in her own mind to stay here and see the other boy, whose momentary contact had filled her with such excitement, I don't know how she would have received Dick's strange proposal; but in her other agitation it passed without more than an additional but temporary shock of that surprise which Dick constantly gave her; and she did not count the cost of the concession she had made to him—the tacit agreement she had come under to live under a commonplace roof, and confine herself to indoor life during this flush of midsummer weather—for the longing that she had to know something, if only as a distant spectator, of the life and being of that other boy.

After a while she roused herself and went over in the ferry-boat to the other side of the river, where were “the rafts” to which Dick looked with so much anxiety and hope. Everything was very still on the rafts at that sunny hour before mid-day, when Eton, shut up in its schoolrooms, did its construing drowsily, and dreamed of the delights of “after twelve” without being able to rush forth and anticipate

them. The attendants on the rafts, lightly-clad, softly-stepping figures, in noiseless boating shoes and such imitation of boating costume as their means could afford, were lounging about with nothing to do, seated on the rails drawling in dreary Berkshire speech, or arranging their boats in readiness for the approaching rush. Dick's mother approached along the road, without attracting any special observation, and got into conversation with one or two of the men with the ease which attends social intercourse on these levels of life. "If there is a new hand wanted, my lad is dreadful anxious to come," she said. "Old Harry's looking for a new lad," answered the man she addressed. And so the talk began.

"There was a kind of an accident on the river last night," she said, after a while ; "one of the gentlemen got his boat upset, and my lad brought it down——"

"Lord bless you, call that a haccident ?" said her informant ; "half-a-dozen of 'em swamps every night. They don't mind, nor nobody else."

"The name of this one was—Ross, I think," she said, very slowly ; "maybe you'll know him ?"

“I know him well enough—he’s in the Victory; not half a bad fellow in his way, but awful sharp, and not a bit of patience. I seed him come in dripping wet. He’s free with his money, and I daresay he’d pay your lad handsome. If I were you, I’d speak to old Harry himself about the place; and if you say you’ve a friend or two among them young swells, better luck.”

“Is this one what you call a swell?” said the woman.

“Why, he’s *Mr* Ross, ain’t he? that’s Eton for honourable,” said one of the men.

“*He* ain’t *Mr* Ross,” said an older and better-informed person, with some contempt. The older attendants at the rafts were walking peer-ages, and knew everybody’s pedigree. “His father was Mister Ross, if you please. He used to be at college in my time; a nice light-haired sort of a lad, not good for much, but with heaps of friends. Not half the pluck of this one; this one’s as dark as you, missis, a kind of a foreign-looking blade, and as wilful as the old gentleman himself. But I like that sort better than the quiet ones; the quiet ones does just as much mischief on the sly.”

“They’re a rare lot, them lads are,” said the other—“shouting at a man like’s he was the dust under their feet. Aint we their fellow-creatures all the same ? It aint much you makes at the rafts, missis, even if you gains a lot in the season. For after all, look how short the season is—you may say just the summer half. It’s too cold in March, and it’s too cold in October—nothing to speak of but the summer half. You makes a good deal while it lasts, I don’t say nothing to the contrary—but what’s that to good steady work all round the year ?”

“Maybe her lad isn’t one for steady work,” said another. “It *is* work, I can tell you is this, as long as it lasts ; from early morning to lockup, never a moment to draw your breath, except school - hours ; and holidays, and half-holidays without end. Then there’s the regular boating gents as come and go, not constant like the Eton gentlemen. They give a deal of trouble—they do ; and as particular with their boats as if they were babies. I tell you what, missis, if you want him to have an easy place, I wouldn’t send him here.”

“He’s not one that’s afraid of work,” said the woman, “and it’s what he’s set his heart on. I

wonder if you could tell me where this Mr Ross comes from?—if he's west-country now, down Devonshire way?"

"Bless you, no," said the old man, who was great in genealogies; "he's from the north, he is—Scotland or thereabouts. His grandfather came with him when he first came to college—Lord something or other. About as like a lord as I am. But the nobility aint much to look at," added this functionary, with whom familiarity had bred contempt. "They're a poor lot them Scotch and Irish lords. Give me a good railway man, or that sort; they're the ones for spending their money. Lord—I cannot think on the old un's name."

"Was it—Eskside?"

"You're a nice sort of body to know about the haristocracy," said the man; "in course it was Eskside. Now, missis, if you knowed, what was the good of coming asking me, taking a fellow in?"

"I didn't know," said the woman, humbly; "I only wanted to know. In my young days, long ago, I knew—a family of that name."

"Ay, ay, in your young days! You were a handsome lass then, I'll be bound," said the old man, with a grin.

“Look here,” said one of the others—“here’s old Harry coming, if you like to speak to him about your lad. Speak up and don’t be frightened. He aint at all a bad sort, and if you tell him as the boy’s spry and handy, and don’t mind a hard day’s work—Speak up! only don’t say I told you.” And the benevolent adviser disappeared hastily, and began to pull about some old gigs which were ranged on the rafts, as if much too busily occupied to spare a word. The woman went up to the master with a heart beating so strongly that she could scarcely hear her own voice. On any other occasion she would have been shy and reluctant. Asking favours was not in her way—she did not know how to do it. She could not feign or compliment, or do anything to ingratiate herself with a patron. But her internal agitation was so strong that she was quite uplifted beyond all sense of the effort which would have been so trying to her on any other occasion. She went up to him sustained by her excitement, which at the same time blunted her feelings, and made her almost unaware of the very words she uttered.

“Master,” she said, going straight to the point, as the excited mind naturally does—“I

have a boy that is very anxious for work. He is a good lad, and very kind to me. We've been tramping about the country — nothing better, for all my folks was in that way; but he don't take after me and my folks. He thinks steady work is better, and to stay still in one place."

"He is in the right of it there," was the reply.

"Maybe he is in the right," she said; "I'm not the one to say, for I'm fond of my freedom and moving about. But, master, you'll have one in your place that is not afraid of hard work if you'll have my son."

"Who is your son? do I know him?" said the master, who was a man with a mobile and clean-shaven countenance, like an actor, with a twinkling eye and a suave manner, the father of an athletic band of river-worthies who were regarded generally with much admiration by "the college gentlemen," to whom their prowess was well known,— "who is your son?"

The woman grew sick and giddy with the tumult of feeling in her. The words were simple enough in straightforward meaning; but they bore another sense, which made her heart flutter, and took the very light from her eyes.

“Who was her son?” It was all she could do to keep from betraying herself, from claiming some one else as her son, very different from Dick. If she had done so, she would have been simply treated as a mad woman: as it was, the bystanders, used to tramps of a very different class, looked at her with instant suspicion, half disposed to attribute her giddiness and faltering to a common enough cause. She mastered herself without fully knowing either the risk she had run or the looks directed to her. “You don’t know him,” she said. “We came here but last night. One of the college gentlemen was to speak for him. He’s a good hard-working lad, if you’ll take my word for it, that knows him best.”

“Well, missis, it’s true as you know him best; but I don’t know as we can take his mother’s word for it. Mothers aint always to be trusted to tell what they know,” said the master, good-humouredly. “I’ll speak to you another time, for the gentlemen are coming. Look sharp, lads.”

“All right, sir; here you are.”

The tide was coming in—a tide of boys—who immediately flooded the place, pouring up-stairs

into the dressing-rooms to change their school garments for boating dress, and gradually occupying the rafts in a moving restless crowd. The woman stood, jostled by the living stream, watching wistfully, while boat after boat shot out into the water,—gigs, with a laughing, restless crew—outriggers, each with a silent inmate, bent on work and practice; for all the school races had yet to be rowed. She stood gazing, with a heart that fluttered wildly, upon all those unknown young faces and animated moving figures. One of them was bound to her by the closest tie that can unite two human creatures; and yet, poor soul, she did not know him, nor had he the slightest clue to find her out—to think of her as anyhow connected with himself. Her heart grew sick as she gazed and gazed, pausing now upon one face, now upon another. There was one of whom she caught a passing glimpse, as he pushed off into the stream in one of the long-winged dragon-fly boats, who excited her most of all. She could not see him clearly, only a glimpse of him between the crowding figures about;—an oval face, with dark clouds of curling hair pushed from his forehead. There came a ring-

ing in her ears, a dimness in her eyes. Women in her class do not faint except at the most tremendous emergencies. If they did, they would probably be set down as intoxicated, and summarily dealt with. She caught at the wooden railing, and held herself upright by it, shutting her eyes to concentrate her strength. And by-and-by the bewildering sick emotion passed ; was it *him* whom she had seen ?

After this she crossed the river again in the ferry-boat, though it was a halfpenny each time, and she felt the expenditure to be extravagant, and walked about on the other bank till she found Dick, who naturally adopted the same means of finding her, neither of them thinking of any return "home,"—a place which did not exist in their consciousness. Then they went and bought something in an eating-shop, and brought it out to a quiet corner opposite the "Brocas clump," and there ate their dinner, with the river flowing at their feet, and the skiffs of "the gentlemen" darting by. It was, or rather looked, a poetic meal, and few people passed in sight without a momentary envy of the humble pic-nic ; but to Dick Brown and his mother there was nothing out of the way in it,

and she tied up the fragments for supper in a spotted cotton handkerchief when they had finished. It was natural for them to eat out of doors, as well as to do everything else out of doors. Dick told her of his good luck, how kind Valentine had been, and gave her the half-crown he had received, and an account of all that was to be done for him. "If they don't mind him, they're sure to mind the other gentleman," said devout Dick, who believed in Val's power with a fervent and unquestioning faith. After a while he went across to the rafts, and hung about there ready for any odd job, and making himself conspicuous in eager anxiety to please the master. His mother remained with the fragments of their meal tied up in the handkerchief, on the same grassy bank where they had dined, watching the boats as they came and went. She did not understand how it was that they all dropped off one by one, and as suddenly reappeared again when the hour for dinner and the hour of "three o'clock school" passed. But she had nothing to do to call her from that musing and silence to which she had become habituated, and remained there the entire afternoon doing nothing but gaze.

At last, however, she made a great effort, and roused herself. The unknown boy after whom she yearned could not be identified among all these strange faces; and there was something which could be done for good Dick, the boy who had always been good to her. She did for Dick what no one could have expected her to do; she went and looked for a lodging where they could establish themselves. After a while she found two small rooms in a house facing the river,—one in which Dick could sleep, the other a room with a fireplace, where his hot meals, which he no doubt would insist upon, could be cooked, and where, in a corner, she herself could sleep when the day was over. She had a little stock of reserve money on her person, a few shillings saved, and something more, which was the remnant of a sum she had carried about with her for years, and which I believe she intended “to bury her,” according to the curious pride which is common among the poor. But as for the moment there was no question of burying her, she felt justified in breaking in upon this little hoard to please her boy by such forlorn attempts at comfort as were in her power. She ventured to buy a few

necessaries, and to make provision as well as she knew how for the night—the first night which she would have passed for years under a roof which she could call her own. One of the chief reasons that reconciled her to this step was, that the room faced the river, and that not Dick alone, but the other whom she did not know, could be watched from the window. Should she get to know him, perhaps to speak to him, that other?—to watch him every summer evening in his boat, floating up and down—to distinguish his voice in the crowd, and his step? But for this hope she could not, I think, have made so great a sacrifice for Dick alone—a sacrifice she had not been able to make when the doing of it would have been still more important than now. Perhaps it was because she was growing older, and the individual had faded somewhat from her consciousness; but the change bewildered even herself. She did it notwithstanding, and of her free will.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHEN Dick saw his friend and patron come down to the rafts that evening in company with another of the “gentlemen,” bigger, stronger, and older than himself, at whom everybody looked with respect and admiration, the state of his mind may be supposed. He had been hanging about all day, as I have said, making himself useful—a handy fellow, ready to push a boat into the water, to run and fetch an oar, to tie on the sheepskin on a rower’s seat, without standing on ceremony as to who told him to do so. The master himself, in the hurry of operations, had given him various orders without perceiving, so willing and ready was Dick, that it was a stranger, and not one of his own men, whom he addressed. Dick contemplated the conversation which ensued with a beating heart. He saw the lads look round, and that Valentine

pointed him out to the potentate of the river-side ; and he saw one of the men join in, saying something, he was sure, in his favour ; and, after a terrible interval of suspense, Val came towards him, waving his hand to him in triumph. "There," cried Val, "we've got you the place. Go and talk to old Harry yourself about wages and things. And mind what I said to you, Brown ; neither Lichen nor I will stand any nonsense. We've made all sorts of promises for you ; and if you don't keep them, Lichen will kick you—or if he don't, I will. You'd best keep steady, for your own sake."

"I'll keep steady," said Dick, with a grin on his face ; and it was all the boy could do to keep himself from executing a dance of triumph when he found himself really engaged at reasonable wages, and informed of the hour at which he was expected to present himself on the morrow. "Give an eye to my boat, Brown," said Val ; "see she's taken care of. I'll expect you to look out for me, and have her ready when you know I'm coming. I hate waiting," said the lad, with imperious good-humour. How Dick admired him as he stood there in his flannels and jersey—the handsomest, splendid,

all-commanding young prince, who had stooped from his skies to interfere on his (Dick's) behalf, for no reason in the world except his will and pleasure. "How lucky I am," thought Dick to himself, "that he should have noticed me last night!"—and he made all manner of enthusiastic promises on account of the boat, and of general devotion to Val's service. The young potentate took all these protestations in the very best part. He stepped into his outrigger with lordly composure, while Dick, all glowing and happy, knelt on the raft to hold it. "You shan't want a friend, old fellow, as long as you behave yourself," said Val, with magnificent condescension which it was fine to see; "I'll look after you," and he nodded at him as he shot along over the gleaming water. As for Dick, as his services were not required till next day, he went across the river to Coffin Lane, where his mother was waiting for him, to tell his news. She did not say very much, nor did he expect her to do so, but she took him by the arm and led him along the water-side to a house which stood in a corner, half facing the river, looking towards the sunset. She took him in at the open door, and up-stairs to the room in which she had already

set out a homely and very scanty table for their supper. Dick did not know how to express the delight and thanks in his heart. He turned round and gave his mother a kiss in silent transport—a rare caress, such as meant more than words. The window of this room looked up the river, and straight into the “Brocas clump,” behind which the sunset was preparing all its splendour. In the little room beyond, which was to be Dick’s bedroom—glorious title!—the window looked straight across to the rafts. I do not think that any young squire coming into a fine property was ever more happy than the young tramp finding himself for almost the first time in his life in a place which he could call home. He could not stop smiling, so full of happiness was he, nor seat himself to his poor supper, but went round and round the two rooms, planning where he could put up a shelf or arrange a table. “I’ll make it so handy for you, mother; you’ll not know you’re born!” cried Dick, in the fulness of his delight.

And yet two barer little rooms perhaps no human home ever was made in. There was nothing there that was not indispensable—a table, two chairs, and no more; and in Dick’s

room a small iron bed. All that his mother possessed for her own use was a mattress, which could be rolled up and put aside during the day. She took her son's pleasure very quietly, as was her wont, but smiled with a sense of having made him happy, which was pleasant to her, although to make him happy had not been her only motive. When she had put away the things from their supper, she sat down at the open window and looked out on the river. The air was full of sound, so softened by the summer that all rudeness and harshness were taken out of it : in the foreground the ferryboat was crossing and recrossing, the man standing up with his punt-pole against the glow of the western sky ; just under the window lay the green eyot, waving with young willows, and up and down in a continual stream on the sunny side of it went and came the boys in their boats. " Show him to me, Dick, when he comes," said the woman. Dick did not require to be told whom she meant, neither was he surprised at this intensity of interest in *him*, which made his young patron the only figure worth identification in that crowded scene. Had he not been, as it were, Dick's guardian angel, who had sud-

denly appeared for the boy's succour?—and what more natural than that Dick's mother should desire before everything else to see one who had been such a friend to her boy?

But I do not think she was much the wiser when Val came down the river, accompanied by a group of backers on the bank, who had made themselves hoarse shrieking and shouting at him. He was training for a race, and this was one of his trial nights. Lichen himself had agreed to come down to give Val his advice and instructions—or, in more familiar phraseology, was “coaching” him for the important effort. Dick rushed out at the sight, to cheer and shriek too, in an effervescence of loyalty which had nothing to do with the character of Val's performance. The mother sat at the window and looked out upon them, longing and sickening with a desire unsatisfied. Was this all she was ever to see of him—a distant speck in a flying boat? But to know that this was him—that he was there before her eyes—that he had taken up Dick and established him in his own train, as it were, near to him, by a sudden fancy which to her, who knew what cause there was for it, seemed something like a

special interference of God,—filled her with a strange confused rapture of mingled feelings. She let her tears fall quietly as she sat all alone, gazing upon the scene. It must be God's doing, she felt, since no man had any hand in it. She had separated them in her wild justice, rending her own heart while she did so, but God had brought them together. She was totally untaught, poor soul, in religious matters, as well as in everything else ; but in her ignorance she had reached that point which our high philosophy reaches struggling through the mist, and which nowadays the unsatisfied and over-instructed mind loves to go back to, thinking itself happier with one naked primary truth than with a system however divine. No one could have taken from this dweller in the woods and wilds the sense of a God in the world,—almost half visible, sometimes, to musing, silent souls like her own ; a God always watchful, always comprehensible to the simple mind, in the mere fact of His perpetual watchfulness, fatherliness, yet severity,—sending hunger and cold as well as warmth and plenty, and guiding those revolutions of the seasons and the outdoor facts of existence which impress the untaught

yet thoughtful being as nothing taught by books can ever do. To know as she did that there was a God in the world, and not believe at the same time that His interference was the most natural of all things, would have been impossible to this primitive creature. Therefore, knowing no agencies in the universe but that of man direct and visible, and that of God, which to her could scarcely be called invisible, she believed unhesitatingly that God had done this—that He had balked her, with a hand and power more great than hers. What was to be the next step she could not tell,—it was beyond her: she could only sit and watch how things would befall, having not only no power but no wish to interfere.

Thus things went on for the remaining portion of the “half,” which lasted only about six weeks more. Dick set himself to the work of making everything “handy” for her with enthusiasm in his odd hours, which were few, for his services at the rafts were demanded imperatively from earliest morning till the late evening after sunset, when the river dropped into darkness. “The gentlemen,” it is true, were all cleared off their favourite stream by nine o’clock ;

but the local lovers of the Thames would linger on it during those summer nights, especially when there was a moon, till poor Dick, putting himself across in his boat when all at last was silent—the last boating party disposed of, and the small craft all ranged in their places ready for to-morrow—would feel his arms scarcely able to pull the light sculls, and his limbs trembling under him. Even then, after his long day's work, when he had eaten his supper, he would set to work to put up the shelves he had promised his mother, or to fix upon his walls the pictures which delighted himself. Dick began with the lowest rudiments of art, the pictures in the penny papers, with which he almost papered his walls ; but his taste advanced as his pennies grew more plentiful : the emotional prints of the 'Police News' ceased to charm him, and he rose to the pictures of the 'Illustrated,' or whatever might be the picture-paper of the time. This advance—so quickly does the mind work—took place in the six weeks that remained of the half ; and by the time "the gentlemen" left, and work slackened, Dick's room was already gorgeous, with here and there a mighty chromo, strong in tint and

simple in subject, surrounded with all manner of royal progresses and shows of various kinds, as represented in the columns of the prints aforesaid. He grew handy, too, in amateur carpentering, having managed to buy himself some simple tools ; and when he had a spare moment he betook himself to the bits of simple carving which Val had handed over to him, and worked at them with a real enjoyment which proved his possession of some germ at least of artistic feeling. The boy never had a moment unemployed with all these occupations, necessary and voluntary. He was as happy as the day was long, always ready with a smile and pleasant word, always sociable, not given to calculating his time too nicely, or to grumbling if some of his "mates" threw upon his willing shoulders more than his share of work. The boating people about got to know him, and among the boys he had already become highly popular. Very grand personages indeed—Lichen himself, for instance, than whom there could be no more exalted being—would talk to him familiarly ; and some kind lads, finding out his tastes, brought him pictures of which they themselves had got tired, and little carved brackets from their walls, and much other rub-

bish of this description, all of which was delightful to Dick.

As for Valentine, the effect produced upon him by the possession of a *protégé* was very striking. He felt the responsibility deeply, and at once began to ponder as to the duties of a superior to his inferiors, of which, of course, one time or other he had heard much. An anxious desire to do his duty to this retainer who had been so oddly thrown upon his hands, and for whom he felt an unaccountable warmth of patronising friendship, took possession of him. He made many trite but admirable theories on the subject—theories, however, not at all trite to Val, who believed he had invented them for his own good and that of mankind. It was not enough, he reasoned with himself, to have saved a lad from the life of a tramp, and got him regular employment, unless at the same time you did something towards improving his mind, and training him for the *rôle* of a respectable citizen. These were very fine words, but Val (strictly within himself) was not afraid of fine words. No young soul of sixteen, worth anything, ever is. To make a worthy citizen of his waif seemed to him for some time his mission.

Having found out that Dick could read, he pondered very deeply and carefully what books to get for him, and how to lead him upon the path of knowledge. With a little sigh he recognised the fact that there was no marked literary turn in Dick's mind, and that he preferred a bit of wood and a knife, as a means of relaxation, to books. Val hesitated long between the profitable and the pleasant in literature as a means of educating his *protégé*. Whether to rouse him to the practical by accounts of machinery and manufactures, or to awake his imagination by romance, he could not easily decide. I fear his decision was biassed ultimately by the possession of a number of books which he had himself outgrown, but which he rightly judged might do very well for his humble friend, whose total want of education made him younger than Val by a few years, and therefore still within the range of the 'Headless Horseman,'—of Captain Mayne Reid's vigorous productions, and other schoolboy literature of the same class. These he brought down, a few volumes at a time, to the rafts, and gave them to his friend with injunctions to read them. "You shall have something better when you have gone through these; but I daresay

you'll like them—I used to myself,” said Val. Dick accepted them with devout respect ; but I think the greatest pleasure he got out of them was when he ranged them in a little book-shelf he had himself made, and felt as a bibliopole does when he arranges his fine editions, that he too had a library. Dick did not care much for the stories of adventure with which Val fed him as a kind of milk for babes. He knew of adventures on the road, of bivouacs out of doors, quite enough in his own person. But he dearly liked to see them ranged in his book-shelf. All kinds of curious instincts, half developed and unintelligible even to himself were in Dick's mind,—the habits of a race of which he knew nothing—partially burnt out and effaced by a course of life infinitely different, yet still existing obstinately within him, and prompting him to he knew not what. If we could study human nature as we study fossils and strata, how strange it would be to trace the connection between Dick's rude book-shelves, with the coarse little ornament he had carved on them, and the pleasure it gave him to range Val's yellow volumes upon that rough shelf—and the great glorious green cabinets in Lady Eskside's draw-

ing-room ! Nobody was aware of this connection, himself least of all. And Val, who had an evident right to inherit so refined a taste, cared as little for the Vernis-Martin as though he had been born a savage ; by such strange laws, unknown to us poor gropers after scraps of information, does inheritance go !

All this time, however, Dick's mother had not seen Val nearer than in his boat, for which she looked through all the sunny afternoons and long evenings, spending half her silent intent life, so different to the outward one, so full of strange self-absorption and concentrated feeling in the watch. This something out of herself, to attract her wandering visionary thoughts and hold her passionate heart fast, was what the woman had wanted throughout the strange existence which had been warped and twisted out of all possibility at its very outset. Her wild intolerance of confinement, her desire for freedom, her instinct of constant wandering, troubled her no more. She did her few domestic duties in the morning, made ready Dick's meals for him (and they lived with Spartan simplicity, both having been trained to eat what they could get, most often by the roadside—cold scraps of

food which required no preparation), and kept his clothes and her own in order ; and all the long afternoon would sit there watching for the skimming boat, the white jersey, with the distinctive mark which she soon came to recognise. I think Val's jersey had a little red cross on the breast—an easy symbol to recollect. When he came down the river at last, and left his boat, she went in with a sigh, half of relief, from her watch, half of pain that it was over, and began to prepare her boy's supper. They held her whole existence thus in suspense between them ; one utterly ignorant of it, the other not much better informed. When Dick came in, tired but cheery, he would show her the books Mr Ross had brought him, or report to her the words he had said. Dick adored him frankly, with a boy's pride in all his escapades ; and there were few facts in Val's existence which were not known in that little house at the corner, all unconscious as he was of his importance there. One morning, however, Dick approached this unfailing subject with a little embarrassment, looking furtively at his mother to see how far he might venture to speak.

“ You don't ever touch the cards now,

mother?" he said all at once, with a guilty air, which she, absorbed in her own thoughts, did not perceive.

"The cards?—I never did when I could help it, you know."

"I know," he said, "but I don't suppose there's no harm in it; it aint you as puts them how they come. All you've got to do with it is saying what it means. Folks in the Bible did the same—Joseph, for one, as was carried to the land of Egypt."

The Bible was all the lore Dick had. He liked the Old Testament a great deal better than the 'Headless Horseman;' and, like other well-informed persons, he was glad to let his knowledge appear when there was an occasion for such exhibitions. His mother shook her head.

"It's no harm, maybe, to them that think no harm," she said; "no, it aint me that settles them—who is it? It must be either God or the devil. And God don't trouble Himself with the like of that—He has more and better to do; so it must be the devil; and I don't hold with it, unless I'm forced for a living. I can't think as it's laid to you then."

“I wish you’d just do it once to please me, mother ; it couldn’t do no harm.”

She shook her head, but looked at him with questioning eyes.

“Suppose it was to please a gentleman as I am more in debt to than I can ever pay—more than I want ever to pay,” cried Dick, “except in doing everything to please him as long as I live. You may say it aint me as can do this, and that I’m taking it out of you ; but you’re all I have to help me, and it aint to save myself. Mother, it’s Mr Ross as has heard somehow how clever you are ; and if you would do it just once to please him and me !”

She did not answer for a few minutes. Dick thought she was struggling with herself to overcome her repugnance. Then she replied, in an altered and agitated voice, “For him I’ll do it—you can bring him to-morrow.”

“How kind you are, mother !” said Dick, gratefully. “College breaks up the day after to-morrow,” he added, in a dolorous voice. “I don’t know what I shall do without him and all of them—the place won’t look the same, nor I shan’t feel the same. Mayn’t he come to-night ? I think he’s going off to-morrow up to Scotland,

as they're all talking of. Half of 'em goes up to Scotland. I wonder what kind of a place it is. Were we ever there?"

"Once—when you were quite a child."

"'Twas there the t'other little chap died?" said Dick, compassionately. "Poor mammy, I didn't mean to vex you. I wonder what he'd have been like now if he'd lived. Look here, mother, mayn't *he* come to-night?"

"If you like," she said, trying to seem calm, but deeply agitated by this reference. He saw this, and set it down naturally to the melancholy recollections he had evoked.

"Poor mother," he said, rising from his dinner, "you *are* a feelin' one! all this time, and you've never forgotten. I'll go away and leave you quiet; and just before lock-up, when it's getting dark, him and me will come across. You won't say nothing you can help that's dreadful if the cards turn up bad?—and speak as kind to him as you can, mother dear, he's been so kind to me."

Speak as kind to him as you can! What words were these to be said to her whose whole being was disturbed and excited by the idea of seeing this stranger! Keep yourself from falling at his feet and kissing them; from falling on his

neck and weeping over him. If Dick had but known, these were more likely things to happen. She scarcely saw her boy go out, or could distinguish what were the last words he said to her. Her heart was full of the other—the other whose face her hungry eyes had not been able to distinguish from her window, who had never seen her, so far as he knew, and yet who was hers, though she dared not say so, dared not claim any share in him. Dared not! though she could not have told why. To her there were barriers between them impassable. She had given him up when he was a child for the sake of justice, and the wild natural virtue and honour in her soul stood between her and the child she had relinquished. It seemed to her that in giving him up she had come under a solemn tacit engagement never to make herself known to him, and she was too profoundly agitated now to be able to think. Indeed I do not think that reasonable sober thought, built upon just foundations, was ever possible to her. She could muse and brood, and did so, and had done so,—doing little else for many a silent year; and she could sit still, mentally, and allow her imagination and mind to be taken possession of by a tumult of

fancy and feeling, which drew her now and then to a hasty decision, and which, had she been questioned on the subject, she would have called thinking—as, indeed, it stands for thinking with many of us. It had been this confused working in her of recollection and of a fanciful remorse which had determined her to give up Valentine to his father; and now that old fever seemed to have come back again, and to boil in her veins. I don't know if she had seriously regretted her decision then, or if she had ever allowed herself to think of it as a thing that could have been helped, or that might still be remedied. But by this time, at least, she had come to feel that it never could be remedied, and that Valentine Ross, Lord Eskside's heir, could never be carried off to the woods and fields as her son, as perhaps a child might have been. He was a gentleman now, she felt, with a forlorn pride, which mingled strangely with the anguish of absolute loss with which she realised the distance between them,—the tremendous and uncrossable gulf between his state and hers. He was her son, yet never could know her, never acknowledge her,—and she was to speak with him that night.

The sun had begun to sink, before, starting up

from her long and agitated musing, the womanish idea struck her of making some preparations for his reception, arranging her poor room and her person to make as favourable an impression as possible upon the young prince who was her own child. What was she to do ? She had been a gentleman's wife once, though for so short a time ; and sometimes of late this recollection had come strongly to her mind, with a sensation of curious pride which was new to her. Now she made an effort to recall that strange chapter in her life, when she had lived among beautiful things, and worn beautiful dresses, and might have learned what gentlemen like. She had never seen Val sufficiently near to distinguish his features, and oddly enough, ignoring the likeness of her husband which was in Dick, she expected to find in Valentine another Richard, and instinctively concluded that his tastes must be what his father's were. After a short pause of consideration she went to a trunk, which she had lately sent for to the vagrant headquarters, where it had been kept for her for years—a trunk containing some relics of that departed life in which she had been “a lady.” Out of this she took a little shawl embroidered in silken

garlands, and which had faded into colours even more tasteful and sweet than they were in their newest glories—a shawl for which Mr Grinder, or any other *dilettante* in Eton, would have given her almost anything she liked to ask. This she threw over a rough table of Dick's making, and placed on it some flowers in a homely little vase of coarse material yet graceful shape. Here, too, she placed a book or two drawn from the same repository of treasures—books in rich faded binding, chiefly poetry, which Richard had given her in his early folly. The small table with its rich cover, its bright flowers and gilded books, looked like a little altar of fancy and grace in the bare room; it was indeed an altar dedicated to the memory of the past, to the pleasure of the unknown.

When she had arranged this touching and simple piece of incongruity, she proceeded to dress herself. She took off her printed gown and put on a black one, which also came out of her trunk. She put aside the printed handkerchief which she usually wore, tramp fashion, on her head, and brushed out her long, beautiful black hair, in which there was not one white thread. Why should there have been? She

was not more than thirty-five or thirty-six, though she looked older. She twisted her hair in great coils round her head—a kind of coiffure which I think the poor creature remembered Richard had liked. Her appearance was strangely changed when she had made this simple toilet. She looked like some wild half-savage princess condemned to exile and penury, deprived of her retinue and familiar pomp, but not of her natural dignity. The form of her fine head, the turn of her graceful shoulders, had not been visible in her tramp dress. When she had done everything she could think of to perfect the effect which she prepared, poor soul, so carefully, she sat down, with what calm she could muster, to wait for her boys. Her boys, her children, the two who had come into the world at one birth, had lain in her arms together, but who now were as unconscious of the relationship, and as far divided, as if worlds had lain between them! Indeed she was quite calm and still to outward appearance, having acquired that power of perfect external self-restraint which many passionate natures possess, though her heart beat loud in her head and ears, performing a whole muffled orchestra of wild music. Had

any stranger spoken to her she would not have heard; had any one come in, except the two she was expecting, I do not think she would have seen them, she was so utterly absorbed in one thought.

At last she heard the sound of their steps coming up-stairs. The light had begun to wane in the west, and a purple tone of half darkness had come into the golden air of the evening. She stood up mechanically, not knowing what she was doing, and the next moment two figures stood before her—one well known, her familiar boy,—the other! Was this the other? A strange sensation, half of pleasure, half of disappointment, shot through her at sight of his face.

Val had come in carelessly enough, taking off his hat, but with the ease of a superior. He stopped short, however, when he saw the altogether unexpected appearance of the woman who was Dick's mother. He felt a curious thrill come into his veins—of surprise, he thought. "I beg your pardon," he said; "I—hope you don't mind my coming? Brown said you wouldn't mind."

"You are very welcome, sir," she said, her

voice trembling in spite of her. "If there is anything I can do for you. You have been so kind—to my boy."

"Oh," said Val, embarrassed, with a shy laugh, "it pays to be kind to Brown. He's done us credit. I say—what a nice place you've got here!"

He was looking almost with consternation at the beautiful embroidery and the books. Where could they have picked up such things? He was half impressed and half alarmed, he could not have told why. He put out a furtive hand and clutched at Dick's arm. "I say, do you think she minds?" Val had never been so shy in his life.

"You want me to tell you your fortune, sir?" she said, recovering a little. "I don't hold with it; but I'll do it if you wish it. I'll do it—once—and for you."

"Oh, thanks, awfully," cried Val, more and more taken aback—"if you're sure you don't mind:" and he held out his hand with a certain timidity most unusual to him. She took it suddenly in both hers by an uncontrollable movement, held it fast, gazed at it earnestly, and bent down her head, as if she would have kissed it.

Val felt her hands tremble, and her agitation was so evident that both the boys were moved to unutterable wonder ; yet somehow, I think, the one of them who wondered least was Valentine, upon whom this trembling eager grasp made the strangest impression. He felt as if the tears were coming to his eyes, but could not tell why.

“It is not the hand I thought to see,” she said, as if speaking to herself—“not the hand I thought.” Then dropping it suddenly, with an air of bewilderment, she said, hastily, “It is not by the hand I do it, but by the cards.”

“I ought to have crossed my hand with silver, shouldn’t I ?” said Val, trying to laugh ; but he was excited too.

“No, no,” she said, tremulously ; “no, no—my boy’s mother can take none of your silver. Are you as fond of him as he is fond of you ?”

“Mother !” cried Dick, amazed at the presumption of this inquiry.

“Well—fond ?” said Val, doubtfully ; “yes, really, I think I am, after all, though I’m sure I don’t know why. He should have been a gentleman. Mrs Brown, I am afraid it is getting near lock-up——”

“My name is not Mrs Brown,” she said, quickly.

“Oh, isn’t it? I beg your pardon,” said Val. “I thought as he was Brown—Mrs ——?”

“There’s no Miss nor Missis among my folks. They call me Myra — Forest Myra,” she said, hastily. “Dick, give me the cards, and I will do my best.”

But Dick was sadly distressed to see that his mother was not doing her best. She turned the cards about, and murmured some of the usual jargon about fair men and dark women, and news to receive, and journeys to go. But she was not herself: either the fortune was so very bad that she was afraid to reveal it, or else something strange must have happened to her. She threw them down at last impatiently, and fixed her intent eyes upon Valentine’s face,

“If you have all the good I wish you, you’ll be happy indeed,” she said; “but I can’t do nothing to-night. Sometimes the power leaves us.” Then she put her hand lightly on his shoulder, and gazed at him beseechingly. “Will you come again?” she said.

“Oh yes,” said Val, relieved. He drew a step back, with a sense of having escaped. “I don’t

really mind, you know, at all," he said ; " it was nothing but a joke. But I'll come again with pleasure. I say, what have you done to that carving, Brown ?"

How glad Val was to get away from her touch, and from her intent eyes ! and yet he did not want to go away. He hastened to the other end of the room with Dick, who was glad also to find that the perplexing interview was at an end, and got out his bit of carving with great relief. Val stood for a long time (as they all thought) side by side with the other, laying their heads together, the light locks and the dark—talking both together, as boys do ; and felt himself calm down, but with a sense that something strange had happened to him, something more than he could understand. The mother sat down on her chair, her limbs no longer able to sustain her. She was glad, too, that it was over—glad and sad, and so shaken with conflicting emotions, that she scarcely knew what was going on. Her heart sounded in her ears like great waves ; and through a strange mist in her eyes, and the gathering twilight, she saw vaguely, dimly, the two beside her. Oh, if she could but have put her arms round them and kissed them

both together ! But she could not. She sat down silent among the shadows, a shadow herself, against the evening light, and saw them in a mist, and held her peace.

“ You did not tell me your mother was a lady,” said Val, as the two went back together through the soft dusk to the river-side.

“ I never knew it,” said wondering Dick ; “ I never thought it—till to-night.”

“ Ah, but I am sure of it,” said Val. “ I thought you couldn’t be a cad, Brown, or I should not have taken to you like this. She’s a lady, sure enough ; and what’s more,” he added, with an embarrassed laugh, “ I feel as if I had known her somewhere—before—I suppose, before I was born ! ”

CHAPTER XIX.

AFTER this curious meeting, Val paid several visits to the little corner house ; so many, indeed, that his tutor interfered, as he had a perfect right to do, and reproached him warmly for his love of low society, and for choosing companions who must inevitably do him harm. Mr Grinder was quite right in this, and I hope the tutors of all our boys would do exactly the same in such a case ; but Val, I am afraid, did not behave so respectfully as he ought, and indeed was insubordinate and scarcely gentlemanly, Mr Grinder complained. The young tutor, who had been an Eton boy himself not so very long before, had inadvertently spoken of poor Dick as a “ Brocas cad.” Now I am not sufficiently instructed to know what special ignominy, if any, is conveyed by this designation ; but Val flamed up, as he did on rare occasions, his fury and in-

dignation being all the greater that he usually managed to restrain himself. He spoke to Mr Grinder as a pupil ought not to have done. He informed him that if he knew Dick he never would venture to use such terms ; and if he did not know him, he had no right to speak at all, not being in the least aware of the injustice he was doing. There was a pretty business altogether between the high-spirited impetuous boy and the young man who had been too lately a boy himself to have much patience with the other. Mr Grinder all but “complained of” Val—an awful proceeding, terminating in the block, and sudden execution in ordinary cases—a small matter enough with most boys, but sufficiently appalling to those who had attained such a position as Val’s, high up in school ; and intolerable to his impetuous temperament. This terrible step was averted by the interposition of mediators, by the soft words of old Mr Grinder, who was Val’s “dame,” and other friends. But young Mr Grinder wrote a letter to Rossraig on the subject, which gave Lady Eskside more distress and trouble than anything which had happened to her for a long time. If she had got her will, her husband would have gone up in-

stantly to inquire into the matter, and it is possible that the identity of Dick and his mother might have been discovered at once, and some future complications spared. The old lady wrung her hands and wept salt tears over the idea that "his mother's blood" was asserting itself thus, and that her son Richard's story might be about to be repeated again, but with worse and deeper shades of misery. Lord Esk-side, however, who had been so much disturbed by dangers which affected her very lightly, was not at all moved by this. He demurred completely to the idea of going to Eton, but agreed that Val himself should be written to, and explanations asked. Val wrote a very magnificent letter in reply, as fine a production as ever sixteen (but he was seventeen by this time) put forth. He related with dignity how he had encountered a friendly boy on the river's side who helped him when his boat swamped—how he had discovered that he was an admirable fellow, supporting his old mother, and in want of work—how he had exerted himself to procure work for this deserving stranger, and how he had gone to his house two or three times to see how he was getting on. "I have been lending

him books," wrote Val, "and doing what I could to help him to get on. His master, who took him on my recommendation, and Lichen's (you know Lichen? the captain of the boats), says he never had such a good man in his place; and I have thought it was my duty to help him on. If you and grandmamma think I ought not to do so," Valentine concluded majestically, "I confess I shall be very sorry; for Brown is one of the best fellows that ever was born."

Lady Eskside wept when she read this letter—tears of joy, and pride, and happy remorse at having thought badly of her boy. She wrote him such a letter as moved even Val's boyish insensibility, with a ten-pound note in it, with which she entrusted him to buy something for his *protégé*. "It is like your sweet nature to try to help him," she said; "and oh, Val, my darling, I am so ashamed of myself for having a momentary fear!" Mr Grinder had a somewhat cold response from Lord Eskside, but not so trenchant as my lady would have wished it. "We are very much obliged to you for your care," said the old Lord; "but I think Valentine has given such good reasons for his conduct that we must not be hard upon him. Of course no-

thing of this sort should be allowed to go too far." Thus Val was victorious; but I am glad to have to tell of him that as soon as he was sure of this, he went off directly and begged Mr Grinder's pardon. "I had no right, sir, to speak to you so," said the boy. They were better friends ever after, I believe; and for a long time Lady Eskside was not troubled with any terrors about Val's "mother's blood!"

All this time Dick "got on" so, that it became a wonder to see him. He had finished Val's carving long ago, and presented it to his gracious patron, declining with many blushes the "five bob" which he had been promised. Before he was eighteen, he had grown, in virtue of his absolute trustworthiness, to be the first and most important ministrant at the "rafts." Everybody knew him, everybody liked him. So far as young squires and lordlings constitute that desirable thing, Dick lived in the very best society; his manners ought to have been good, for they were moulded on the manners of our flower of English youth. I am not very sure myself that he owed so much to this (for Eton boys, so far as I have seen, bear a quite extraordinary resemblance to other boys) as to his naturally

sweet and genial temper, his honest and generous humbleness and unselfishness. Dick Brown was the very last person Dick thought of, whatever he might happen to be doing—and this is the rarest of all qualities in youth. Then he was so happy in having his way, and “a home,” and in overcoming his mother’s fancy for constant movement, that his work was delightful to him. It was hard work, and entailed a very long daily strain of his powers—too long, perhaps, for a growing boy—but yet it was pleasant, and united a kind of play with continuous exertion. All summer long he was on the river-side, the busiest of lads or men, in noiseless boating-shoes, and with a dress which continually improved till Dick became the nattiest as well as the handiest of his kind. He had a horror of everything that was ugly and dirty : when the others lounged about in their hour’s rest, while their young clients were at school, Dick would be hot about something ;—painting and rubbing the old boats, scraping the oars, bringing cleanliness, and order, and that bold kind of decoration which belongs to boat-building, to the resuscitation of old gigs and “tubs” which had seemed good for nothing. He would even look after

the flowers in the little strip of garden, and sow the seeds, and trim the border, while he waited, if there happened to be no old boats to cobble. He was happy when the sun shone upon nothing but orderliness and (as he felt it) beauty.

In his own rooms this quality of mind was still more apparent. I have said that he and his mother lived with Spartan simplicity. This enabled him to do a great deal more with his wages than his more luxurious companions. First, comforts, and then superfluities — elegances, if we may use the word—began to flow into the room. The elegances, perhaps, were not very elegant at first, but his taste improved at the most rapid rate. When he had nothing better to do, he would go and take counsel with Fullady the wood-carver, and get lessons from him, helping now and then at a piece of work, to the astonishment of his master. In the evening he carved small pieces of furniture, with which he decorated his dwelling. In winter he was initiated into the mysteries of boat-building, and worked at this trade with absolute devotion and real enjoyment. In short, Dick's opinion was that nobody so happy as himself had ever lived—his work was as good as play,

and better, he thought; and he was paid for doing what it gave him the greatest pleasure to do—a perennial joke with the gentle fellow. In all this prosperity Dick never forgot his first patron. When Val rowed, Dick ran by the bank shouting till he was hoarse. When Val was preferred to be one of the sublime Eight, who are as gods among men, he went almost out of his wits with pride and joy. “*We’ll* win now, sure enough, at Henley!” he said to his mother, with unconscious appropriation of the possessive pronoun. But when Dick heard of the squabble between Val and his tutor, his good sense showed at once. He took his young patron a step aside, taking off his hat with almost an exaggeration of respect — “Don’t come to our house again, sir,” he said; “the gentleman is in the right. You are very kind to be so free with me, to talk and make me almost a friend; but it wouldn’t do if every Eton gentleman were to make friends with the fellows on the water-side—the gentleman is in the right.”

“My people don’t think so, Brown,” cried Val; “look here, what has been sent me to buy you something,” and he showed his ten-pound note.

Dick's eyes flashed with eager pleasure, not for the money, though even that was no small matter. "I don't understand," he added, after a moment, shaking his head. "I don't think they'd like it either, if they knew. You must have been giving too good an account, sir, of mother and me."

Val only laughed, and crushed the crisp bank-note into the pocket of his trousers. "I mean to spend it for you on Monday, when I am going to town on leave," he said. He was going to see Miss Percival, his grandmother's friend. And, in fact, he did buy Dick a number of things, which seemed to his youthful fancy appropriate in the circumstances. He bought him some books, a few of those standard works which Val knew ought to be in everybody's library, though he did not much trouble them himself; and a capital box of tools, and drawing materials, for Dick had displayed some faculty that way. Both the boys were as happy as possible—the one in bestowing, the other in receiving, this gift. Lady Eskside's present gave them the deepest pleasure, though she was so far from knowing who was the recipient of her bounty. "Brown," said Val, solemnly, after

they had enjoyed the delight of going over every separate article, and examining and admiring it —“ Brown, you mind what I am going to say. You must rise in the world ; you have made a great deal of progress already, and you must make still more. Heaps of fellows not half so good as you have got to be rich, and raised themselves by their exertions. You must improve your mind ; and you must take the good of every advantage that offers, and rise in the world.”

“ I’ll try, sir,” said Dick, with the cheeriest laugh. He was ready to have promised to scale the skies, if Val had recommended it. He arranged his books carefully in a little bookcase he had made, which was far handsomer than the old one which had received the yellow volumes—overflowings of Val’s puerile library. But I am not sure that Macaulay and Gibbon instructed him much more than the ‘ Headless Horseman ’ had done. His was not a mind which was much affected by literature ; he cared more for doing than for reading, and liked his box of tools better than his library. Musing over his work, he revolved many things in his head, and got to have very just views about

matters concerning which his education had been a blank ; but he did not get his ideas out of books. That was not a method congenial to him, though he would have acknowledged with respect that it was most probably the right way. But anyhow, Val had done his duty by his *protégé*. He had put into his hands the means of rising in the world, and he had suggested this ambition. Whatever might happen hereafter, he had done his best.

And Dick's mother continued contented also, which was a perpetual wonder to him. She weathered through the winter, though Dick often watched her narrowly, fearing a return to her old vagrant way. When Val's boat disappeared from the river with all the others, she was indeed restless for a little while ; but it was, as it happened, just about that time that Val took to visiting the little corner house, and these visits kept her in a visionary absorption, always afraid, yet always glad, when he came. In spring she was again somewhat alarming to her son, moving so restlessly in the small space they had, and looking out so wistfully from the window, that he trembled to hear some suggestion of fresh wandering. All that she asked,

however, was, When did the boats go up for the first time? a question which Dick answered promptly.

“On the 1st of March, mother. I wish it was come,” cried Dick, with animation.

“And so do I,” she said, with musing eyes fixed on the river; then alarmed, perhaps, lest he should question her, she added hastily, “It is cheery to see the boats.”

“So it is,” said Dick, “especially for you, mother, who go out so seldom. You should take a walk along the banks; it’s cheerful always. I don’t think you half know how pretty it is.”

She shook her head. “I am not one for walks,” she said, with a half smile—“not for pleasure, Dick. Since I’ve given up our long tramps, I don’t feel to care for moving. I’m getting old, I think.”

“Old!” said Dick, cheerily; “it will be time enough to think of that in twenty years.”

“Twenty years is a terrible long time,” she replied, with a little shiver; “I hope I’ll be dead and gone long before that.”

“I wish you wouldn’t speak so, mother.”

“Ah, but it’s true. My life aint much good

to any one," she said. "I am not let to live in my own way, and I can't live in any other. If God would take me, it would be for the best. Then I might have another chance."

"Mother, you break my heart," cried Dick, with a face full of anxiety, throwing away his tools, and coming up to her. "Do you mean that it is I that won't let you live your own way?"

"I don't blame nobody but myself—no; you've been a good boy—a very good boy—to me," she cried; "better, a long way, than I've been to you."

"Mother," said the lad, laying his hand on her shoulder, his face flushing with emotion, "if it's hard upon you like this—if you want to start off again——"

"No, I don't, I don't!" she said with suppressed passion; then falling back into her old dreamy tone—"So the boats go up on the 1st of March? and that's Monday. To see 'em makes the river cheery. I'm a little down with the winter and all; but as soon as I see 'em, I'll be all right."

"Please God, mother," said pious Dick, going back to his carving. He was satisfied, but yet

he was startled. For, after all, why should she care so much about the boats ?

This 1st of March inaugurated Val's last summer on the river—at least, on this part of the river, for he had still Oxford and its triumphs in prospect. That “summer half” was his last in Eton, and naturally he made the most of it. Val had, as people say, “done very well” at school. He was not a brilliant success, but still he had done very well, and his name in the school list gave his grandparents great pleasure. Lord Eskside kept a copy of that little *brochure* on his library table, and would finger it half consciously many a time when some county magnate was interviewing the old lord. Val's name appeared in it like this : * Ross (5) γ . Now this was not anything like the stars and ribbons of the name next above his, which was B * Robinson, (19) α ; for I do not mean to pretend that he was very studious, or had much chance of being in the Select for the Newcastle Scholarship (indeed he missed this distinction, though he went in for it gallantly, without being, however, much disappointed by his failure). To be sure, I have it all my own way in recording what Val did at Eton, since nobody is likely nowadays,

without hard labour in the way of looking up old lists, to be in a position to contradict me. But he had the privilege of writing his letters upon paper bearing the mystic monogram of Pop.—*i.e.*, he was a member of *Eton Society*, which was a sure test of his popularity; and he was privileged in consequence to walk about with a cane, and to take part in debates on very abstruse subjects (I am not quite sure which privilege is thought the most important), and received full recognition as “a swell,”—a title which, I am happy to say, bears no vulgar interpretation at Eton, as meaning either rank or riches. And he was a very sublime sight to see on the 4th of June, the great Eton holiday, both in the morning, when he appeared in school in court dress—breeches and black silk stockings—and delivered one of those “Speeches” with which Eton upon that day delights such members of the fashionable world as can spare a summer morning out of the important business of the season; and in the evening, when he turned out in still more gorgeous array, stroke of the best boat on the river, and a greater personage than it is easy for a grown-up and sober-minded imagination to conceive.

It happened that this particular year Mr

Pringle was in London upon some business or other, and had brought his daughter Violet with him to see the world. Vi was seventeen, and being an only daughter, and the chief delight of her parents' hearts, and pride of her brothers', big and little, was already "out," though many people shook their heads at Mrs Pringle's precipitancy in producing her daughter. Violet's hair was somewhat darker now that it was turned up, but showed the pale golden hue of her childhood still in the locks which, when the wind blew upon her, would shake themselves out in little rings over her ears and round her pretty forehead. Her eyes were as dark and liquid as they had been when she was a child, with a wistful look in them, which was somewhat surprising, considering how entirely happy a life she had led from her earliest breath, surrounded with special love and fondness; but so it was, account for it who will. Those tender eyes that shone out of her happy youthful face were surely conscious of some trouble, which, as it did not exist in the present, must be to come, and which, with every pretty look, she besought and entreated you to ward off from her, to help her through. But a happy little maiden was Vi,

looking through those pretty eyes, surprised and sweet, at London—tripping everywhere by her proud father's side, with her hand on his arm, looking at the fine pictures, looking at the fine people and the fine horses in the Park, and going over the sights as innocent country people do when such a happy chance as a child to take about happens to them. Some one suggested to Mr Pringle the fact of the Eton celebration during this pleasant course of dissipation, and Vi's eyes lighted up with a sweet glow of pleasure beyond words when it was finally decided that they were to go.

And go they did, conscientiously seeing everything. They went to "Speeches" in the morning—that august ceremonial—and heard Val speak, and a great many more. Violet confined her interest to the modern languages which she understood; but Mr Pringle felt it incumbent upon him to look amused at the jokes in Greek, which, I fear, the poor gentleman in reality knew little more about than Vi did. But the crowning glory of the morning was that Val in his "speaking clothes" (and very speaking, very telling articles they were, in Violet's eyes at least) walked through college with them afterwards,

bareheaded, with the sun shining on his dark curls, the same bold brown boy who had carried off the little girl from the Hewan six years before, though by this time much more obsequious to Vi. He showed himself most willing and ready all day to be the cicerone of "his cousins ;" and when in the evening, Violet, holding fast by her father's arm, her heart beating high with pleasure past and pleasure to come, walked down to the rafts in company with Val in the aquatic splendours of his boating costume—straw hat wreathed with flowers, blue jacket and white trousers—the girl would have been very much unlike other girls if she had not been dazzled by this versatile hero, grand in academic magnificence in the morning, and resplendent now in the uniform of the river. "I am so sorry I can't take you out myself," said Val, "for of course I must go with my boat ; but I have a man here, the best of fellows, who will row you up to Surly. Here, Brown," he cried, "get out the nicest gig you have, and come yourself—there's a good fellow. I want my cousins to see everything. Oh, I'll speak to Harry, and make it all right. I want you, and nobody else," he added, looking with friendly eyes at his *protégé*. I don't think

Mr Pringle heard this address, but looking round suddenly, he saw a young man standing by Valentine whose appearance made his heart jump. "Good God!" he cried instinctively, staring at him. Dick had grown and developed in these years. He had lost altogether the slouch of the tramp, and was, if not so handsome as Val, trim and well made, with a chest expanded by constant exercise, and his head erect with the constant habit of attention. He was dressed in one of Val's own coats, and no longer looked like a lad on the rafts. For those who did not look closely, he might have been taken for one of Val's schoolfellows, so entirely had he fallen into the ways and manners of "the gentlemen." He was as fair as Val was dark, about the same height, and though not like Val, was so like another face which Mr Pringle knew, that his heart made a jump into his mouth with wonder and terror. Perhaps he might not have remarked this likeness but for the strange association of the two lads, standing side by side as they were, and evidently on the most friendly terms. "Who is that?" cried Mr Pringle, staring with wide-open eyes.

"It is the best fellow in the world," cried Val,

laughing, as Dick sprang aside to arrange the cushions in a boat which lay alongside the raft. "He'll take you up to Surly faster than any one else on the river."

"But, Valentine—it is very kind of him," said Vi, hesitating—"but you did not introduce him to us——"

"Oh, he's not a gentleman," said Val, lightly; "that is to say," he added, seeing Dick within reach, with a hasty blush, "he's as good in himself as any one I know; but he aint one of the fellows, Vi; he works at the rafts—his name is Brown. Now, do you think you can steer? You used to, on the water at home."

"Oh yes," said Violet, with modest confidence. Val stood and looked after them as the boat glided away up the crowded river; then he stalked along through the admiring crowd, feeling as a man may be permitted to feel who holds the foremost rank on a day of *fête* and universal enjoyment.

"To him each lady's look was lent,
On him each courtier's eye was bent."

To be sure there was a great many others almost as exalted as Val; and only the initiated knew that he rowed in the Eight, and was captain of

the Victory,—the best boat on the river. He stalked along to his boat, over the delicious turf of the Brocas, in the afternoon sunshine, threading his way through throngs of ladies in pretty dresses, and hundreds of white-waistcoated Etonians. How proud the small boys who knew him were, after receiving a nod from the demi-god as he passed, to discourse loudly to gracious mother or eager sister, Val's style and title! "That's Ross at my dame's—he's in the Eight—he won the school sculling last summer half; and we think we'll get the House Fours, now he's captain. He's an awfully jolly fellow when you know him," crowed the small boys, feeling themselves exalted in the grandeur of his acquaintance; and the pretty sisters looked after Val, a certain awe mingling with their admiration; while Philistines and strangers, unaccompanied by even a small boy, felt nobodies, as became them. Then came the start up the river. Never was a prettier sight than this ceremonial. The river all golden with afternoon glory; the great trees on the Brocas expanding their huge boughs in the soft air, against the sky; the banks all lined with animated, bright-coloured crowds; the stream alive with attend-

ant boats ; and the great noble pile of the castle looking down serene from its height upon the children and subjects at its royal feet, making merry under its great and calm protection. It is George III.'s birthday—poor, obstinate, kindly old soul!—and this is how a lingering fragrance of kindness grows into a sort of fame. They say he was paternally fond and proud of the boys, who thus yearly, without knowing it, celebrate him still.

Dick took his boat with Val's cousins in it up the river, and waited there among the willows, opposite the beautiful elms of the Brocas, till the "Boats" went past in gay procession. He pointed out Val's boat and Val's person to Violet with a pleasure as great as her own. "It is the best boat on the river, and he is one of the best oars," cried Dick, his honest fair face glowing with pleasure. "We all think his house must win the House Fours—they didn't last year, for Mr Lichen was still here, and he's heavier than Mr Ross ; but Grinder's will have it this time." Dick's face so brightened with generous delight, and acquired an expression so individual and characteristic, that Mr Pringle began to breathe freely, and to say to himself that fancy had led him astray.

“Do you belong to this place?” he asked, when they started again to follow the boats up the river in the midst of a gay flotilla, looking Dick very steadily, almost severely, in the face.

“Not by birth, sir,” said Dick. “Indeed, I don’t belong anywhere; but I’m settled here, I hope, for good.”

“But you don’t mean to say you are a boat-man?” said Mr Pringle; “you don’t look like it. It must be a very precarious life.”

“I am head man at the rafts,” said Dick—“thanks to Mr Ross, who got me taken on when I was a lad”—(he was not quite nineteen then, but maturity comes early among the poor), “and we’re boat-builders to our trade. You should see some of the boats we turn out, sir, if you care for such things.”

“But I suppose, my man, you have had a better education than is usual?” said Mr Pringle, looking so gravely at him that Dick thought he must disapprove of such vanities. “You don’t speak in the least like the other lads about here.”

“I suppose it’s being so much with the gentlemen,” said Dick, with a smile. “I am no better than the other lads. Mr Ross has given me books—and things.”

“Mr Ross must have been very kind to you,”

said Mr Pringle, with vague suspicions which he could not define—"he must have known you before?"

"Hasn't he just been kind to me!" said Dick, a flush coming to his fair face; "an angel couldn't have been kinder! No, I never saw him till two years ago; but lucky for me, he took a fancy to me—and I, if I may make so bold as to say so, to him."

"Mr Brown," said Violet, looking at him with a kind of heavenly dew in her dark eyes—for to call such effusion of happiness tears would be a word out of place—"I am afraid, if we are going through the lock, I shall not be able to steer."

This was not in the least what she wanted to say. What she wanted to say was, I can see you are a dear, dear, good fellow, and I love you for being so fond of Val; and how Dick should have attained to a glimmering of understanding, and known that this was what she meant, I cannot tell—but he did. Such things happen now and then even in this stupid everyday world.

"Never mind, miss," he said cheerfully, looking back at her with his sunshiny blue eyes, "I can manage. Hold your strings fast, that you may not lose them: the steerage is never much

use in a lock ; and if you're nervous, there's the Sergeant, who is a great friend of Mr Ross's, will pull us through."

The lock was swarming with boats, and Violet, not to say her father, who was not quite sure about this mode of progression, looked up with hope and admiration at the erect figure of the Sergeant, brave and fine in his waterman's dress with his silver buttons, and medals of a fiercer service adorning his blue coat. The Sergeant had shed his blood for his country before he came to superintend the swimming of the favoured ones on the Thames. His exploits in the water and those of his pupils are lost to the general public, from the unfortunate fact that English prejudice objects to trammel the limbs of its *natateurs* by any garments. But literature lifts its head in unsuspected places, and the gentle reader will be pleased to learn that the Sergeant's Book on Swimming will soon make the name, which I decline to deliver to premature applauses, known over all the world. He looked to Violet, who was somewhat frightened by the crowds of boats, like an archangel in silver buttons, as he caught the boat with his long pole, and guided them safely through.

I cannot, however, describe in detail all the pretty particulars of the scene, which excited and delighted Violet more than words can tell. Her father was infinitely less interested than usual in her pleasure, having something else in his mind, which he kept turning over and over in his busy brain, while he led her round the supper-table of the boys at Surly, or held her fast during the fireworks at the end of the evening. Was this the other? If it was the other, what motive could the Eskside people have to hide him, to keep him in an inferior station? Did Val know? and if Val knew, how could he be so rash as to present to his natural adversary, a boy who had in every feature Dick Ross's face? Mr Pringle was bewildered with these thoughts. Now and then, when Dick's face brightened into expressiveness, he said to himself that it was all nonsense, that he was crazy on this point, and that any fair lad who appeared by Val's side would immediately look like Richard in his prejudiced eyes. Altogether he was more uncomfortable than I can describe, and heartily glad when the show was over. He took Val by the arm when he came to say good-bye to them, and drew him aside for a moment.

“Does your grandfather know of your intimacy with this lad?” he asked, with the morose tone which his voice naturally took when he was excited.

“Yes, of course they do,” said Val, indignant. “I never hid anything from them—why should I?”

“Who is he, then? I think I have a right to know,” said Mr Pringle.

“A right to know! I don’t understand you,” said Val, beginning to feel the fiery blood tingling in his veins; but he thought of Vi, and restrained himself.

“He is Brown,” he said, with a laugh; “that’s all I know about him. You’re welcome to know as much as I do; though as for right, I can’t tell who has the right. You can ask the men at the rafts, who have just the same means of information as I.”

While this conversation was going on, Violet had spoken softly to Dick. “Mr Brown,” she said, being naturally respectful of all strangers, “I am so glad of what you told us about Mr Ross.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Dick; “you could not be more glad to hear than I am to tell. I

should like to let every one know that though he's only a boy, he's been the making of me."

"But—I beg your pardon—are you older than a boy?" said Vi.

Dick laughed. "When you have to work for your living, you're a man before you know," he said, with a certain oracular wisdom that sank deeply into Vi's mind. But the next moment her father called her somewhat sharply, and she awoke with a sigh to the consciousness that this wonderful day was over, and that she must go away.

CHAPTER XX.

THIS was Val's last summer at Eton; he went away with deep regret, as all well-conditioned boys do, and was petted and made much of at home in the interval between his school and his university life. Lady Eskside, who had once carried little Val with her, with care so anxious, was proud and happy beyond description now when Val accompanied her anywhere with that air of *savoir faire* and intimate knowledge of the world which distinguishes his kind. He had already a circle much enlarged from hers, and knew people whom even the Dowager Duchess, who was more in the world than Lady Eskside, could not pretend to know. He was a head taller than good-natured Lord Hightowers, and a thousand times handsomer and better bred. "But not the least like his father," said her Grace, with pointed particularity. "Not so

like as he was," said Lady Eskside, not unprepared for this attack ; " but I can still see the resemblance — though the difference of complexion is bewildering to those who don't know both faces so well as I do," she added, with a smile. To be sure, no one else could know the two faces as well as she did. Val was extremely well received in the county, and considered, young as he was, an acquisition to general society ; and was asked far and wide to garden-parties, which were beginning to come into fashion, and to the few dances which occurred now and then. He had to go, too, to various entertainments given by the new people in Lord Eskside's feus. During Val's boyhood, the feus which the old lord and his factor laid out so carefully had been built upon, to the advantage of the shopkeepers in Lasswade for one thing ; and a row of, on the whole, rather handsome houses, in solid white stone, somewhat urban in architecture for the locality, and built to resist wind and storm for centuries, rose on the crown of the green bank which overlooked the road, and were to be seen from the terrace at Ross-craig. There were two ladies in them who gave parties,—one the wife of a retired physician,

the other a well-connected widow. Val had to dance at both houses, for the very good reason that the widow was well connected, which made it impossible to refuse her; while the other house had a vote, more important still. "It is your business to make yourself agreeable to everybody, Val," said Lord Eskside, feeling, as he looked at the boy's long limbs and broad shoulders, that the time was approaching in which his ambition should at last be gratified, and a Ross be elected for the county, notwithstanding all obstacles. Within the next four or five years a general election was inevitable; and it was one of the old lord's private prayers that it might not come until Val was eligible. He did all he could to communicate to him that interest in politics which every young man of good family, according to Lord Eskside, should be reared in. Val had been rather inattentive on this point: he held, in an orthodox manner, those conventional and not very intelligent Tory principles which belong to Eton; but he had not thought much about the subject, if truth must be told, and was rather amused than impressed by Lord Eskside's eloquence. "All right, grandpapa," he would say, with that calm

general assent of youth which is so trying to the eager instructor. He was quite ready to accept both position and opinions, but he did not care enough about them to take the trouble of forming any decision for himself.

But he went to Mrs Rintoul's party, and made himself very agreeable ; and not only the retired doctor himself, but what was perhaps more important, his daughters—from Miss Rintoul of five-and-thirty to the little one of sixteen—were ready as one woman to adopt his cause, and wear his colours when the time came. "What does it matter between them, papa?" said Miss Rintoul, who was very strong-minded. "Tory or Radical ; what does it matter ? They are all conservative in office, and destructive out of it. If I had a vote—and at my age it's a disgrace to England that I haven't—I should stand by friends and neighbours. That's a better rule than your old-fashioned Tory and Whig. A good man is the one thing needful ; over whom, if necessary, one can exert intelligent influence," said this enlightened woman. I do not think her papa, who was better aware how very impossible it is to influence any human creature, was entirely of her opinion ; but he informed Willie

Maitland that probably on the whole, if no candidate exactly of his own way of thinking appeared in the field, he would not hesitate to support Mr Ross, if he carried out, as there was every reason to expect, the promise of his youth. Thus Val, in gay unconsciousness, was made to begin his canvassing when he was nineteen, and while still the episode of the university lay between him and public life. Lord Eskside invited a large party for the 1st of September, and the house continued full up to the time of Val's departure for Oxford; and besides this party of guests at home, there was such a succession of entertainments given at Rossraig as had not been known before for many years,—not since Val's father was on his promotion, like Val. Mary Percival was one of the party during this gay time, aiding Lady Eskside to receive her guests and do the honours of her house. She came when it was definitely ascertained that Richard was not coming, as his parents wished. He wrote that he was deeply occupied, and that in the present state of Italian politics it was impossible that he could leave his post—a letter over which Lady Eskside sighed; but as Mary came to make up the deficiency,

there was something gained to atone for this loss.

Mary, however, never would commit herself to that enthusiasm for Val which his grandmother felt was her boy's due. She liked him very well, she said—oh, very well: he was a nice boy; she was very glad he had done so well at school, and she hoped he would take a good place at Oxford; but I leave the reader to judge whether this mild approbation was likely to satisfy the old people, who by this time—husband as well as wife—were, as the servants said, altogether “wrapt up” in Val. Mary offended her friend still more by the perverse interest she took in the Pringle family, and her many visits to the Hewan, where Val was delighted to accompany her as often as she chose to go. Violet was “in residence,” as he said, at the cottage, living a somewhat lonely life there, though the others of the family came and went, spending a day or a night as they could manage it. I do not know if any thought of “falling in love” had ever come into Valentine's boyish head; but there was a delicate link of affection and interest between Violet and himself which affected him he could not

quite tell how. As for poor little Vi, I fear her young imagination had gone further than Valentine's. It was not love in her case, perhaps, any more than in his; but it was fancy, which at seventeen is almost as strong. I think this was the primary reason of Mary's frequent visits to the Hewan. She saw what was going on in the girl's young head and heart; and with that intense recollection of the circumstances which decided her own fate which such gentlewomen, thrown out of the common path of life, often have, she had conceived an almost exaggerated anxiety for the fate of Vi, which seemed to be shaping itself after the model of her own.

"I wish my dear old lady would not spoil that boy so," she said one September morning, when she had walked alone through the woods to the Hewan. Her pretty *particular* grey gown (for Mary was not without something of that precise order which it is usual to call old-maidishness, about her dress) was marked here and there with a little spot from the damp ferns and grass, which she rubbed with her handkerchief as she spoke, and which suddenly brought back to Violet's memory that one day

of "playing truant" which had been about the sweetest of her life. Mary had perceived that Violet gave a quick look for the other figure which generally followed, and that there was a droop of disappointment about her, when she perceived that her visitor was alone. "I wish she would not spoil that boy so. He is not a bad boy——"

"Is it possible you can mean Val?" said Violet, with dignity, erecting her small head.

"Yes, indeed, my dear, it is quite possible; I do mean Val. He is a good boy enough, if you would not all spoil him with adulation—as if he were something quite extraordinary, and no one had ever seen his like before."

"You do not like Val, Miss Percival—you never did; but he likes you, and always walks with you when you will let him."

"Ah, that is when I am coming here," said Mary, with a momentary compunction. Then perceiving a pleased glow diffuse itself over Vi's face, she added, quickly, "I mean, he likes to go with me when it pleases himself; but if I were to ask any little sacrifice of his will from him, you should see how he would look. He is one of the most self-willed boys I know."

Violet did not make any answer. She patted her foot upon the carpet, and the corners of her little mouth were drawn down. She would have frowned had she known how; as it was, she averted her face in wrath and dismay.

“Violet, my dear, I take a great interest in you,” said Mary. “When I look at you, I sometimes think I see myself at your age. I don’t like to think that you may grow up to make a demigod of Val—or indeed of any other.”

“Miss Percival!—I! Oh, how dare you!—how can you say so!” cried Violet, springing to her feet, her face crimson, her eyes shining. “I! make a—anything of Val! Oh, how can you be so unkind, you grown-up people! Must a girl never speak to a boy unless he is her brother? And Val has been just like my brother. I think of him—as I think of Sandy.”

“Oh, you little story-teller!” cried Mary, laughing in spite of herself, as Violet’s indignant voice faltered into uncertainty; “but, Vi, I am not going to scold—don’t be afraid. I am going to tell you for your good what happened to me. I don’t like doing it,” she said, with a blush that almost neutralised the difference of age between herself and the girl who listened to her; “but

I think it may be for your good, dear. Violet, when I was your age there was Some one—whom I was constantly in the habit of seeing, as you might be of seeing Val. There was never any—flirtation or nonsense between us. How shall I say it, Violet?—for I don't care to speak of such things any more than you would. I liked him, as I thought, as you do, like a brother; and he was always kept before me—never any one but Richard. After a while he went out into the world, and there did—something which separated us for ever! oh, not anything wrong, Vi—not a crime, or even vice—but something which showed me that I, and all I was, such as I was, was nothing in the world to him—that nothing was of value to him but his own caprice. I never got over it, Violet. You see me now growing old, unmarried; and of course I never shall marry now, nor have young ones round me like your mother——”

“Oh, dear Miss Percival,” cried Violet, with tears in her eyes, “who cares for being married? What has that to do with it? Is it not far finer, far grander, to live like you, for ever constant to your first love? Is not that the best of all?” cried the little enthusiast, flushing with

visionary passion. Mary caught her by her pretty shoulders, shook her and kissed her, and laughed, and let one or two tears drop, a tribute, half to her own, half to the child's excitement.

"You little goose!" she cried. "Vi, I saw him after, years after—such a man to waste one's life for!—a poor petty *dilettante*, more fond of a bit of china than of child or wife, or love or honour. Ah, Vi, you don't understand me! but to think I might have been the mother of a child like you, but for that poor creature of a man!"

"Oh, don't, don't!" cried Vi, putting her hands to her ears; "I will not listen to you, now. If you—loved him," said the girl, hesitating and blushing at the word, "you never, never could speak of him like that."

"I never—never could have been deceived in him,—is that what you mean? Vi, I hope you will never follow my example."

"Hollo!" cried another voice of some one coming in at the door, which stood open all day long, as cottage doors do—"is there any one in—is Mary here? Are you in, Vi?" and Val's head, glowing with a run up the brae, bright

with life and mirth, and something which looked very much like boyish innocence and pleasure, looked in suddenly at the parlour door. Val was struck by consternation when he saw the agitated looks which both endeavoured to hide. "What's the row?" he asked, coming in with his hat in his hand. "You look as if you had been crying. What have you been doing, Mary, to Vi?"

"Scolding her," said Miss Percival, laughing. "I hope you have no objection, Val."

"But I have great objections; nobody shall bother Violet and make her cry, if I can help it. She never did anything in her life to deserve scolding. Vi," cried Val, turning to her suddenly, "do you remember the day we played truant? If Mary had'nt been here, I meant to carry you off again into the woods."

Violet looked up first at him and then at Mary; the first glance was full of delight and tender gratitude, the other was indignant and defiant. "Is this the boy you have been slandering?" Vi's eyes said, as plain as eyes could speak, to her elder friend. Miss Percival rose and made the gentleman a curtsy.

"If Mary is much in your way, she will go ;

but as Vi is a young lady now, perhaps Mary's presence would be rather an advantage than otherwise. I put myself at your orders, young people, for the woods, or wherever you like."

"Well," said Val, with the composure of his age, "perhaps it might be as well if you would come too. Run to the larder, Violet, and look if there's a pie. I'll go and coax Jean for the old basket—the very old basket that we had on that wonderful day. Quick! and your cloak, Vi." He rushed away from them like a whirlwind; and soon after, while the two ladies were still looking at each other in doubt whether he should be humoured or not, Jean's voice was heard approaching round the corner from her nest.

"Pie! set you up with dainty dishes! Na, Mr Valentine, you'll get nae pie from me, though you have the grace to come and ask for it this time; but I'll make you some sandwiches, if you like, for you've a tongue like the very deil himself. Oh ay—go away with your phrases. If you were not wanting something you would take little heed o' your good Jean, your old friend."

"Listen," said Mary to Vi.

"No that ye're an ill laddie, when a's said.

You're not one of the mim-mouthed ones, like your father before you ; but I wouldna say but you were more to be lippened to, with all your noise and your nonsense. There, go away with you. I'll do the best I can, and you'll take care of missie. Here's your basket till ye, ye wild lad."

Vi had grasped Mary's arm in return when old Jean continued ; but being pitiful, the girl in her happiness would not say anything to increase what she felt must be the pain of the woman by her side. Vi had divined easily enough that it was Valentine's father of whom Mary spoke ; and the child pitied the woman, who was old enough to be her mother. Ah, had it but been Valentine ! He never would disappoint any one—never turn into a *dilettante*, loving china better than child or wife. She kissed Mary in a little outburst of pity—pity so angelic that Violet almost longed to change places with her, that she might see and prove for herself how different Valentine was. As for Mary, she made herself responsible for this mad expedition with a great confusion and mingling of feelings. She went, she said to herself, to prevent harm ; but some strange mixture of a

visionary maternity, and of a fellow-feeling quite incompatible with her mature age, was in her mind at the same time. She said to herself, with a sigh, as she went down the slope, that she might have been the boy's mother, and let her heart soften to him, as she had never done before ; though I think this same thought it was which had made her feel a little instinctive enmity to him, because he was not her son but another woman's. How lightly the boy and girl tripped along over the woodland paths, waiting for her at every corner, chattering their happy nonsense, filling the sweet, mellow, waving woods with their laughter ! They pushed down to the river, though the walk was somewhat longer than Mary cared for, and brought her to the glade in which the two runaways had eaten their dinner, and where Vi had been found asleep on Val's shoulder. "It looks exactly as it did then ; but how different we are !" cried Violet, on the warm green bank where her shoes and stockings had been put to dry. Mary sat down on the sunny grass, and watched them as they poked into all the corners they remembered, and called to them with maternal tremblings, when the boy once more led the girl across the step-

ping-stones to the great boulder by the side of which Esk foamed and flashed. She asked herself, was it possible that this bold brown boy would ever turn out to be like his father ? and tried to recollect whether Richard had ever been so kind, so considerate of any one's comfort, as Val was of Vi's. Was it perhaps possible that, instead of her own failure, this romance, so prettily begun, might come to such a climax of happiness as romances all feign to end in ? Mary, I fear, though she was so sensible, became slightly foolish as she sat under the big beech, and looked at the two in the middle of the stream together, Esk roaring by over his rocks, and making the words with which she called them back, quite inaudible. How handsome Val looked, and how pretty and poetic his little companion ! The bank of wood opposite was all tinted with autumn colour, rich and warm. It was a picture which any painter would have loved, and it went to Mary's heart.

“ But you are too big, Val, to play at the Babes in the Wood nowadays,” said old Lady Eskside, with a little wrinkle in her brow, when she heard of the freak ; “ and I wonder the Pringles leave that poor little thing by herself

at the Hewan, sometimes for days together. They say it's for her health; but I think it would be much better for her health if she were under her mother's eye."

"You must remember that I was with them," said Mary, "representing her mother, or a middle-aged supervision at least."

"My dear," said Lady Eskside, half angry, half smiling, as she shook her finger at her favourite, "I have my doubts that you are just a romantic gowk; though you might know better."

"Yes, I might know better—if experience could teach," said Mary; but experience so seldom teaches, notwithstanding all that is said to the contrary! And Mary could not but reflect that Lady Eskside had not frowned, but smiled, upon her own delusion. Perhaps in such cases parental frowns are safer than smiles.

CHAPTER XXI.

THERE was a great dinner at Rossraig before Val went to Oxford : as much fuss made about him, the neighbours began to say, as was made for his father who came home so seldom, and had distinguished himself in diplomacy, and turned out to be a man of whom the county could be proud ; whereas Val was but an untried boy going to college, of whom no one could as yet say how he would turn out. Mr Pringle was invited to this great ceremonial, partly by way of defiance to show him how popular the heir was, and partly (for the two sentiments are not incapable of conjunction) out of kindness, as recognising his relationship. He came, and he listened to the remarks, couched in mysterious terms, yet comprehensible enough, which were made as to Val's future connection with the county, in grim silence. After dinner, when

the ladies had retired, and as the wine began to circulate, these allusions grew broader, and at length Mr Pringle managed to make out very plainly that old Lord Eskside was already electioneering, though his candidate was but nineteen, and for the moment there was very little chance of a new election. Val, careless of the effect he was intended to produce, and quite unconscious of his grandfather's motives, was letting loose freely his boyish opinions, all marked, as we have said, with the Eton mark, which may be described as Conservative in the gross, with no very clear idea what the word means in detail, but a charming determination to stick to it, right or wrong. Lord Eskside smiled benignly upon these effusions, and so did most of his guests. "He has the root of the matter in him," said the old lord, addressing Sir John, who was as anxious as himself to have "a good man" elected for the county, but who had no son, grandson, or nephew of his own; and Sir John nodded back in genial sympathy. Mr Pringle, however, as was natural, being on the opposite side from the Rosses in everything, was also on the other side in politics, and maintained an eloquent silence during this part of

the entertainment. He bided his time, and when there came a lull in the conversation (a thing that will happen occasionally), he made such an interpellation as showed that his silence arose from no want of inclination to speak.

“Your sentiments are most elevated, Valentine,” he said, “but your practice is democratical to an extent I should scarcely have looked for from your father’s son. I hope your friend the boatman at Eton is flourishing—the one you introduced to my daughter and me?”

“A boatman at Eton,” said the old lord, bending his brows, “introduced to Violet? You are dreaming, Pringle. I hope Val knows better than that.”

“Indeed I think it shows very fine feeling on Valentine’s part—this was one of nature’s noblemen, I gathered from what he said.”

“Nature’s fiddlestick!” exclaimed Lord Eskside, and the Tory gentlemen pricked up their ears. There was scarcely one of them who did not recollect, or find himself on the eve of recollecting, at that moment, that Val’s mother was “not a lady,” and that blood would out.

“I introduced him to you as a boatman, sir,” said Val, “not as anything else; though as for

noblemen, Brown is worth twenty such as I have known with handles to their names. We get to estimate people by their real value at Eton, not by their accidental rank," said the youth splendidly, at which Mr Pringle cried an ironical, "Hear, hear!"

"Gently, gently, my young friend," said Sir John. "Rank is a great power in this world, and not to be lightly spoken of: it does not become you to speak lightly of it; and it does not agree with your fine Tory principles, of which I warmly approve."

"What have Tory principles to do with it?" said Val. "A fellow may be rowdy or a snob though he is a lord; and in that case at Eton, sir, whatever may happen at other places, we give him the cold shoulder. I don't mean to set up Eton for an example," said Val, gravely, at which there was a general roar.

"Bravo, bravo, my young Tory!" cried the Duke himself, no less a person, who on that night honoured Lord Eskside's table. "In that respect, if you are right, Eton is an example, let any one who pleases take the other side."

"If Wales had been at Eton, and had been wowdy, we'd have sent him to Coventry as soon

as look at him," said Lord Hightowers, smoothing an infantile down on his upper lip.

"A very fine sentiment ; but I don't know if the antagonistic principle would work," said Mr Pringle. "I am a Liberal, as everybody knows ; but I don't care about admitting boatmen to my intimacy, however much I may condemn an unworthy peer."

"Did Brown intrude upon you ?" said Valentine, bewildered ; "was he impudent ? did he do anything he oughtn't to ? Though I could almost as soon believe that I had behaved like a cad myself, if you say so I'll go down directly and kick the fellow." And poor Valentine, flushed and excited, half rose from his seat.

"Bwown !" said Lord Hightowers from the other side of the table. "Beg your pardon, but you're mistaken ; you must be mistaken. Bwown ! best fellow that ever lived. Awfully sorry he's not a gentleman ; but for a cad—no, not a cad—a common sort of working fellow, he's the nicest fellow I ever saw. Couldn't have been impudent—not possible. It aint in him, eh, Ross ? or else I'd go and kick him too with pleasure," said the young aristocrat calmly.

Between the fire of these two pairs of young eyes, Mr Pringle was somewhat taken aback.

“Oh, he was not impudent; on the contrary, a well-informed nice young fellow. My only wonder was, that young gentlemen of your anti-democratical principles should make a bosom friend of a man of the people—that’s all. For my part, I think it does you infinite credit,” said Mr Pringle, blandly. “I hope you have been having good sport at Castleton, Lord Hightowers. You ought to have come out to my little moor at Dalrulzian, Val. I don’t know when the boys have had better bags.”

And thus the conversation fell back into its ordinary channels; indeed it had done so before this moment, the battle about Brown having quickly failed to interest the other members of the party. Lord Eskside sat bending his brows and straining his mind to hear, but as he had the gracious converse of a Duke to attend to, he could not actually forsake that potentate to make out the chatter of the boys with his adversary. Thus Mr Pringle fired his first successful shot at Val. The Tory gentlemen forgot the story, but they remembered to have heard something or other of a love of low company on the part of

Valentine Ross, "which, considering that nobody ever knew who his mother was, was perhaps not to be wondered at," some of the good people said. When Lady Eskside heard of it, she was so much excited by the malice of the suggestion, and expressed her feelings so forcibly, that Val blazed up into one of his violent sudden passions, and was rushing out to show Mr Pringle himself what was thought of his conduct, when his grandfather caught him and arrested him. "Do you want to make fools of us all with your intemperate conduct, sir," cried the old lord, fire flashing from under his heavy brows. "It is only a child that resents a slight like this—a man must put up with a great deal and make no sign. 'Let the galled jade wince ; my withers are unwrung.' That is the sort of sentiment that becomes us." I don't know if this good advice would have mollified Val but for the sudden appearance just then at one of the windows which opened on the terrace, of Violet in her blue gown, whose innocent eyes turned to them with a look which seemed to say, "Don't, oh don't, for my sake !" Of course Violet knew nothing about it, and meant nothing by her looks. It was the expression habitual to

her, that was all; but as the old man and the young, one hot with fury, the other calming down his rage, perceived the pretty figure outside, the old lord dropped, as if it burned him, his hold on Val's arm, and Val himself stopped short, and, so to speak, lowered his weapons. "Is my lady in, please?" said Violet through the glass—which was all she had wanted to ask, with those sweet imploring looks. They opened the window for her eagerly, and she stepped in like something dropped out of the sky, in her blue gown, carrying her native colour with her. After this Val could not quite make out what it was that he had against Mr Pringle, until Violet in her innocence brought the subject up.

"Mamma was scolding papa for something—something about Valentine," said Violet. "I did not hear what it was."

"Indeed your papa seems to have spoken in far from a nice spirit, my dear, though I don't like to say it to you," said Lady Eskside. "What was it about, Val? some boatman whom he called your bosom friend."

"Oh!" cried Violet, clasping her hands together, "it must have been Mr Brown. Papa used to talk of him for long and long after."

“And did *you* think, Violet,” said the old lady, severely, “that my boy made him his bosom friend ? ”

“Oh, Lady Eskside ! he was so nice and so grateful to Val. I took such a fancy to him,” cried Vi, with a blush and a smile, “because he was so grateful. He said Mr Ross had done everything for him. Bosom friend ! He looked—I don’t think I ever saw a man look so before—women do sometimes,” said Violet, with precocious comprehension—“as if he would have liked to be hurt or done some harm to for Val’s sake.”

“It is the boy I told you about, grandma,” said Val—“the one that Grinder made himself disagreeable about ; as if a fellow couldn’t try to be of use to any other fellow without being had up ! He rowed them up the river on the 4th of June. He aint my bosom friend,” he added, laughing ; “but I’d rather have him to stand by me in a crowd than any one I know—so that Mr Pringle was right.”

“But he did not mean it so ; it was ill-meant, it was ill-meant !” cried Lady Eskside. Violet looked at them both with entreating looks.

“Papa may have said something wrong, but I am sure he did not mean it,” said Vi, with the

dew coming to her pretty eyes. Lady Eskside shook her head; but as for Val, his anger had stolen away out of his heart like the moisture on the grass when the sun comes out; but the sun at the moment had an azure radiance shining out of a blue gown.

After this Val went off to the University with a warm sense of his approaching manhood, and a new independence of feeling. He went to Balliol naturally, as the college of his country, and there fell into the hands of Mr Gerald Grinder, who had condescended to be the boy's private tutor long ago, just before he attained to the glories of his fellowship. Boys were thus passed up along the line among the Grinder family, which had an excellent connection, and throve well. Val was not clever enough nor studious enough to furnish the ambitious heads of his college with a future first-class man; but as he had one great and well-established quality, they received him with more than ordinary satisfaction; for even at Balliol, has not the most sublime of colleges a certain respect for its place on the river? I have heard of such a thing as a Boating scholarship, the nominal examination for which is made very light in-

deed to famous oars ; but anyhow, Val, though perhaps a very stiff matriculation paper might have floored him, got in upon comparatively easy terms. I will not say much about his successes, nor even insist on the fact that Oxford was an easy winner on the river that triumphant day when Lichen rowed stroke and Val bow in the University boat, and all the small Etonians roared so, under their big hats, that it was a mercy none of them exploded. Val did well, though not brilliantly, in his University career, as he had done at Eton. He had a little difficulty now and then with his hasty temper, but otherwise came to no harm ; and thus, holding his own in intellectual matters, and doing more than hold his own in other points that rank quite as high in Oxford, as in the rest of the academical world, made his way to his majority. I believe it crossed Lord Eskside's mind now and then to think that in Parliament it was very soon forgotten whether a man had been bow or even stroke of the 'Varsity boat ; and that it could count for little in political life, and for less than nothing with the sober constituency of a Scotch county ; but then, as all the youth of England, and all the instructors of

that youth, set much store by the distinction, even an anxious parent (not to say grandfather) is mollified. "What good will all that nonsense do him?" the old lord would growl, working his shaggy eyebrows, as he read in the papers, even the most intellectual, a discussion of Val's sinews and breadth of chest and "form" before the great race was rowed. "At least it cannot do him any harm," said my lady, always and instantly on the defensive; "and I don't see why you should grudge our boy the honour that other folks' boys would give their heads for." "Other folks' boys may be foolish if they like—I am concerned only for my own," said Lord Eskside; "what does the county care for his bow-ing or his stroke-ing? it's a kind of honour that will stand little wear and tear, however much you may think of it, my lady." But to tell the truth, I don't think my lady in her soul did think very much of it, except in so far that it was her principle to stand up for most things that pleased Val.

In the mean time, however, the departure of Val from Eton had produced a much more striking effect upon some nameless persons than on any of his other friends. Dick missed him with

unfeigned and unconcealed regret. He insisted upon carrying his bag to the station for him, notwithstanding the cab which conveyed Val's other effects; and went home again in very depressed spirits, after having bidden him good-bye. But Dick's depression was nothing to that with which his mother sat gazing blankly over the river, with that look in her eyes which had for some time departed from them—that air of looking for something which she could not find, which had made her face so remarkable. She had never quite lost it, it is true; but the hope which used to light up her eyes of seeing, however far off, that one boat which she never failed to recognise shooting up or down the stream, had softened her expression wonderfully, and brought her back, as it were, to the things surrounding her. Val, though she saw so little of him, was as an anchor of her heart to the boy's mother. The consciousness that he was near, that she should hear his name, see the shadow of him flitting across the brightness of the river, or that even when he was absent, a few weeks would bring back those dim and forlorn delights to her, kept the wild heart satisfied. This strange visionary absorption in the boy

she had given up did not lessen her attachment to the boy she retained—the good Dick, who had always been so good a son to her. She thought that she had totally given up Val; and certainly she never hoped, nor even desired, any more of him than she had from her window. Indeed, in her dim perpetual ponderings on this subject, the poor soul had come to feel that it could be no comfort, but much the reverse, to Val, to find out that she was his mother. Had any hope of the possibility of revealing herself to him ever been in her mind, it would have disappeared after their first interview. After that she had always kept in the background on the occasions when he came to see Dick, and had received his “Good morning,” without anything but a curtsy. No, alas! a gentleman like that, with all the consciousness about him of a position so different,—with that indescribable air of belonging to the highest class which the poor tramp-woman recognised at once, remembering her brief and strange contact with it—a gentleman like that to have a mother like herself revealed to him—a mother from the road, from the fairs and racecourses! She almost cried out with fright when she thought of the

possibility, and made a vow to herself that never, never would she expose Valentine to this horror and shame. No! she had made her bed, and she must lie upon it.

But when he went away, the visionary support which had sustained her visionary nature—the something out of herself which had kept her wild heart satisfied—failed all at once. It was as if a blank had suddenly been spread before the eyes that were always looking for what they could find no more. She never spoke of it—never wept, nor made any demonstration of the change; but she flagged in her life and her spirit all at once. Her work, which she had up to this time got through with an order and swiftness strangely at variance with all the habits which her outdoor life might have been supposed to form, began to drag, and be a weariness to her. She had no longer the inducement to get it over, to be free for the enjoyment of her window. Sometimes she would sit drearily down in the midst of it, with her face turned to the stream by a forlorn habit, and thus Dick would find her sometimes when he came in to dinner. “You are not well, mother,” the lad said, anxiously. “Oh yes, quite well—the likes

of me is never ill—till we die,” she would say, with a dreamy smile. “You have too much work, mother,” said Dick; “I can’t have you working so hard—have a girl to help you; we’ve got enough money to afford it, now I’m head man.” “Do you think I’ve gone useless, then?” she would ask, with some indignation, rousing herself; and thus these little controversies always terminated.

But Dick watched her, with a wonder growing in his mind. She was very restless during the autumn, yet when the dark days of winter came, relapsed into a half-stupefied quiet. Even when Val was at Eton, he had of course been invisible on the river during the winter. “The spring will be the pull,” Dick said to himself, wondering, with an anguish which it would be difficult to describe, whether it was his duty to pull up the stakes of this homely habitation, which he had fixed as he thought so securely for himself, and to abandon his work and his living, and the esteem of his neighbours, to resume for her sake the wanderings which he loathed; could it be his duty? A poor lad, reared at the cost of visible privations by a very poor mother, has a better idea of the effort and of the sacrifice made for

him, than a young man of a higher class for whom even more bitter sacrifices may have been made. Dick knew what it must have cost the poor tramp-woman to bring him up as she had done, securing him bread always, keeping him from evil communications, even having him taught a little in his childhood. For a tramp to have her child taught to read and write involves as much as Eton and Oxford would to another ; and Dick was as much above the level of his old companions in education as a university prizeman is above the common mass ; and he knew what it must have cost her, therein having an advantage over many boys, who never realise what they have cost their parents till these parents are beyond all reach of gratitude. Was it, then, his duty to give up everything, his own very life, and open the doors of her prison-house to this woman to whom he owed his life ? Such questions come before many of us in this world, and have to be solved one way or other. Our own life, independence, and use ; or the happiness of those who have guarded and reared us, though without giving up their all to us, as we are called upon to do for them. Perhaps it is a question which women have to decide upon more

often then men. Dick thrust it away from him as long as he could, trying not to think of it, and watching his mother with an anxiety beyond words, as the days lengthened, and the spring freshness came back, and the Brocas elms got their first wash of green. Sometimes he saw her give an unconscious gasp as if for breath, as though the confined air of the room stifled her. Sometimes he found her half bent out of the open window, with her rapt eyes gazing, not at the river, but away over the distant fields. She got paler and thinner every day before his eyes ; and he owed everything (he thought) to her, and what was he to do ?

What the sacrifice would have been to Dick, I dare not calculate. In these three years he had become known to everybody about, and was universally liked and trusted. He was his master's right-hand man. He had begun to know what comfort was, what it was to have a little money, (delightful sensation !) what it was to get on in the world. The tramp-boys about the roads, and the new lads who were taken on at the rafts, attracted his sympathy, but it was the sympathy of a person on a totally different level—who had indeed been as they were, but who

had long gone over their heads, and was of a class and of habits totally different. Had Lord Hightowers been called upon to divest himself of his title, and become simple John Seton in an engineer's workshop, the humiliation would not have been comparable to that which Dick would have endured had he been compelled to degrade himself again into a vagrant, a frequenter of fairs and races. Indeed I think Lord Hightowers would rather have liked the change, being of a mechanical turn,—while to Dick the thought was death. It made him sick and faint to think of the possibility. But, on the other hand, was he to let his mother pine and die like a caged eagle ? or let her go away from him, to bear all the inevitable privations alone ?

One day the subject was finally forced upon his consideration in such a way that he could not disregard it. When he went home to his early dinner, she was gone. Everything was arranged for him with more care than usual, his meal left by the fire, his table laid, and the landlady informed him that his mother had left word she would not be back till night. Dick did not run wildly off in search of her, as some people

would have done. He had to look after his work, whatever happened. He swallowed his dinner hastily, a prey to miserable thoughts. It had come then at last, this misfortune which he had so long foreseen ! Could he let her wander off alone to die of cold and weariness behind some hedge ? After the three years' repose, her change of habits, and the declining strength which he could not deceive himself about, how could she bear those privations alone ? No, it was impossible. Dick reviewed the whole situation bitterly enough, poor fellow. He knew what everybody would say : how it was the vagrant blood breaking out in him again ; how it was, once a tramp always a tramp ; how it was a pity—but a good thing, on the whole, that he had done nothing wild and lawless before he left. And some would regret him, Dick thought, brushing his hand across his eyes—"the gentlemen" generally, among whom he had many fast friends. Dick decided that he would do nothing rash. He would not give up his situation, and give notice of leaving to the landlady, till he had first had a talk with his mother ; but he "tidied" the room after his solitary dinner with a forlorn sense of the general breaking up of all his com-

forts—and went to his afternoon's work with a heavy heart.

It was quite late when she came home. He could hear by her steps upon the stair that she was almost too tired to drag one foot after another, as he ran to open the door for her. Poor soul ! she came in carrying a basket of primroses, which she held out to him with a pathetic smile. “Take them, Dick ; I've been far to get 'em, and you used to be fond of them when you were little,” she said, dropping wearily into the nearest seat. She was pale, and had been crying, he could see ; and her abstract eyes looked at him humbly, beseechingly, like the eyes of a dumb creature, which can express a vague anguish but cannot explain.

“Was it for *them* you went, mother ?” cried Dick, with momentary relief : but this was turned into deeper distress when she shook her head, and burst out into a low moaning and crying that was pitiful to hear.

“No,” she said,—“no, no, it wasn't for them ; it was to try my strength ; and I can't do it, Dick—I can't do it, no more, never no more. The strength has gone out of me. I'm dying for free air and the road—but I can't do it, no more, no more !”

Poor Dick went and knelt down by her side, and took her hand into his. He was glad, and conscience-stricken, and full of pity for her, and understanding of her trouble. "Hush, mother! hush!" he said; "don't cry. You're weakly after the long winter, as I've seen you before——"

"No, lad, no," she cried, rocking herself in her chair; "no, I'll never be able for it again—no more, no more!"

Dick never said a word of the tumult in his own mind: he tried to comfort her, prophesying—though heaven knows how much against his own interests!—that she would soon feel stronger, and coaxed her to eat and drink, and at length prevailed upon her to go to bed. Now that they had become comparatively rich, she had the little room behind which had once been Dick's, and he was promoted to a larger chamber up-stairs. He sat up there, poor fellow, as long as he could keep awake, wondering what he must do. Could it be that he was glad that his mother was less strong? or was it his duty to lose no time further, but to take her away by easy stages to the open air that was necessary for her, and the fields that she loved? Dick's

heart contracted, and bitter tears welled up into his eyes. But he felt that he must think of himself no longer, only of her. That was the one thing self-evident, which required no reasoning to make clear.

The next day a letter came from Valentine Ross, the first sign of his existence all this time, which changed entirely the current of affairs.

CHAPTER XXII.

VAL'S letter was of a character sufficiently exciting to have made Dick forget anything less important than the crisis which had thus arrived. Its object was to invite him to Oxford, to a place somewhat similar to that which he had held at Eton, in one of the great boating establishments on the river. The master was old, and wanted somebody of trust to superintend and manage his business, with a reasonable hope of succeeding to him. "You had better come up and talk it over," wrote Val, ever peremptory. "I have always said you must rise in the world, and here is the opportunity for you. They have too much regard for you at Eton to keep you from doing what would be so very advantageous ; therefore come up at once and look after it." Dick's heart, which had been beating very low in his honest breast, overwhelmed with fear and

forebodings, gave one leap of returning confidence ; but then he reflected that his mother must be made the final judge, and with a sickening pang of suspense he “knocked off” his work, and rowed himself across to the little house at the corner. His mother was wearied and languid with her long walk on the day before. She had paused in the midst of her morning occupations, and Dick found her seated in the middle of the room, with her back turned to the window, and her face supported on her hands. She was gazing at the wall opposite, much as she gazed into the distant landscape, not seeing it, but longing to see through it—to see something she could not see. She started when Dick came in, and smiled at him deprecating and humble. “I was resting a moment,” she said, with an air of apology that went to his heart. “Have you forgotten something, Dick ?”

“No, mother, but I’ve heard of something,” he said, taking out his letter. This made her sit upright, and flushed her cheek suddenly with a surprised alarm for which he could not account—for which she herself could not account ; for it was perhaps the first time in her life that it had occurred to her what would happen if Dick

found out the secret of his own story. The possibility of Valentine doing so had crossed her mind, and she had shrunk from it. But what if Dick should find out? the idea had never entered her imagination before.

"It's a letter from Mr Ross, mother," said Dick, steadily looking at her. "He says he has heard of a place for me at Oxford where he is himself—a place where I should be almost master at once, have everything to manage, and might succeed, and get it into my own hands. Mother! that would please you? Now to think you should like *that* when you can't endure this! It would be the same kind of place."

"Don't be hard upon me, Dick," she said, faltering, and turning away her eyes that he might not see the strange light in them—which she was herself aware must be too remarkable to be overlooked. "I can't answer for my feelings. It's a change, I suppose—a change that I want. My old way I can't go back to, for more things than one. I'm too weak and old; and more than that, I'm changed in my mind. Dick, I think it will be a comfort to you to tell you. It aint only my limbs, boy, nor my strength. My mind's changed; I couldn't go on the tramp again."

“No, mother? thank God!”

“I don’t thank God,” she said, shaking her head. “I am not glad; but so it is, and I want a change. Let us go, boy. Please God, I’ll be happier there.”

“Mother,” said Dick, anxiously, “your looks are changed all at once. I’m going to ask you a curious question. Has it anything to do with—Mr Ross?”

She made no answer for the moment, but leant her head upon her hands, and looked vaguely at the wall.

“I know it’s a curious question,” repeated Dick, with an attempt at a smile. “But you were satisfied as long as he was here; and since he’s gone you have fallen back—only since he’s gone! You never got that longing sort of look while he was here. What has Mr Ross to do with you and me? Mother—don’t you suppose I think it’s anything wrong, for I don’t—but what has he to do with you and me?”

“Nothing—nothing, Dick,” she cried—“nothing; never will have, never can have. Don’t ask me. When I was young, when I was a girl, I knew his—people—his—father. There, that’s all. I never meant to have said as much.

There is nothing wrong. Yes, I suppose it's him I miss somehow. Not that he is half to me, or quarter to me, that you are—or anything to me at all."

"It's very strange," said Dick, troubled; "and somehow *I* feel for him as I never felt for anybody else. You knew his—father——?"

"I won't have any questions from you, Dick," she cried passionately, rising from her chair. "I told you I knew his—people. Some time or other I'll tell you how I knew them; but not now."

"I wonder does he know anything about it," said Dick, speaking more to himself than her. "It's very strange; he said he thought you were a lady, mother; and that he had seen you before——"

"Did he? God bless him!" cried the woman, surprised by sudden tears. "But I aint a lady—I aint a lady," she added, under her breath; "he was wrong there."

"You have some lady ways, mother, now and again," said Dick, pondering. "It *is* strange. If you knew his people, as you say, does he know?"

"Not a word, Dick, and he mustn't know.

Remember, if it was my last word—*he* mustn't know! Promise me you'll not speak. If he knew and they knew—they'd—I don't know what they mightn't do. Dick, you will never betray your mother?—you will never—never——”

“Hush, mother dear; you are worrying yourself for nothing,” said her gentle boy. “If there's nothing wrong, what could they or anybody do? Of course, I won't say a word. All the safer,” he added, with a laugh, “because I don't know what words to say. When you keep me dark, mother, I can't give out any light to other people, can I? It's the surest way.”

She took no notice of this implied reproof, the most severe that had ever come from Dick's gentle lips. She was another creature altogether from the languid woman whom he had found sitting there in the midst of the untidy room. A new light had come into her eyes—all her stupor and weariness were over. Dick was startled, and he was a trifle hurt at the same time, which was natural enough. If there had been any material for jealousy in him, I think it must have developed at that moment—for all his love had not called forth from his mother one tittle of the feeling which to all appearance

an utter stranger awoke. Dick sighed, but his nature was not in the smallest degree self-contemplative; and he shook the momentary feeling away ere it had time to take form. "If I can get leave, I'll go up to Oxford and see about it to-morrow," he said. When he had come to this conclusion, he went towards the door to return to his work, leaving her active and revived, both in mind and body. But he stopped before he reached it, and turned back. "Mother," he said, with a little solemnity, "Mr Ross will be only about two years at Oxford. What shall we do when he goes away? We cannot follow him about wherever he goes."

"God knows," she said, stopping short in her sweeping. "Perhaps the world may end before then; perhaps——. We can't tell," she added solemnly, bowing her head as if to supreme destiny, "what may happen any day or any year. It's all in God's hand."

Dick went away without another word. He arranged to go to Oxford, and did so, and found Val, and finally made an agreement to take the situation offered him; but this little prick to his pride and affection rankled in his mind. Why should Mr Ross be so much more to her than

himself, her son, who had never left her side? "It is strange," he said, with a sense of injury, which grew fainter every moment, yet still lingered. He looked at Val with more interest than ever, and a curious feeling of somehow belonging to him. What could the link be? Dick knew very little about his own history; he did not know whose son he was, nor what his mother had been. The idea, indeed, gleamed across his mind that Val's father might have been his own father, and this thought gave him no such thrill of pain and shame as it would naturally have brought to a young man brought up in a different class. Dick, with the terrible practical knowledge of human nature which belongs to the lower levels of society, knew that such things happened often enough; and if he felt a little movement in his mind of unpleasant feeling, he was neither horrified by the suggestion of such a possibility, nor felt his mother lowered in his eyes. Whatever the facts were, they were beyond his ken; and it was not for him to judge them. Pondering it over, however, he came to feel with a little relief that this could not be the solution. He knew what the manners of his class were, and he knew that his mother had

always been surrounded by that strange abstract atmosphere of reserve and modesty which no one else of her degree resembled her in. No, that could not be the explanation. Perhaps she had recognised in Val the son of some love of her youth whom she had kept in her thoughts throughout all her rougher life. This was a strangely visionary hypothesis, and Dick felt how unreal it was; but what other explanation could he make?

The situation at Oxford was a great "rise in the world" to Dick. It was a place of trust, with much better wages than he had at Eton, and a little house close to the river-side. His Eton employer grumbled a little, and said something about a want of gratitude, as employers are so apt to do; but eventually it was all arranged to Dick's satisfaction and benefit. He and his mother took possession of the little house in May, so quickly was the bargain made; and when she made her first appearance at Oxford, she had put off the last lingering remnants of the tramp, and looked after the furniture and fittings-up with a languid show of pleasure in them, such as she had never exhibited before. She changed her dress, too, to Dick's infinite

pleasure. She put off the coloured handkerchief permanently from her head, and adopted a head-dress something of the same shape,—a kerchief of white net tied under her chin, which threw up her still beautiful face, and impressed every one who saw her with Val's idea that she had been a lady once. This strange head-gear, and the plain black gown without flounces or ornament which she wore constantly, made people think her some sort of a nun ; and the new man at Styles' and his mother became notable on the river-side. They had a little garden to the house, and this, too, seemed to please her. She filled it with common sweet-smelling flowers, and worked in it with a new-born love for this corner of earth which she could call hers ; and every day she stood looking over her little garden wall, and saw Val and his boat go by. This kept the rhythm of her life in cadence, and she was livelier and more ready in conversation and intercourse with her good son than she had ever been before.

As for Val, after the kind thought which made him send for Dick and warmly plead his cause with the boatbuilder on the river-side, there were moments when he felt a certain embarrassment

about what he had done. Dick, too, had changed, as well as himself. He could not speak to him as of old, or give him half-crowns, or trust to him to do whatever he wished. In the last case, indeed, he might have trusted Dick entirely; for his gratitude, and what is more, his affection, for his young patron, was unbounded. But Val no longer liked to suggest what Dick would have been but too happy to do. The vagrant whom he had taken up had become in a manner Val's equal. He was wiser than the other, though he did not know a tenth part so much; and though he owed everything he was to Val's boyish interposition in his favour, yet he had a great deal in him which Val had not originated, and which, indeed, was quite beyond him. The undergraduate of high degree did not know how to treat the young man who was still so lowly. He could not ask him to his rooms, or bid him to eat at his own table, half out of a lingering social prejudice, half because he had an uncomfortable knowledge of what people would say. He was as much his friend as ever, but he did not know how to show it. Now and then he went to the little house, but Dick's mother gave him sensations so very strange that he did not

care to go often ; and had he gone very often, his tutor, no doubt, would have taken notice of the fact, and set it down to a love of low society, as his Eton tutor had done. Altogether, the situation was full of embarrassment, and the intercourse not half so easy as it had been. To be sure, the external advantages were certain ; Dick had a much better situation and a bright prospect before him, and this was so much gained. Val's advice to him about rising in the world had been wonderfully carried out. He had risen in the world, and got on the steps of the ladder. Indeed, Dick might almost have been said to have attained all that a person of his class could ever attain ; he might make a great deal more money, but he could not materially advance his position. Val was still, and perhaps more than ever, above him, since as they both progressed into manhood, their respective positions began to be more sharply defined : and nothing in the world could ever make it possible for Lord Eskside's heir to say to the young boatbuilder, "Come up higher." And yet Val had lost all power of treating him as an inferior. It was a curious problem, infinitely more difficult, as was natural, to the generous young fellow on the

higher level, than to the lowlier lad who made no pretensions to any sort of dignity, and never "stood upon" a quality which he did not suppose himself to possess.

There happened, however, a curious incident in Val's last summer at Oxford, which he indeed did not know, but which affected Dick strangely enough. One summer morning (it was in Commemoration week, when the mornings are somewhat languid) Dick's mother was seated in the little parlour facing the river, which her son had furnished with all the care of an untaught *virtuoso*. Half the things in it were of his own making; but there were many trifles besides which he had "picked up," with that curious natural fancy for things pretty and unusual which was innate in him. It was a strange incongruous room. The floor was covered with a square of old Turkey carpet, the subdued harmonious colours of which, and soft mossy texture, were Dick's delight. The little table, covered with the old faded embroidered shawl, stood in the window; an old-fashioned glass which Dick had "picked up" was on the mantelpiece, reflecting some china vases which his mother had bought, and which showed her taste

to be of a different character from his. Prettily carved bookcases of his making were fitted into the corners ; and a common deal table, without any cover, stood just under one of them, with a large brown earthenware basin on it, before which his mother sat shelling peas for Dick's dinner. She had "a girl" now to help her with the work, and it was her son's desire that she should sit in the parlour. But as it was not within the poor soul's possibilities to shut herself up to needle-work or any lady-like occupation, she brought in her peas to shell there, and sat alone, contented enough, yet oppressed with the sense that within a few days the same blank which she had before experienced would fall on the earth and skies. It was a bright morning, still cool but full of sunshine, which just touched the old-fashioned window-sill, upon which lay Dick's carving materials and a book or two—not, I am sorry to say, books intended to be read, but only to get designs out of, and suggestions for work. The river lay broad in the sunshine, relieved by here and there the bright green of some willows : the softened sounds outside, the soft silence within, were harmonious with the subdued sensations of the lonely woman, in whom all seemed stilled

too for the moment. The shadow hung over her, but it had not yet fallen, and her mind was less excited than it had been—more able to endure, less intolerant of pain.

Thus she sat absorbed in her homely occupation, when she heard voices approaching through the soft air. One of them she recognised at once with a thrill of pleasure to be Val's. He was coming slowly along, pointing out everything to some one with him. The woman dropped the peas out of her hands, and listened. The window was open, and so near the road that every sound was distinctly heard. It was some time before any one replied to Val, and the listener had leisure enough for many wild fears and throbs of anxious suspense. At last the answer came—in a lady's voice, which she knew as well as if she had heard it yesterday, with its soft Scotch accent, its firm tone and character, unlike any other she knew. The woman rose suddenly, noiselessly, to her feet; she grew white and blanched, as with deadly terror.

“Here is where Brown lives,” said Val, in his cheery voice—“and his mother, whom I want you particularly to see. A nice little house, isn't it? Stop and look at the boats down the

river before we go in. Isn't it pretty, grandma ? not like our Esk, to be sure, but with a beauty of its own."

"Far gayer and brighter than Esk, certainly," said Lady Eskside, quite willing to humour the boy ; though her own opinion of the broad, flat, unshadowed, and unfeatured Thames was not too flattering. She stood leaning upon his arm, rapt in a soft Elysium of pride and happiness. The lovely morning, and the good accounts she had been hearing of her boy, and the fact that he was going home with her, and that she was leaning on his arm, and seeing more beauty in his kind young face than the loveliest summer morning or the fairest scene could have shown her—all combined to make everything fair to Lady Eskside. She was going to visit his humble friends—to seal with her approbation that kindly patronage of the "deserving" poor, which is as creditable to their superiors as a love of low society is discreditable. They stood together talking for a minute at the open door.

At that same moment Dick was on his way to the back door which communicated with the boatbuilding-yard—but was met, to his wonder and dismay, by his mother, flying from the house with a face blanched to deadly paleness,

and a precipitate haste about her, which nothing but fear could have produced. She seized him by the arm without a word—indeed she was too breathless and panting to speak—and dragged him with her, too much amazed to resist. “For God’s sake, what is the matter, mother?” he said, when surprise would let him speak. She made no answer, but holding fast by him, took refuge in a boat-house built against the side wall of the little back yard through which she had flown. Dick, who was a patient fellow, not easily excited, stood by her wondering, but refraining to question when he saw the state of painful excitement in which she was. “Listen!” she said, under her breath; and presently he heard Val’s voice in the yard calling her. “Mrs Brown!” cried Val; though it was the first time after her disavowal of it that he had used that name, which was now adopted by everybody else, as of course the name of Dick Brown’s mother. “I can’t think where she can have gone to,” he added, with some vexation; “and I wanted you to see her specially—almost more than Brown himself.”

“Well, my dear, it cannot be helped,” said the voice of Lady Eskside, much more composed than Val’s—for I cannot say that she was deeply

disappointed. "No doubt the honest woman has run out about some needful business—leaving her peas, too. Come, Val, since you can't find her ; your grandpapa will be waiting for us, my dear."

"I can't see Brown, either," he said, with still greater annoyance, coming back after an expedition into the yard. "The men say he went home. I can't tell you how annoyed I am."

"Well, well, I can see them another time, my dear," said my lady, smiling within herself at the boy's disappointment—"and we must be going to meet your grandfather. I wonder where she got that cover on her table. I had a shawl just like it once ; but come, dear, come ; think of my old lord waiting. We must not lose any more time, Val."

Dick put his arm round his mother ; he thought she was going to faint, so deadly white was her face—white as the kerchief on her head. She laid her head on his shoulder, and moaned faintly. Her closed eyes, her blanched cheeks, her lips falling helplessly apart, gave Dick an impression of almost death.

"Mother, tell me, for God's sake ! who is this, and what is the matter with you ?" he cried.

CHAPTER XXIII.

“You must hold yourself ready to be called back at a moment’s notice, Val,” said the old lord. “It must be some time next year, and it may be any day. That is to say, we can scarcely have it, I suppose, before Parliament meets, except in some unforeseen case. Therefore see all you can as soon as you can, and after February hold yourself in readiness to be recalled any day.”

“Certainly, sir,” said Val, with a blithe assent which was trying to his grandfather. He was quite ready to do anything that was wanted of him—to make up his mind on any political subject on the shortest notice, and sign anything that was thought desirable ; but as for personal enthusiasm on the subject, or excitement in the possibility of being elected member for the county, I am afraid Val was as little moved as the terrier he was caressing. Perhaps, however,

he was all the more qualified on that account to carry the traditionary principles of the Rosses to the head of the poll, and to vote as his fathers had voted before him, when they had the chance,—or would have voted, had they had the chance. Val was setting out on his travels when this warning was given. He was going to see his father in Florence, and, under his auspices, to visit Italy generally, which was a very pleasant prospect. Up to this time he had done the whole duty of boy in this world ; and now he had taken his degree, and had a right to the prouder title of man.

Not that Val was very much changed from his Eton days. He was still slim and slight, notwithstanding all his boating. His brown complexion was a trifle browner, if that were possible, with perpetual exposure to the sun ; his hair as full of curls, and as easily ruffled as ever, rising up like a crest from his bold brown forehead ; and I do not think he had yet got his temper under command, though its hasty flashes were always repented of the moment after. “ A quick temper, not an ill temper,” Lady Eskside said ; and she made out that Valentine Ross, the tenth lord, her husband’s father—he whose

portrait in the library her son called "a Raeburn," and between whom and Val she had already attempted to establish a resemblance—was very hasty and hot-tempered too; which was an infinite comfort to her, as proving that Val got his temper in the legitimate way—"from his own family"—and not through that inferior channel, "his mother's blood." He was slightly excited about the visit to his father, and about his first progress alone into the great world—much more excited, I am sorry to say, than he was about representing the county; but on that point Lord Eskside did everything that was necessary, filling up what was wanting on Valentine's part in interest and emotion. He had again filled Rossraig with a party which made the woods ring with their guns all morning, and talked politics all night; and there was not a voter of importance in the whole county who had not already been "sounded," one way or other, as to how he meant to dispose of his vote. "The first thing to be done is to make sure of keeping the Radicals out," Lord Eskside said; for, indeed, a Whig lawyer was known to be poising on well-balanced wing, ready to sweep down upon a constituency which

had always been staunch—faithful among the faithless known. The present Member, I must explain, was in weak health ; and but for embarrassing his party, and thwarting the cherished purpose of Lord Eskside, who was one of the leading members of the Conservative party in the county, would have retired before now.

Val's term of residence at home was not, therefore, much more than a visit. He did what an active youth could do to renew all his old alliances, and climbed up the brae to the Hewan many times without seeing any of the family there, except the younger boys, who were mending of some youthful complaint under Mrs Moffatt's care, and who looked up to him with great awe, but were not otherwise interesting to the young man. "Are any of the others coming—is your mother coming—or Vi?" said Valentine ; but these youthful individuals could afford him no information. "Oh ay, they're maybe coming next month," said old Jean, who took a feminine pleasure in the dismay that was visible in Valentine's face. "They were here a' the summer, June and July ; and I wouldna wonder but we'll see them all October—if it's no too cauld," the old woman added, with a twinkle in her eye.

“What good will that do me?” said Val; and he leaped the dyke and went home through the ferns angry with disappointment. And yet he was not at all in love with Violet, he thought, but only liked her as the nicest girl he knew. When he remarked to Lady Eskside that it was odd to find none of the Pringles at the Hewan, my lady arose and slew him on the spot. “Why should the Pringles be at the Hewan?” she said; “they have a place of their own, where it becomes them much better to be. To leave Violet there so long by herself last year was a scandal to her mother, and gave much occasion for talking.”

“Why should it give occasion for talking?” said Val.

“A boy like you knows nothing about the matter,” the old lady answered, putting a stop to him decisively. Perhaps that was true enough; but it was also true that Val took a long walk to the linn next day, and sat down under the beeches, and mused for half an hour or so, without quite knowing what he was thinking about. How clearly he remembered those two expeditions, mingling them a little in his recollection, yet seeing each so distinctly! the small Violet in her blue cloak, sleeping on his shoulder

(which thought made him colour slightly and laugh in the silence, such intimate companionship being strangely impossible to think of nowadays), and the elder Violet, still so sweet and young, younger than himself, though he was the very impersonation of Youth, repeating all the earlier experiences except that one. "By Jove, how jolly Mary is!" said Valentine to himself at the end of this reverie; and when he went home he devoted himself to Miss Percival, who was again at Rosscraig, as she always was when Lady Eskside was exposed to the strain and fatigue of company. "Do you remember our picnic at the linn last year?" he said, standing over Mary in a corner after dinner, to the great annoyance of an elderly admirer, who had meant to take this opportunity of making himself agreeable to a woman who seemed the very person to "make an excellent stepmother" to his seven children. Mary, who was conscious in some small degree of the worthy man's meaning, was grateful to Val for once; and enjoyed, as the quietest of women do, the discomfiture of her would-be suitor.

"Yes," she said, smiling; "what of it, you unruly boy?"

“I am not a proper subject for such epithets,” said Val. “I have attained my majority, and made a speech to the tenantry. I say, Mary, do you know, that’s a lovely spot, that linn. I was there to-day——”

“Oh, you were there to-day?”

“Yes, I was there. Is there anything wonderful in that?” said Val, not sure whether he ought not to take offence at the laughing tone, which seemed to imply something. “Tell Violet, when you see her, that it was uncommonly shabby of her not to come this year. We’d have gone again.”

“There’s a virtue in three times, Val,” said Mary. “If you go again, it will be more than a joke; and I don’t think I’ll give your message to Vi.”

“Why should it be more than a joke? Or why should it be a joke at all?” said Val, reddening, he scarcely knew why. He withdrew after this, slightly confused, feeling as if some chance touch had got at his heart, giving it a *dinnle* which was half pleasure and half pain. Do you know what a *dinnle* is, dear English reader? It means that curious sensation which you, in the poverty of your language, call “striking.”

“striking the funny bone.” You know what it is in the elbow. Valentine had that kind of sensation in his heart ; and I think if this half-painful jar of the nerve lasted, and suggested quite new thoughts to the boy, it was all Mary Percival’s fault. I am happy to say that her widower got at her on Val’s withdrawal, and made himself most overpoweringly agreeable for the rest of the night.

And then the boy went away on his grand tour, leaving the old people at home rather lonely, longing after him ; though Lord Eskside was too much occupied to take much notice of Val’s departure. My lady was very busy, too, paying visits all over the country, and paying court to great and small. She promised the widower her interest with Mary, but judiciously put him off till Miss Percival’s next visit, saying, cunningly, that she must have time to prepare her young friend for the idea, and trusting in Providence that the election might be over before an answer had to be given. It was gratifying to the Esksides to find a devoted canvasser for Valentine in the person of Lord Hightowers, the only possible competitor who could have “divided the party” in the county. Hightowers,

however, was not fond of politics, and had no ambition for public life; it would have suited him better to be a locksmith, like Louis Seize. And among them all, they got the county into such a beautiful state of preparation that Lord Eekside could scarcely contain his rapture—and having laid all his training, and holding his match ready, sat down, in a state of excitement which it would be difficult to describe, to wait until the moment of explosion came.

In other places, too, Valentine's departure had caused far more excitement than he was at all aware of. He had seen and said good bye to Dick, with the most cordial kindness, on the day he left Oxford. But Val had not failed to remark a gravity and preoccupation about his humble friend which troubled him in no small degree. When he recounted to Dick the failure of Lady Eekside and himself on the day before, the young man had received the information with a painful attempt to seem surprised, which made Val think for a moment that Dick's mother had avoided the visit of set purpose. But as he knew of no hidden importance in this, the idea went lightly out of his head; and a few days after he remembered it no more. Very

much more serious had been the effect upon Dick. His mother's flight and her panic were equally unintelligible to him. The thought that there must be "something wrong" involved, in order to produce such terror, was almost irresistible ; and Dick's breeding, as I have said, had been of that practical kind which makes the mind accustomed to the commoner and vulgarer sorts of wrong-doing. He did not insist upon knowing what it was that made his mother afraid of Val's grandmother ; but her abject terror, and the way in which she dragged him too, out of sight, as if he had been a partner of her shame, had the most painful effect upon the young man. In the rudimentary state of morals which existed among the class from which he sprang, and where all his primitive ideas had been formed, dishonesty was the one crime short of murder which could bring such heavy shame along with it. He who steals is shunned in all classes, except among the narrow professional circles of thieves themselves ; and Dick could not banish from his thoughts a painful doubt and uncertainty about his mother's relations with "Mr Ross's people." She herself was so stunned and petrified by the great danger which

she seemed to herself to have escaped, that she was very little capable of giving a rational explanation of her conduct. "You knew this lady before, mother?" said Dick to her, half pitifully, half severely, as he took her back to the parlour and placed her in a chair after the visitors were gone. "Yes," she answered, but no more. And though he asked her many other questions, nothing more than repeated Yes and No could he get in reply.

I do not know what wild sense of peril was in the poor creature's heart. She feared, perhaps, that they could have taken her up and punished her for running away from her husband; she felt sure that they would separate her from her remaining boy—though had they not the other, whom she had given up to them? and in her panic at the chance of being found out, all power of reasoning (if she ever had any) deserted her. Ah, she thought to herself, only a tramp is safe! As soon as you have a settled habitation, and are known to neighbours, and can be identified by people about, all security leaves you: only on the tramp is a woman who wishes to hide herself safe. In her first panic, the thought of going away again, of deserting everything, of

taking refuge on those open roads—those outdoor bivouacs which are full in the eye of day, yet better refuges than any mysterious darkness—came so strongly over her, that it was all she could do to withstand its force. But when she looked at her son, active and trim, in his boat-building-yard, or saw him studying the little house at night, with his tools in his hand, to judge where he could put up something or improve something—his mother felt herself for the first (or perhaps it was the second) time in her life, bound as it were by a hundred minute threads which made it impossible for her to please herself. It was something like a new soul which had thus developed in her. In former times she had done as the spirit moved her, obeying her impulses whenever they were so strong as to carry everything else before them. Now she felt a distinct check to the wild force of these impulses. The blood in her veins moved as warmly as ever, impelling her to go, and she knew that she was free to go if she would, and that Dick too could be vanquished, and would come with her, however unwillingly. She was free to go, and yet she could not. For the first time in her life she had learned consciously to prefer another to herself. She could not ruin Dick.

The struggle that she maintained with her old self was violent, but it was within herself, and was known to nobody; and finally, the new woman, the higher creature, vanquished the old self-willed and self-regarding wanderer. She set herself to meet the winter with a dogged resolution, feeling less, perhaps, the absence of that visionary solace which she had found in the sight of Val, in consequence of the hard and perpetual battle she had to fight with herself. And, to make it harder, she had not the cheery gratitude and tender appreciation of the struggle, which had rewarded her much less violent effort before. Dick was gloomy, overcast, pondering upon the strange thing that had happened. He could not get over it: it stood between him and his mother, making their intercourse constrained and unhappy. Had she *robbed* the old lady from whom she had fled in so strange a panic? Short of that, or something of that kind, why, poor Dick thought, should one woman be so desperately afraid of another? He did not, it is true, say, or even whisper to himself, this word so terrible to one in his insecure position, working his way in the world with slow and laborious advances; but the suspicion rankled in his heart.

All this time, however, his mother neither

thought of setting herself right by telling him what her mystery was, nor once felt that she was wronging Dick by keeping the secret of his parentage so closely hidden from him. It did not occur to her that by doing this she was doing an injury to her boy. The life of gentlefolks—the luxurious and elegant existence into which her husband had tried to tame her, a wild creature of the woods—had been nothing but misery to her ; and I doubt whether she was capable of realising that Dick, so different from herself in nature, would have felt differently in respect to those trammels from which she had fled. Had she been able to think, she would have seen how—unconsciously, with the instinct of another race than hers—the boy had been labouring all his life to manufacture for himself such a poor imitation of those trammels as was possible to him ; but she was little capable of reasoning, and she did not see it. Besides, he was hers absolutely, and she had a right to him. She had given up the other, recognising a certain claim of natural justice on the part of the father of her children ; and in so doing she had gone as far as nature could go, giving up half, with a rending of her heart which had never healed ;

but no principle of which she had ever heard called upon her to give up the whole. The very fact of having made a sacrifice of one seemed to enhance and secure her possession of the other—and how could she do better for Dick than she had done for herself? But this question had not even arisen in her mind as yet. She feared that *they* had hidden emissaries, who, if they found her out, might take her remaining child from her; but that he was anyhow wronged by her silence, or had any personal rights in the matter, had not yet entered into her brooding, slowly working, confused, and inarticulate soul.

In one other house besides, Val and his concerns were productive of some little tumult of feeling—not the least important of the many eddies with which his stream of life was involved. Mr Pringle was almost as much excited about the approaching conflict as Lord Eskside. He saw in it opportunities for carrying out his own scheme, which he called exposure of fraud, but which to others much more resembled the vengeance of a disappointed man. He was the bosom friend of the eminent lawyer who meant to contest Eskside in the Liberal interest, and had no small share in influencing him to this

step. His own acquaintance with the county, in the position of Lord Eskside's heir-presumptive in past days, had given him considerable advantages and much information which a stranger could not easily command ; and with silent vehemence he prepared himself for the conflict—contemplating one supreme stroke of revenge—or, as he preferred to think, contemplating a full exposure to the world of the infamous conspiracy against his rights and those of his children, from which the county also was now about to suffer. He did not speak freely to his family of these intentions, for neither his wife nor his children were in harmony with him on the subject ; but this fact, instead of inducing him to reconsider a matter which appeared to other eyes in so different a light, increased the violence of his feelings, just in proportion to the necessity he felt for concealing them. It was even an additional grievance against Valentine, and the old people who had set Valentine up as their certain successor, that the lad had secured the friendship of his enemy's own family. Sandy, who was by this time a hard-working young advocate, less fanciful and more certain of success than his father—though a very good son, and

very respectful of his parents, had a way of changing the subject when the Eskside business was spoken of, which cut Mr Pringle to the quick. He could see that his son considered him a kind of monomaniac on this subject; and indeed there was sometimes very serious talk between Sandy and his mother about this *idée fixe* which had taken hold upon the father's mind.

Thus Mr Pringle's own family set themselves against him; but perhaps there was not one of them that had the least idea what painful results might follow except poor little Violet, who was very fond of her father, and in whose childish heart Val had established himself long ago. She alone was certain that her father meant mischief—mischief of a deeper kind than mere opposition to his election, such as Mr Pringle, as tenant of the Hewan and the land belonging to it, had a right to make if he pleased. Violet watched him with a painful mixture of dread lest her father should take some unworthy step, and dread lest Valentine should be injured, contending in her mind. She could scarcely tell which would have been the most bitter to her; and that these two great and appalling dangers should be

combined in one, was misery enough to fill her young soul with the heaviest shadows. This she had to keep to herself, which was still harder to bear, though very usual in the troubles of youth. Everything which concerns an unrevealed and nascent love,—its terrors, which turn the very soul pale ; its partings, which press the life out of the heart ; its sickness of suspense and waiting,—must not the maiden keep all these anguishes locked up in her heart, until the moment when they are over, and when full declaration and consent make an end at once of the mystery and the misery ? This training most people go through, more or less ; but the trial is so much harder upon the little blossoming woman that the dawns of the inclination, which she has never been asked for, are a shame to her, which they are not to her lover. Violet did not venture to say a word even to her mother of her wish to be at the Hewan while Val was there—of her sick disappointment when she found he had gone away without a chance of saying good-bye ; and though she did venture to whisper her fears lest papa might “say something to hurt poor Val’s feelings,” which was a very mild way of putting it—she got little comfort out of this

suppressed confidence. "I am afraid he will," Mrs Pringle said. "Indeed, the mere fact that your papa is Mr Seisin's chief friend and right-hand man, will hurt Val's feelings. I am very sorry, and I think it very injudicious; for why should we put ourselves in opposition to the Eskside family? but it cannot be helped, and your papa must take his away."

"Perhaps if you were to speak to him," said Vi, with youthful confidence in a process, than which she herself knew nothing more impressive, and even terrible on occasion.

"Speak to him!" said Mrs Pringle; "if you had been married to him as long as I have, my dear, you would know how much good speaking to him does. Not that your papa is a bit worse than any other man."

With this very unsatisfactory conclusion poor Violet had to be satisfied. But she watched her father as no one else did, fearing more than any one else. Her gentle little artifices, in which the child at first trusted much, of saying something pleasant of Val when she had an opportunity — vaunting his fondness for the boys, his care of herself (in any other case the strongest of recommendations to her father's

friendship), his respect for Mr Pringle's opinions, his admiration of the Hewan—had, she soon perceived, to her sore disappointment, rather an aggravating than a soothing effect. “For heaven's sake, let me hear no more of that lad ! I am getting to hate the very sound of his name,” her father said ; and poor Violet would stop short, with tears springing to her eyes.

CHAPTER XXIV.

VALENTINE went off gaily upon his journey, without any thought of the tragic elements he had left behind him. I think, had Dick been still at the rafts at Eton, his young patron would have proposed to him to accompany him to Italy in that curious relationship which exists in the novel and drama, and could perhaps exist in former generations, but not now, among men—as romantic humble servant and companion. But Dick was grown too important a man to make any such proposal possible. Valentine dallied a little in Paris, which he saw for the first time, and made his way in leisurely manner across France, and along the beautiful Cornice road, as people used to do in the days before railways were at all general, or the Mont Cenis tunnel had been thought of. He met, I need not add, friends at every corner—old “Eton

fellows," comrades from Oxford, crowds of acquaintances of his own class and kind—a peculiarity of the present age which is often very pleasant for the traveller, but altogether destroys the strangeness, the novelty, the characteristic charm, of a journey through a foreign country. A solid piece of England moving about over the Southern landscape could not be more alien to the soil on which it found itself than were those English caravans in which the young men travelled ; talking of cricket if they were given that way—of hits to leg, and so many runs off one bat ; or, if they were boating men, of the last race, or what happened at Putney or at Henley while the loveliest scenes in the world flew past their carriage-windows like a panorama. I think Mr Evelyn saw a great deal more of foreign countries when he made the grand tour ; and even Val, though he was not very learned in the jargon of the picturesque, got tired of those endless *réchauffés* of stale games and pleasures. He got to Florence about a fortnight after he left England, and made his way at once to the steep old Tuscan palace, with deeply corniced roof and monotonous gloom of aspect, which stood in one of the smaller streets opening into the Via Maggio

on the wrong side of the river. The wrong side—but yet the Pitti palace is there, and certain diplomatists preferred that regal neighbourhood. Val found a servant, a bland and splendid Italian majordomo, waiting for him when he arrived, but not his father, as he had half hoped; and even when they reached the great gloomy house, he was received by servants only—rather a dismal welcome to the English youth. They led him through an endless suite of rooms, half lighted, softly carpeted, full of beautiful things which he remarked vaguely in passing, to an inner sanctuary, where his father lay upon a sofa with a luxurious writing-table by his side. Richard Ross sprang up when he heard his son announced, and came forward holding out his hand. He even touched Valentine's face with his own, first one cheek, then the other,—a salutation which embarrassed Val beyond measure; and then he bade him welcome in set but not unkindly terms, and began to ask him about his journey, and how he had left “everybody at home.”

This was only the third time that Val had seen his father, and Richard was now a man approaching fifty, and considerably changed

from the elegant young diplomatist, who had surveyed with so little favour fourteen years ago the boy brought back to him out of the unknown. Richard's first sensation now on seeing his son was one of quick repugnance. He was so like—the vagrant woman against whom Mr Ross was bitter as having destroyed his life. But he was too wise to allow any such feeling to show, and indeed did his best to make the boy at home and comfortable. He asked him about his studies, and received Val's half-mournful confession of not having perhaps worked so well as he might have done, with an indulgent smile. "It was not much to be expected," he said ; "boys like you, with no particular motive for work, seldom do exert themselves. But I heard you had gained reputation in a still more popular way," he added ; and spoke of the boat-race, &c., in a way that made Val deeply ashamed of that triumph, though up to this moment he had been disposed to think it the crowning triumph of his life. "You were quite right to go in for it, if your inclination lies that way," said his bland father. "It is as good a way as another of getting a start in society." And he gave Val a list of "who" was in Florence,

according to the usage established on such occasions. He even took the trouble of going himself to show him his room, which was a magnificent chamber, with frescoed walls and gilded ceilings, grand enough for a prince's reception-room, Val thought; and told him the hours of meals, and the arrangements of the household generally. "My house is entirely an Italian one," he said, "but two or three of the people speak French. I hope you know enough of that language at least, to get on easily. Your own servant, of course, will be totally helpless, but I will speak to Domenico to look after him. If you know anything at all of Italian, you should speak it," he added, suavely; "you will find it the greatest help to you in your reading hereafter. Now I will leave you to rest after your long journey, and we shall meet at dinner," said the politest of fathers. Val sat staring before him half stupefied when he found himself left alone in the beautiful room. This was not the kind of way in which a son just arrived would be treated at Eskside. How much he always had to explain to his grandmother, to tell her of, to hear about! What a breathless happy day the first day at

home always was, so full of talk, news, consultations, interchange of the family nothings that are nothing, yet so sweet ! Val's journey had only been from Leghorn, no further, so he was not in the least fatigued ; and why he should be shut up here in his room to rest he had not a notion, any desire to rest being far from his thoughts. After a while he got up and examined the room, which was full of handsome old furniture. How he wished Dick had been with him, who would have enjoyed all those cabinets, and followed every line of the carvings with interest ! Valentine himself cared little for such splendours. And finally he went out, and found as usual a schoolfellow round the first corner, and marched about the strange beautiful place till it was time for dinner, and felt himself again.

It was very strange, however, to English—or rather Scotch—Valentine, to find himself in this Italian house, with a man so polished, so cultivated, so exotic as his father for his sole companion. Not that they saw very much of each other. They met at the twelve o'clock breakfast, where every dish was new to Val, for the *ménage* was thoroughly Italian ; and at

dinner on the days when Richard dined at home. Sometimes he took his handsome boy with him to great Italian houses, where, in the flutter of rapid conversation which he could not follow, poor Val found himself hopelessly left out, and looked as *gauche* and unhappy as any traditionary lout of his age ; and sometimes Val himself would join an English party at a hotel, where the hits to leg and the Ladies' Challenge Cup would again be the chief subjects of conversation ; if not (which was still more dreary) the ladies' eager comparing of notes over Lady Southsea's garden party, or that charming Lady Mary Northwood's afternoon teas. On the whole, Val felt that his father's banquets were best adapted to the locality ; and when a lovely princess, with jewels as old as her name and as bright as her eyes, condescended to put up with his indifferent French, the young man was considerably elated, and proud of his father and his father's society — as, when the same fair lady congratulated Richard upon the *beaux yeux* of Monsieur *son fils*, his father was of him.

One of the rare evenings which they spent together, Val informed his father of Lord Esk-

side's eager preparations for the ensuing election, and of the place he was himself destined to take in the eyes of his county and country. Richard Ross did not receive this information as his son expected. His face grew immediately overcast.

"I wonder my father is so obstinate about this," he said. "He knows my feeling on the subject. It is the most terrible ordeal a man can be subjected to. I wish you had let me know, all of you, before making up your minds to this very foolish proceeding. Parliament!—what should you want with Parliament at your age?"

"Not much," said Val, somewhat uneasy to hear his grandfather attacked by his father, and a little dubious whether it became him to take the old man's side so warmly as he wished; "but I hope I shall do my duty as well as another," he said, with a little modest pride, "though I have still everything to learn."

"Do your duty! stuff and nonsense," said Richard; "what does a boy of your age know about duty? Please your grandfather you mean."

Val felt the warm blood mounting to his face,

and bit his lip to keep himself down. "And if it was so, sir," he said, his eyes blazing in spite of himself, "there might be worse things to do."

Richard stopped short suddenly and looked at him—not at his face, but into his eyes, which is of all things in the world the most trying to a person of hot temper. "Ha!" he said, with a soft smile, raising his eyebrows a little in gentle surprise, "you have a temper, I see! how is it I never found that out before?"

Val dug his heels into the rich old Turkey carpet; he pressed his nails into his flesh, wounding himself to keep himself still. One glance he gave at the perfect calm of his father's face, then cast down his eyes that he might not see it. Richard looked at him with amused calculation, as if measuring his forces, then waited, evidently expecting an outburst. When none came, he said with that precise and nicely modulated voice, every tone of which ministers occasions of madness to the impatient mind—

"Of course, with that face you must have a temper; I should have seen it at the first glance. But you have learnt to restrain it, I perceive. I congratulate you—it augurs well for your success in life."

Then he fell back quite naturally into the previous subject, changing his tone in a moment to one of polite and perfect ease.

“I am sorry, as I said before, that my father is so obstinate. Why doesn’t he put in some squire or other whom he might influence as much as he pleases? But you; I tell you there isn’t such an ordeal in existence. Everything a man has ever done is raked up.”

“They may rake up as much as they please,” said Val, with a violent effort, determined not to be outdone by his father in power of self-control. His voice, however, was unsteady, and so was the laugh which he forced. “They may rake up what they please; I don’t think they can make much of that, so far as I am concerned.”

“So far as you are concerned!” repeated Richard, impatiently. “Why, if your grand-aunt made a *faux pas* a hundred years ago, it would be brought up against you. You! It was not robbing of orchards I was thinking of. My father is very foolish; and it is wilful folly, for I told him my sentiments on the subject.”

“I wish, sir, if it was the same to you, you

would remember that my grandfather—is my grandfather,” said Val, not raising his eyes.

“Oh, very well. He is not my grandfather, you see, and that makes me, perhaps, less respectful,” said Richard. “You have taken away my comfort with this news of yours, and it is hard if I may not abuse somebody. Do you know what an election is? If your great-grandaunt, as I said, ever made a *faux pas*——”

“I don’t suppose she did,” said Val. “Why should we be troubled about the reputation of people who live only in the picture-gallery? I am not afraid of my grandaunt.”

“It is because you do not know,” said Richard, with a sigh. “Write to your grandfather, and persuade him to give it up. It is infinitely annoying to me. Tell him so. I shall not have a peaceful moment till it is over. One’s whole history and antecedents delivered up to the gossip of a vulgar crowd! I think my father must have taken leave of his wits.”

And he began to pace about the great dimly-lighted room in evident perturbation. The rooms in the Palazzo Graziani were all dimly lighted. A few softly burning lamps, shaded with delicate *abâtjourns*, gave here and there

a silvery glimmer in the midst of the richly-coloured and balmy darkness—just enough to let you see here a picture, there a bit of tapestry, an exquisite cabinet, or some priceless “bit” of the sumptuous furniture which belongs of right to such houses. Richard’s slight figure moving up and down in this lordly place, with impatient movements, disturbed its calm like a pale ghost of passions past.

“Every particular of one’s life!” he continued. “I told him so. It is all very well for men who have never stirred from home. If you want to save us all a great deal of annoyance, and yourself a great many stings and wounds, write to your grandfather, and beseech him to give it up.”

“I will tell him that you wish it, sir,” said Val, hesitating; “but I cannot say that I do myself, or that I distrust his judgment. Will you tell me what wounds I have to fear should they bring up all my antecedents—every particular of one’s life?”

Richard eyed his son from the shade in which he stood. Val’s face was in the full light. It was pale, with a certain set of determination about the mouth, on which there hov-

ered a somewhat forced smile. He paused a moment, wondering how to reply. A dim room is an admirable field for deliberation, with one face in the shade and the other in the light. Should he settle the subject with a high hand, and put the young man summarily down? Should he yield? He did neither. He altered his voice again with the consummate skill of a man trained to rule and make use of even his self-betrays, and knowing every possible way of doing so. He laughed softly as he came back to the table, throwing off his impatience as if it had been a cloak.

“A snare! a snare!” he said. “If you think I am so innocent as to fall into it, or if you hope to see me draw a chair to the table and begin, ‘My son, listen to the story of my life,’ you are mistaken, Val. I am like most other men. I have done things, and known people whom I should not care to have talked about—and which will be talked about inevitably if you are set up as a candidate for Esk-side. Never mind! I shall have to put up with it, I suppose, since my father has set his heart upon it; but I warn you that it may come harder on you than me; and when I say so

I have done. Give me your photographs, and let me look over them—a crowd of your Eton and Oxford friends, I suppose.”

Val looked at his father with a question in his eyes, which he tried to put with his lips, and could not. During all these years he had thought little enough of his mother. Now and then the recollection that there was such a person wandering somewhere in the world would come to him at the most unlikely time—in the middle of the night, in the midst of some moment of excitement, rarely when he could make any inquiries about her, even had it been possible for him to utter such inquiries. Now at once these suppressed recollections rushed into his mind. Here was the fountain-head of information; and no doubt the story which he did not know, which no one had ever told him, was what his father feared. “Father,” he began, his mouth growing dry with excitement, his heart beating so loudly that he could scarcely hear himself speak.

Probably Richard divined what he was going to say—for Val, I suppose, had hardly ever addressed him solemnly by this title before. He called him “Sir,” when he spoke to him, scarcely

anything else. Richard stopped him with a rapid movement of his hand.

“Don’t, for heaven’s sake, speak to me so solemnly,” he said, half fretfully, half playfully. “Let me look at your photographs. There is a good man here, by the way, where you should go and get yourself done. The old people at home would like it, and it might prove a foundation, who knows, for the fine steel engraving of the member for Eskside, which no doubt will be published some day or other. Come round to this side and tell me who they are.”

The words were stopped on Valentine’s lips ; and if any one could have known how bitter these words were to him, his relinquishment of the subject would be more comprehensible to them. Are we not all glad to postpone a disagreeable explanation ? “It must be done some time,” we say ; “but why now, when we are tolerably comfortable ?” Valentine acted upon this natural feeling. His sentiments towards his father were of a very mingled character. He was proud of him ; his refinement and knowledge of the world made a powerful impression upon the boy’s mind ; Val even admired the man who was so completely unlike himself—

admired him and almost disliked him, and watched him with mingled wonder and respect. He had never had a chance of regarding him with the natural feelings of a child, or forming the usual prejudices on his behalf. He met him almost as one stranger meets another, and could not but judge him accordingly on his merits rather than receive him blindly, taking those merits for granted, which is in most cases the more fortunate lot of a son. His father was only a relation of whom he knew very little, and with whom he was upon quite distant and independent, yet respectful, terms. They were both glad, I think, to take refuge in the photographs; and Richard asked with a very good grace, "Who is this?" and "Who is that?"—through showers of young Oxford men and younger Etonians. When he had made his way through them, there was still a little pack of cards to be turned over—photographs not dignified enough to find a place in any book. Hunter, the game-keeper, Harding, the butler, his wife the house-keeper, and many other humble personages, were amongst them; and Richard turned them over with more amusement than the others had given him. Suddenly, however, his remarks came to

a dead stop. Val, who was standing close by him, felt that his father started and moved uneasily in his chair. He said nothing for the moment; then in a voice curiously unlike his former easy tone, yet curiously conquered into a resemblance of it, he said, with a little catching of his breath, "And who is this, Val?"

It was a scrap of an unmounted photograph, a bit cut off from the corner of a river scene—a portrait taken unawares and unintentionally by a wandering artist who was making studies of the river. It was Dick Brown's mother, as she had been used to stand every day within her garden wall, looking at Val's boat as it passed. Val had seen the picture with her figure in it, and had bought and kept it as a memento of two people in whom he took so much interest: for by an odd chance Dick was in it too, stooping to push off a boat from the little pier close by, and very recognisable by those who knew him, though his face was scarcely visible. "Oh, sir," said Val, instinctively putting out his hand for it, "that is nothing. It was taken by chance. It's the portrait of a woman at Oxford, the mother of a fellow I know."

"A fellow you know—who may that be? is

his portrait among those I have been looking at? This," said Richard, holding it fast and disregarding Val's hand, which was stretched out to take it, "is an interesting face."

What feelings were in the man's breast as he looked at it who can tell? Surprise, almost delirious, though he hid it as he had trained himself to hide everything; quick-springing curiosity, almost hatred, wild eagerness to know what his son knew of her. He made that remark about the interesting face not unfeelingly, but unawares, to fill up the silence, because everything in him was stirred up into such wild impulses of emotion. The light swam in his eyes; yet he continued to see the strange little picture thus blown into his hand as it seemed by some caprice of fate. As for Valentine, he felt a repugnance incomprehensible to himself to say anything about Dick or his mother, and could have snatched the scrap of photograph out of his father's hand, though he could not tell why.

"Oh, it is not much," he said—"it is not any one you would know. It is the mother of a lad I took a great fancy to a few years ago. He was on the rafts at Eton, and used to do all sorts

of things for me. That's his mother—and indeed there's himself in the corner, if you could see him. I found it in a photograph of the river; and as I knew the people, and it is so seldom one sees people who are unconscious of their likenesses being taken, I bought it; but of course it has no interest to any one who does not know the originals," and he put out his hand for it again.

"Pardon," said Mr Ross, serenely—"it has an interest. The face is a very remarkable face, like one I remember seeing years ago. What sort of a person was her son?"

By skilful questions he drew from Val all that he knew: the whole story of Dick's struggle upwards; of his determination to do well; of the way he had risen in the world. Val mixed himself as little as he could with the narrative, but could not help showing unwittingly, how much share he had in it; and at last grew voluble on the subject, flattered by the interest his father took in it. "You say the son was at the rafts at Eton, and yet this picture was taken at Oxford. How was that?" said Richard. Val was standing behind him all this time, and their looks had not met.

“Well, sir,” said Val, “I hope you won’t think, as Grinder did, that it was my love of what he called low society. If Brown is low society, I should like to know where to find better.”

“So Grinder said it was your love of low society?”

“He wrote to my grandfather,” said Val, sore at the recollection, “but fortunately they knew me better; and when I explained everything, grandmamma, like the old darling she is, sent me ten pounds to buy Brown a present. I got him some books, and crayons, and carving things——”

“Yes; but you have not told me how this came to be taken at Oxford,” said Richard, persistent.

“Well, sir, I was going to tell you. I heard that old Styles wanted a man. Styles, perhaps you recollect him down at—— Yes, that’s him. So I told him I could recommend Brown, and so could Lichen, who had been captain of the boats in my time. Lichen of Christ’s-Church. You won’t know his name? He rowed stroke——”

“Yes, yes; but let us come back to Brown.”

“There is not much more,” said Val, a little disconcerted. “Styles took him on our recommendation, and hearing what an excellent character he had—and that’s where he is now. He and his mother have got Styles’ little house, and the old man’s gone into the country. I shouldn’t wonder if Brown had the business when he dies. He has got on like a house on fire,” said Val—“educated himself up from nothing, and would be a credit to any one. I’ve always thought,” said the lad, with an innocent assumption of superior insight, “that he cannot have been born a cad, as he seemed when I first saw him; for the mother looks as if she had been a lady. You laugh, sir, but I dare swear it’s true.

“I was not laughing,” said Richard, bundling up the photographs together, and handing them over to his son; “indeed, I think you have behaved very creditably, and shown yourself capable of more than I thought. Now, my dear fellow, I’m going to work to-night. Take your pictures. They have amused me very much; and I think you should go to bed.”

Val had been doing a great deal that day, and I think he was not sorry to take his father’s advice. He gathered all his treasures together, and bade

him a more cordial good-night than usual, as he went away with his candle through the dim suite of rooms. As soon as he had turned his back, Richard Ross pushed away the papers he had drawn before him, and watched the young figure with its light, walking down the long vista of curtained rooms. The man was not genial enough to let that same gentle apparition come in and illuminate with love the equally dim and lonely antechambers of his heart ; but some thrill of natural feeling quickened within him, some strange movement of unwonted emotion as he looked after the lad, and felt how wonderful was this story, and how unwittingly, in natural friendliness of his boyish soul, Val had done a brother's part to his brother. The idea moved him more than the reality did. He took up the little photograph again, which he had kept without Valentine's knowledge, and gazed at it, but not with love. "Curse of my life!" he said to himself, murmuring the words in sonorous Tuscan, which he spoke like a native ; and clenching his teeth as he gazed at the image of the woman who had ruined him, as he thought. She to look "as if she had been a lady!"—he laughed within himself secretly and bitterly at the

thought—a lady ! the tramp-girl who had been his curse, and whom he had never been able to teach anything to. When the first vehemence of these feelings was over, he sat down and wrote a long letter to his confidential solicitor in London, a man to whom the whole story had long been known. And I do not think Richard Ross had sound sleep that night. The discovery excited him deeply, but not with any of the pleasure with which a man finds what he has lost, with which a husband might be supposed to discover the traces of his lost wife and child. No ; he wanted no tamed tramp to disgrace him with her presence, no successful mechanic-son to shame his family : as they had chosen, so let them remain. He had not even any curiosity, but a kind of instinctive repugnance to his other son. And yet he was pleased with Valentine, and thought of the boy more kindly, because he had been kind to his lost brother. How this paradox should be, I am unable to explain.

CHAPTER XXV.

“ So Mr Pringle is on the other side,” said Mary Percival. “ Perhaps it is just as well, considering all things.”

“ Why should it be just as well ?” said Violet, with a spark of fire lighting up her soft eyes. “ Is unkindness, and opposition among people who ought to be friends, ever ‘ just as well ’ ? You are not like yourself when you say so ;” and a colour which was almost angry rose upon Vi’s delicate cheek.

“ My dear, I have never concealed from you that I want to keep you and Val apart from each other,” said Miss Percival, with an injudicious frankness which I have never been able to understand in so sensible a woman ; but the most sensible persons are often foolish on one special point, and this was Mary’s particular weakness.

“Why should we be kept apart?” said Violet, with lofty youthful indignation. “Nobody can keep us apart—neither papa’s politics nor anything else outside of ourselves.”

“Vi! Vi! I don’t think that is how a girl should speak of a young man.”

“Oh, I cannot bear you when you go on about girls and young men!” cried Violet, stamping her small foot in the vehemence of her indignation. “Is it my fault that I am a girl and Val a boy? Must I not be friends with him because of that, a thing we neither of us can help, though I have known him all my life? But we are fast friends,” cried Vi, with magnificent loftiness, her pretty nostrils dilating, her bright eyes flashing upon her companion. “Neither of us think for a moment of any such nonsense. We were friends when we were seven years old, and I would not give up my friend, not if he were twenty young men!”

“You are a foolish little girl, and I am sorry for you, Vi,” said Mary, shaking her head. “At any rate, because you are fond of Val, that is no reason for being uncivil to me.”

At these words, as was natural, Violet, with tears in her eyes, flew to her friend and kissed

her, and begged pardon with abject penitence. "But I wish I had nothing more on my mind than being friends with Val," the girl said, sighing, "or the difference of people's politics. Of course people must differ in politics, as they do in everything else. I am a Liberal myself. I think that to resist everything that is new, and cling to everything that is old, whether they are bad, or whether they are good, is very wrong. To choose what is best, whether old or new, is surely the right way."

"Oh, you are a Liberal yourself?" said Mary, amused; "but I don't doubt Val could easily turn you into a Conservative, Vi."

"Val could not do anything of the kind," said Violet, with some solemnity. "Of course I can't have lived to be twenty without thinking on such subjects. But I wish I had nothing more on my mind than that. Both Liberals and Conservatives may be fond of their country, and do their best for it. I don't like a man less for being a Tory, though I am a Liberal myself."

"That is very satisfactory for us Tories, my dear," said Mary, "and I am obliged to you for your magnanimity; but what is it

then, my pretty Vi, that you have upon your mind?"

The girl paused and let fall a few sudden tears. "Mary," she said (for there was a Scotch tie of kinship between them also which made this familiarity admissible), "I am so frightened—and I don't know what I am frightened at. I feel sure papa means to do something more than any one knows of, against Val."

"Against Val! He means to oppose his election, no doubt, and give Lord Eskside and our side all the trouble possible: we know that!" cried Mary, who was a politician of the old school. "These are always the tactics of the party—to give as much trouble, and sow as many heartburnings as possible; though they know they have not a chance of success."

"I suppose it is just what the Tories would do if they were in the same position," said Violet, naturally on the defensive. "But all that is nothing to me," she cried; "if people like to fight, let them: I don't mind it myself—the excitement is pleasant. But, of course, you know better than I do—are you sure there is nothing more than fair fighting that papa could do to Val?"

"I am sure your papa is not a man to do anything inconsistent with fair fighting," said Mary, evasively, her curiosity strongly roused.

This stopped Violet once more. She gave a heavy sigh. "I hear them say that everything is fair in an election contest, as everything is fair in war."

"Or love."

"I don't understand such an opinion!" said Violet, rising to her feet and striking her pretty hands together in impatience. "If a thing is wrong once, it is wrong always. Love! they call that love which can be pushed on by tricks and lies; and people like you, Mary—people who ought to know better—say so too. Of course, one knows you cannot *think* it," the girl cried, with a quick-drawn breath, half sob, half sigh.

"Well, dear, I suppose we all give in to the saying of things which we don't think," said Miss Percival, deprecatingly; "but, Vi, you have made me curious. What is it your father means to do?"

"I wanted to ask *you* that; what can he do? Can he do anything?" said Violet. Mary looked at the impulsive girl, not knowing what

to answer. Vi was true as truth itself in her generous young indignation against all unworthy strategy—and she was “fond of” and “friends with” Val, according to the childish phraseology which, in this respect at least, she chose to retain. But still, even Violet’s innocence was a reason for not trusting her with any admission that Valentine was open to special attack. She might assail her father with injudicious partizanship, entreating him to withhold from assaults which he had never thought of making ; so that, on the whole, Mary judged it was judicious to say nothing as to any special flaw in the young candidate’s armour. She shook her head.

“I cannot think of anything that could be done against Valentine,” she said. “He has been a good boy, so far as we know ; and when a boy is not a good boy it is always found out. Sir John is to propose him, and Mr Lynton of the Linn to second,—he could not have a better start ; and dear old Lord Eskside to stand by him, to get his heart’s desire,” said Mary, with a little glimmer of moisture in her eyes. “You young things don’t think of the old people. It goes to my heart, after all their disappointments, to think they will have their wish at last.”

Violet did not make any reply. Though she was a Liberal herself, and looked upon politics generally from such an impartial elevation of good sense, it was no small trouble to poor Vi to know that she could not even pretend to be on Valentine's side at this great crisis of his life ;— could not go with Lady Eskside's triumphant party to see him done honour to in the sight of all men ; could not even wear a bit of ribbon, poor child, for his sake, but must put on the colours of snuffy Mr Seisin, and go with her mother to the opposition window, and pretend to look delighted at all the jokes that might be made, and all the assaults upon her friends. Violet would not allow how deeply she felt this, the merely superficial and necessary part of the situation ; and, in reality, it was as nothing to her in comparison with the dread in her heart of something more, she knew not what— some masked battery which her father's hand was arranging. She took Mary out to show her the improvements which were being made at the Hewan, the new rooms which were almost finished, and which would make of the poor little cottage a rustic villa. Jean Moffat, whose nest had not been interfered with, though Mr

Pringle had bought the place, came out as she heard the voices of the ladies, to take her share in the talk. Jean had now the privileged position of an old servant among the Pringles, and still acted as duenna and protectress to Violet on many a summer day when that little maiden escaped alone with her maid from Moray Place. Mr Pringle had been getting on in his profession during those years; not in its honours, the tide of which he had allowed to go past him, but in its more substantial rewards. He was better off, and able to afford himself the indulgence of a whim; so the Hewan had been bought, half in love, half in hatred. In love, because the children, and Violet especially, were fond of the little place; and in hatred, because it commanded the always coveted domain of Eskside.

“You are a Liberal too, I understand, Jean,” said Mary; “you are all Mr Ross’s enemies up here.”

“I wish he might never have waur enemies.” said old Jean, “and that’s no an ill wish; but I’ll never disown my principles. I’ve aye been a Leebereal from the time of the Reform Bill, which made an awfu’ noise in the country. There’s nane o’ your contests worth speaking o’

in comparison with that. But I'm real distressed that there's this opposition now. We'll no get our man in, and we'll make a great deal o' dispeace ; and two folk so muckle thought of in the county as my lord and my lady might have gotten their way for once. I canna bide the notion of going again' Mr Valentine ; but he's a kindly lad, and will see that, whatever you are, ye maun gang with your pairty. Lord bless the callant ! if it was for naething but yon chicken-pie, he's a hantle mair to me than ony Edinburgh advocate that was ever born. But you see yourself, Miss Percival, how we're placed ; we maun side with our ain pairty, right or wrong."

"Yes, I see the difficulty of the position," said Mary, laughing, "and I shall make a point of explaining it to Val."

"Do that, mem," said Jean, seriously. She did not see any joke in the matter, any more than Vi did, whose mind was in a very disturbed state.

"And I suppose your son will be of your mind ?" said Mary, not indisposed to a little gentle canvassing on her own part.

"I couldna undertake to answer for John," said the old woman ; "nor I wouldna tamper

with him," she added, "for it's a great responsibility, and he ought to judge for himself. There's one thing with men, they tak a bias easy, and John was never a Leebéral on conviction, as ye may say, like his faither and me; and he has a' the cobbling from the House, and a' the servants' work, and my lord's shooting boots, and so forth, and noo and then something to do for my lady hersel; so I wouldna say but he might have a bias. It's a grand thing to have nae vote," said Jean, meditatively, "and then ye can have the satisfaction of keeping to your pairty without harming your friends on the other side."

Jean expressed thus the sentiments of a great many people in Eskside on the occasion of this election. Even some of the great tenant-farmers who were Liberals, instead of delighting in the contest, as perhaps they ought to have done, grumbled at the choice set before them, and regretted the necessity of vexing the Eskside family, old neighbours, by keeping to their own party. For Val Ross, as they all felt, was on the whole a much more appropriate representative than "a snuffy old Edinburgh lawyer," said one of the malcontents, "with about as much

knowledge of the county as I have of the Parliament House." "But he knows how to bring you into the Parliament House, and squeeze the siller out of your pouch and mine," said another. The Parliament House in question, gentle Southern reader, meant not the House of Commons, but the Westminster Hall of Edinburgh, into which, or its purlieus, it was quite easy to get with Mr Seisin's help, but not so easy to get out again. I am afraid, indeed, that as the Liberal party was weak in the county, and there had been no contest for some time, and no active party organisation existed, there would have been no attempt to oppose Valentine at all but for the determination of Mr Pringle, who, without bringing himself very prominently forward, had kept his party sharply up to the mark, and insisted upon their action. That they had no chance of success, or so little that it was not worth calculating upon, they all acknowledged ; but allowed themselves to be pushed on, notwithstanding, by the ardour of one fierce personal animosity, undisclosed and unsuspected. Mr Pringle had been gradually winding himself up to this act of vengeance through many years. I think if other people had recollected the strange

way in which his young supplanter had made his first appearance at Eskside, or if any sort of stigma had remained upon Val, the feelings of the heir-presumptive would have been less exaggerated ; but to find that everybody had forgotten these suspicious circumstances—that even his insinuations as to the lad's love of low company, though sufficiently relished for the moment, had produced no permanent impression—and that the world in general accepted Valentine with cheerful satisfaction as Richard Ross's son and Lord Eskside's heir, without a doubt or question on the subject,—all this exasperated Mr Pringle beyond bearing. No passionate resentment and sense of injury like this can remain and rankle so long in a mind without somehow obscuring the moral perceptions ; and the man had become so possessed by this consciousness of a wrong to set right and an injury to avenge, that it got the better both of natural feeling and morality. He did not even feel that the thing he meditated was beyond the range of ordinary electioneering attack ; that it strained every law even of warfare, and exceeded the revenges permitted to civilised and political men. All this he would have seen in a moment had

the case not been his own. He would have condemned any other man without hesitation; would have solemnly pointed out to him the deliberate cruelty of the project, and the impossibility of throwing any gloss, even of pretended justice, over it. For no virtuous impulse to punish a criminal, no philanthropic purpose of hindering the accomplishment of a crime, could be alleged for what he meant to do. The parties assailed were guiltless, and there was no chance that his assault, however virulent, could shake poor Val's real position, however much it might impair his comfort. He could scarcely, even to himself, allege any reason except revenge.

Meanwhile Val had been summoned home. He had spent Christmas with his father, and since then had travelled farther afield, visiting, though with perhaps not much more profit than attended his tour in Italy, the classic islands of Greece. It was early spring when the summons reached him to return without delay, everything in the political horizon being ominous of change. Val got back in March, when the whole country was excited by the preliminaries of a general election. He had been so doubtful of the advantage of the abundant English society he had enjoyed abroad, that

he was comforted to find himself in English society at home, where it was undeniably the right thing, and natural to the soil. When he arrived at Eskside there was a great gathering to meet him. His address was to be seen at full length on every bit of wall in Lasswade and the adjoining villages, and even in the outskirts of Edinburgh; and the day of nomination was so nearly approaching that he had scarcely time to shake himself free from the dust and fatigue of his journey, and to think of the speech which it would be necessary to deliver, in answer to all the pretty compliments which no doubt would be showered upon him. Val, I am afraid, was a great deal more concerned about making a good appearance on this occasion, and conducting himself with proper manly coolness and composure—as if being nominated for a seat in Parliament was a thing which had already happened to him several times at least in his career—than about the real entry into public life itself, the responsibility of an honourable member, or any other legitimate subject of serious consideration. When he asked after everybody on his return, the dignified seriousness with which he was told of the presence of the Pringles at the Hewan

did not affect the young man much. "Ah, you never liked poor Mr Pringle, grandma," he said, lightly. "I have little occasion to like him," said Lady Eskside; "and now that he is the getter up of all this opposition, the only real enemy you have, my own boy——"

"Oh, enemy! come, grandma, that is too strong," said Val. "If I never have any worse enemy than old Pringle, I shall do. But I am sorry they are on the other side," he added, with a boyish thought that his blue colours would have looked prettier than ever near Violet's bright locks. He paused a moment, and then burst out with a laugh. "I wonder if they will put her into old Seisin's yellow ribbons," he cried, quite unaware how dreadfully he was betraying himself. "Poor Vi!"

Lady Eskside and Mary looked at each other—the one with a little triumph, the other with horror and dismay. It was my lady whose face expressed the latter sentiments. She had constantly refused to believe that Val had ever "thought twice" of Sandy Pringle's daughter. Even now she assailed Mary indignantly, as soon as Valentine's back was turned. "What did you mean by giving me such a look? Do you

mean that a boy like that cannot think of a girl he has known all his life without being in love with her? My dear Mary, that is not like you. I was laughing myself, I confess," said the old lady, who looked extremely unlike laughter, "at the idea of their yellow ribbons on Vi's yellow hair. The little monkey! setting herself up, forsooth, as a Liberal; I'm glad the colours are unbecoming," Lady Eskside concluded, with the poorest possible attempt at a laugh.

Mary made no reply—but she was much more prepossessed in favour of Val than she had ever been. Women like a man, or even a boy for that matter, who betrays himself—who has not so much command of his personal sentiments but that now and then a stray gleam of them breaking forth shows whereabouts he is. Mary—who had taken Violet under her protection, determined that not if she could help it should that little girl fall a victim, as she herself had done—was entirely disarmed by the boyish ingenuousness of his self-disclosure. She thought with a half sigh, half smile, once more, as she had thought that summer day by the linn, that this boy might have been her son had things gone as they should—that he ought indeed to

have been her son. Sometimes this was an exasperating, sometimes a softening thought ; but it came to Mary on this occasion in the mollifying way.

“Don’t ask me anything about Vi,” she said to Valentine the same evening. “You know I never approved of too much friendship between you ; she is your enemy’s daughter.”

“What do you call too much friendship ?” said Val, indignantly. “If you think I am going to give her up because her old father is an old fool, and goes against us, you are very much mistaken. Why, Vi ! I have known her since I was *that* high—better than Sandy or any of them.”

“Her father is not so dreadfully old,” said Mary, laughing ; “and besides, Val, I don’t put any faith in him ; his opposition is a great deal more serious than you think.”

“Well, I suppose he must stick to his party,” said Val, employing in the lightness of his heart old Jean’s words ; “but I know very well,” he added, with youthful confidence, “that though he may be forced for the sake of his party to show himself against me, he wishes me well in his heart.”

“You are convinced of that?”

“Quite convinced,” said Val, with magnificent calm. Indeed I rather think the boy was of opinion that this was the case in the world generally, and that however outward circumstances might compel an individual here and there to appear to oppose him, by way of keeping up his party or otherwise, yet in their hearts the whole human race wished him well.

CHAPTER XXVI.

It was on a bright spring morning that the nomination of a knight of the shire to represent Eskshire in Parliament took place in Castleton, the quiet little country town which was not far from the Duke's chief seat, and tolerably central for all the county. The party from Eskside drove over in state, my lord and my lady, with Miss Percival and Val, in the barouche, and with four horses in honour of so great an occasion. They were all in high spirits, with hopes as bright as the morning, though I think Valentine thought more than once how pleasant it would have been to have had little Vi sitting bodkin on the front seat of the carriage between himself and his grandfather. There would have been plenty of room for her, though I don't know that this would have been considered quite a dignified proceeding by my lady. The

little town was all astir, and various cheers were raised as Lord Eskside and Val went into the committee room; and my lady and Mary went on to the hotel which was in their interest,—a heavy, serious, old, grey stone house in the marketplace close to the hustings, from one of the windows of which they were to witness the nomination. On the other side stood the other hotel where Mr Seisin's supporters congregated. When Lady Eskside took her place at the window specially reserved for her, there was a flutter of movement among the crowd already assembled, and many people turned to look at her with interest scarcely less than that with which they welcomed the candidate and his supporters. Lady Eskside was a great deal older than when we saw her first; indeed, quite an old lady, over seventy, as was her husband. But she had retained all her activity, her lightness of figure and movement, and the light in her eyes, which shone almost as brightly as ever. The beauty of age is as distinct as, and not less attractive in its way than, the beauty of youth; the one extremity of life having, like the other, many charms which fail to us commonplace persons in the dull middle-ages,

the period of prose which intervenes in every existence. Lady Eskside was a beautiful old woman ; her eyes were bright, her colour almost as sweet and fresh, though a little broken and run into threads, as when she was twenty ; her hair was snow-white, which is no disadvantage, but the reverse, to a well-tinted face. She had a soft dove-coloured bonnet of drawn or quilted satin coming a little forward round her face, not perched on the top of the head as ladies now wear that necessary article of dress ; and a blue ribbon, of Val's colours, round her throat,—though I think, as a matter of choice, she would have preferred red, as “more becoming” to her snowy old beauty. Mary, you may be sure, was in Val's colours too, and was the thorough partisan of the young candidate, however little she had been the partisan of the boy himself in his natural and unofficial character. There was a bright fire blazing in the room behind them to which they could retire when they pleased ; and the window was thrown wide open, so that they might both see and hear.

The hotel opposite—not by any means such a good one as the Duke's Head—was of course in the opposition interest, and blazed with yellow

flags and streamers. At the window there, just before the commencement of proceedings, several ladies appeared. They did not come in state like Lady Eskside, for Mr Seisin had no woman-kind belonging to him ; and these feminine spectators were wives and daughters of his supporters, and not so enthusiastic in his cause as they were about their own special relations who intended to perform on the occasion. Among them, in a prominent position, but keeping back as much as possible, Mrs Pringle and Violet were soon descried by the ladies opposite. Neither of them wore anything yellow, as Lady Eskside, with sharp old eyes, undimmed by age, discovered in a moment. "They are both fair, and yellow is unbecoming to fair people," she said, with involuntary cynicism. I do not much wonder that she was severe upon them ; for indeed had they not pretended all manner of kindness and friendship for her boy ? "It is not their fault," said Mary, apologetically. "I wonder what you mean by telling me it is not their fault !" cried Lady Eskside. "Is a man's wife just his housekeeper, that she should have no power over him ? They should not have let Sandy Pringle make a fool of himself.

They should not have given their consent, and stuck themselves up there in opposition to the family. I have no patience with such women." It was not wonderful that my lady should disapprove ; and I don't think that two greater culprits in feeling than Mrs Pringle and her daughter were to be found in all Eskside. They had the satisfaction of knowing that the husband and father who had driven them to make this appearance was not unaware of the sentiments with which they regarded it ; but that, I think, was all the comfort these poor ladies had.

Then there came a stir in the crowd, and a thickening and increase of its numbers, as if more had been poured into a vessel nearly full ; and the candidates and their supporters came up to the hustings. How Lady Eskside's heart swelled and fluttered as her handsome boy, a head taller than his old grandfather, appeared on that elevation over the crowd, detached from the rest, not only by his position as the hero of the day, but by his fresh youth, and those advantages of nature which had been so lavishly bestowed upon him ! Lady Eskside looked at him with pride and

happiness indescribable, and kissed her hand to him as he turned to salute her at her window ; but I will not venture to describe the feelings of the other ladies, when Val, with, they thought, a reproachful look on his handsome face, took off his hat to them at their opposite window. Mrs Pringle blushed crimson, and pushed back her chair ; and Violet, who was very pale, bent her poor little head upon her mother's shoulder and cried. " Oh, how cruel of papa to set us up here ! " sobbed Vi. Mrs Pringle was obliged to keep up appearances, and checked her child's emotion summarily ; but she made up her mind that the cause of this distress and humiliation should suffer for it, though she would not fly in his face by refusing absolutely to appear. These agitated persons did not find themselves able to follow the thread of the proceedings as Lady Eskside did, who did not lose a word that was said, from the speech of Sir John who proposed Val, down to the young candidate's own boyish but animated address, which, and his good looks, and the prestige and air of triumph surrounding him, completely carried away the crowd. Sir John's little address was short, but very much to the purpose. It gave a succinct account of

Val. "Born among us, brought up among us—the representative of one of the most ancient and honourable families in the county ; a young man who has distinguished himself at the university, and in every phase of life through which he has yet passed," said Sir John, with genial kindness. Mr Lynton, who seconded Val's nomination, was more political and more prosy. He went into the policy of his party, and all it meant to do, and the measures of which he was sure his young friend would be a stanch supporter, as his distinguished family had always been. Mr Lynton was cheered, but he was also interrupted and assailed by questions from Radical members of the crowd, and had a harder time of it than Sir John, who spoke largely, without touching abstract principles or entering into details. Mr Lynton was a little hustled, so to speak, and put through a catechism, but on the whole was not badly received.

Val's, however, was the speech of the day. He rushed into it like a young knight-errant, defying and conciliating the crowd in the same breath, with his handsome head thrown back and his young face bright and smiling. "He has no end of way on him," Lord Hightowers

said, who stood by, an interested spectator—or rather, metaphorically, ran along the bank, as he had done many a day while Val rowed triumphant races, shouting and encouraging. Val undertook everything, promised everything, with the confidence of his age. He gave a superb assurance to the Radicals in the crowd that it should be the aim of his life to see that the intelligence of the working classes, which had done so much for Great Britain, should have full justice done to it; and to the tenant-farmer on the other side, that the claims of the land, and those who produced the bread of the country, should rank highly in his mind as they ought always to do. The young man believed that everything could be done that everybody wanted; that all classes and all the world could be made happy;—what so easy? And he said so with the sublime confidence of his age, promising all that was asked of him. When Mr Seisin's supporters and himself came after this youthful hero, it is inconceivable what a downfall everybody felt. I am bound to add that Mr Seisin's speech read better than Val's in the paper, and so did that of his own proposer. But that mattered very little at the moment. Val carried

the crowd with him, even those of them who were a little unwilling, and tried to resist the tide. The show of hands was triumphantly in his favour. He was infinitely more Liberal than Mr Seisin, and far more Tory than Sir John. He thought every wrong could be redressed, and that every right must conquer: there was no compromise, no moderation, in his triumphant address.

Lady Eskside and Mary made a progress down the High Street when the gentlemen went to the committee rooms, and saw the Duchess and the Dowager-Duchess, who were both most complimentary. These great ladies had heard Val's speech, or rather had seen it, being too far off to hear very much, from their carriage, where they sat on the outskirts of the crowd. "What fire, what vigour he has!" said the Dowager. "I congratulate you, dear Lady Eskside; though how you could ever think that boy like his father——"

"He is not much like your family at all, is he?" said the Duchess-regnant, with a languid smile. This was the only sting Lady Eskside received during all that glorious day. The old lord and the young candidate joined them ere

long, and their drive back was still more delightful to the old couple than the coming. Lord Eskside, however, growled and laughed and shook his head over Val's speech. "You're very vague in your principles," he said. "Luckily you have men at your back that know what they are doing. You must not commit yourself like that, my man, wherever you go, or you'll soon get into a muddle."

"Never mind!" said my lady; "he carried everybody with him; and, once in the House, I have no fear of his principles; he'll be kept all right."

"Luckily for him, the county knows me, and knows he's all right; though he's a young gowk," said the old lord, looking from under his bended eyebrows at his hope and pride. They were more pleased, I think, than if Val had made the most correct of speeches. His exuberance and overflow of generous youthful readiness for everything made the old people laugh, and made them weep. They knew, at the other end of life, how these enthusiasms settle down, but it was delicious to see them spring, a perennial fountain, to refresh the fields and brighten the landscape, which of itself is arid enough. They looked at

each other, and remembered, fifty years back, how this same world had looked to them—a dreary old world, battered and worn, and going on evermore in a dull repetition of itself, they knew ; but as they had seen it once, in all the glamour which they recollected, so it appeared now to Val.

Val himself was so much excited by all that had happened, that he strolled out alone as soon as he had got free, for the refreshment of a long walk. It was the end of March : the trees were greening over ; the river, softening in sound, had begun to think of the summer as his banks changed colour ; and the first gowans put out their timid hopeful heads among the grass. Val went on instinctively to the linn, with a minute wound in his heart, through all its exhilarations. He thought it very hard that Vi should not have been near him, that she should not have tied up her pretty hair with his blue ribbon, that she should have been ranged on the other side. It was the only unpleasant incident in the whole day, the only drop in his cup that was not sweet. He explained to himself how it was, and felt that the reason of it was quite comprehensible ; but this gives so little satisfaction to the mind.

“Of course he must stick to his party,” Val murmured to himself between his teeth ; and of course Mrs Pringle and Violet could not go against the head of the family in the sight of the world at least. When Val saw, however, a gleam of his own colour between the two great beech-trees he knew so well, he rushed forward, his heart beating lighter. He felt sure that it was Violet’s blue gown, which she must have put on, on her return, by way of indemnifying herself for wearing no blue in the morning. He quickened his step almost to a run, going softly over the mossy grass, so that she did not hear him. The sunset was glowing in the west, lighting up the woods with long slanting gleams, and clouds of gorgeous colour, which floated now and then over the trees like chance emissaries from some army where the cohorts were of purple and gold. Vi sat with her face to that glow in the west, under the old beech-tree where the Babes in the Wood had been discovered ; but her face was hidden, and she was weeping quite softly, confident in the loneliness of the woods, through which now and then a long sobbing sigh like a child’s would break. The pretty little figure thus abandoned to sorrow, the hidden

face, the soft curved shoulders, the golden hair catching a gleam of the sunset through the branches, and still more, the pathetic echo of the sob, went to Val's heart. He went up close to her, and touched her shoulder with a light caressing touch. "Vi! what's the matter?" said the boy, half ready to cry too out of tender sympathy, though he was nearly twenty-two, and just about to be elected knight of the shire.

"Oh Val, is it you?" She sprang up, and looked at him with the tears on her cheeks. "Oh, don't speak to me!" cried Violet. "Oh, how can you ask me what is the matter, after what has happened to-day?"

"Is that what you are crying for?" said Val. "Never mind, Vi, dear. I know you have got to stick to your father, and he must stick to his party. It was hard to see you over there on the other side; but if you feel it like this, I don't mind."

"How did you think I should feel it?" cried the girl. "Oh no, you don't mind! you have plenty, plenty better than me to be with you, and stand up for you; but I—I do mind. It goes to my heart."

And here she sat down again, and covered her

face once more. Val knelt beside her, and drew away her hands.

“Here was where we sat when we were children,” he said, softly, to comfort her. “We have always cared more for each other than for any one else; haven’t we, Vi? How could I have plenty, plenty to stand by me? wasn’t it unkind to say so—when you know you are the one I care for most?”

Violet did not lift up her head, but she cried more softly, letting the voice of the charmer steal into her heart.

“I was savage when I saw you over there,” said Val, with his lips very close to her ear. “But you did not put on their ugly colours at least; and now you are all dressed out in mine, and I don’t care,” said the youth; and he stooped and kissed her blue gown prettily, as a young knight-errant might.

“Oh Val!” cried Violet, with a fresh outburst, but turning towards him; “I thought you would be angry.”

“How could I be angry with you, Vi? Should you have been angry if it had been me?”

“Yes,” she said, quickly; “if I had thought

you didn't care." And here she stopped and grew crimson, and turned away her head.

"But you could not suppose that I didn't care," said Val ; "that would have been impossible. If you only knew how often I have thought of you while I have been away ! It was cruel of you not to let me see you before I went ; but when I was gone, I am sure there never was a day, seldom an hour, that I did not think of you, Vi."

She turned round her head to look at him for a moment : there were tears still in her eyes, but very soft ones, a kind of honey-dew. "Did you, Val ?" she said, half under her breath.

"Always," said the lad. "I wanted you to see everything I saw. I thought how sweet it would be if we could go everywhere together, as we did when we were children—but not just like that either. You know, don't you, how fond I am of you, Vi ?"

"Oh Val !" She was almost as near him as when she fell asleep on his shoulder. "But you must not speak to me so now," she cried suddenly, making an effort to break the innocent spell which seemed to draw them closer and closer ; "it makes me wretched. Oh Val, it is not only

that we were on the other side this morning. My heart is breaking. I am sure papa means to do something against you, and I cannot stop him. I think my heart will break."

"What can he do against me?" said Val, in his light-hearted confidence; "and he would not if he could. Don't think of such nonsense, Vi, but listen to me. We are not children now, but I am fonder of you than of anybody in the world. Why shouldn't we go everywhere together, be always together. If I might go to your father now and say you belonged to me, he could not carry you off to the other side—could he? Vi," said the lad, a little chilled and anxious, "don't turn your head away, dear. Won't you have me, Vi?"

"Oh Val, wait a little—I daren't listen to you now. I should be afraid to say a word."

"Afraid, Vi, to say anything to me—except that you don't care for me!" said Valentine, holding her fast. "Look me in the face, and you could never have the heart to say that."

Violet did not say anything good or bad, but she turned softly to him: her face met his eyes as a child turns to a mother or a flower to the sun, and they kissed each other tenderly under

the great beech boughs where they had sat leaning against each other, two forlorn babies, ten long years before. The scene now was the completion of the scene then. What explanations were wanted between the children? they had loved each other all along; no one else had so much as come within the threshold of either heart. They clung together, feeling it so natural, murmuring in each other's ears with their heads so close; the sunset glowing, then fading about them, till the green glade under the beeches was left in a silvery grey calm of evening, instead of that golden glow. The Babes in the Wood had forgotten themselves. Violet at last discovered with a start how changed the light was and how embrowned the evening. She started from her young lover's arm.

"Oh, how late it is," she cried. "Oh, what will they think at home? I must go. I must go at once, or they will think I am lost."

"We have been lost before now," said Val, taking it much more easily. "But it *is* late, and there's a dinner and fine people at Ross-craig. Oh Vi, what a bore, what a bore! Can't you come with me?—not this night when so much has happened, not this one night?"

"Indeed you are very bold to speak of such a thing," said Vi, with dignity; "and you must not come with me either," she said, mournfully. "Oh Val, I am afraid we have gone and made things worse. I told you not to speak."

"Very likely that I should not speak!" said Val. "But, Vi, look here; now that it is settled, you may come with grandmamma on Thursday, mayn't you? I cannot have you on the other side now."

"But I *am* on the other side," said Vi, with some loftiness. "I am a Liberal myself. I should never have opposed you, Val, or worn anybody else's colours, even if I had not — cared for you; but I am a Liberal as well as papa."

"You must be a Tory when you belong to me," said Val.

"Never," cried Violet; and she shook his arm away and stood independent, with eyes glowing and cheek flushing. Valentine was half angry, half amused, with a man's instinctive sense of the futility of such protestations. How delightful it was! almost a first quarrel, though their engagement was not an hour old!

"Well, then, you shall be a little Radical if

you like—so long as you come,” he said. “I give in ; but you must come with us for the election. I have set my heart on that ; otherwise I shall stand up on the hustings,” cried Val, “and say, That young lady is going to be my wife, and this is how she treats me. I swear, if you are not with grandmamma, I will——”

“How foolish you boys are !” said Vi ; and she took his arm, as if, they both thought, they had been old engaged people, or married people (it did not much matter which). And in this way they made their charmed progress through the wood, forgetting the passage of time till they came to the brae at the Hewan, where Violet, with some terror, dismissed her lover. “You shall not come any farther,” she said ; “you shall not. I don’t mean you to see papa to-night. Oh Val, Val ! what shall I do if he means to do you any harm ?”

“Tell him he will be harming you,” said Val ; but how lightly he took her terror : what could Mr Pringle or any man do to him ? He was at the high topgallant of success and happiness, almost intoxicated with all the good things that had come to him, and with the young innocent

love which rose warm as a summer stream and as soft, fed by all the springs of his heart, growing with all the growth of his life. It was very hard to leave her there, and make his way to his dinner and his politics; but still it had to be done, though Violet stamped her little foot in impatience before he would go. When they parted at last, Val sped along the twilight woods like an arrow, with nothing but triumph and delight in him. He had plucked the last flower of happiness, to wear in his bosom for ever; there seemed to be nothing wanted to the perfection of the moment, and of his life.

As for Violet, she was far from being so happy. She went up the brae more leisurely, in no hurry to go in. Poor child! all her anxieties came back to her with double force. How was she to tell this, how to keep it secret? the one was almost as hard as the other. And then the great chimera in her mind, which she tried to say to herself was nothing, nothing! that dread which she could not explain or define—the consciousness that her father was going to do something against Val. What could she do to hinder him? She shrank from encountering his sharp looks, from telling him her story,—and yet was it not

her duty to make one final effort ? She went round the new buildings to the little old front of the cottage, which still commanded that view over the Esk which Violet loved so well. Her father was walking about alone smoking his cigar. No one else was visible. The peace of evening had fallen upon the house ; but it was cold after the sunset, and Mrs Pringle had not come out to cheer her husband while he smoked his cigar ; indeed, to tell the truth, he was not sufficiently in his wife's good graces to have this indulgence. If Vi, his favourite child, could do anything, now was the moment. Her heart began to beat violently as she stood and looked at him, hesitating, drawn forward by one impulse and back by another. A mere chance movement settled the question. He held out his hand to her as she stood looking at him. "Come, Vi, give me your company," he said ; "your mother thinks it too cold to come out. Where have you been, child, so late ?"

"I have been down at the linn," said Violet ; "it is always so pretty there."

"But you need not have forgotten your dinner, my dear ; your mother does not like it ; and I thought you were tired after your drive to

Castleton," said Mr Pringle, in slightly reproachful tones.

"I am not tired, papa ; I was a little—troubled in my mind. Papa, must we go on the election day, and put ourselves up again, against Val ? Oh papa, why ? might we not stay at home at least ? That is what I was thinking of. Valentine never did any harm to us, papa."

"Has not he ?" said Mr Pringle, fiercely. "You are a goose, Vi, and know nothing about it ; you had better not speak of what you don't understand."

"Why shouldn't I understand ?" said Violet, roused. "I am just as able to understand as any one. The only harm Val has done is by being born, and how could he help that ? But papa, dear," said the girl, twining her arm suddenly within his, and leaning on him closely—"that was not what I was thinking of. Down at the linn, where we used to be so much together, how could I help thinking ? Val was always so——" Vi paused, with injudicious words on her lips which she stopped just in time—"nice to me," she added, with a quick breath of fright at her own temerity. "Even the boys were never so good to me ; they never took me

out into the woods to play truant. Oh papa, if you could only know how delightful it was !”

“He might have broken your neck,” said the obdurate father. “I owe him something for the fright he gave us that day.”

“What fright did he give you ? Mamma has told me since she was not a bit frightened. It was the very sweetest—no, almost the very sweetest,” said Violet, a little thrill of tremulous happiness going through her heart, which told of a sweeter still—“day of my life. He took as much care of me as if I had been—his sister ; more than the boys ever take. Oh papa ! and to sit up yonder against him, as if we were not friends with Val. He is the only one who does not blame you a bit,” said Violet, unused to secrets, and betraying herself once more.

“He ! you have seen him, then ? It is very kind of him certainly not to blame me,” said Mr Pringle, with a smile.

“He says, of course you must stick to your party,” said Violet. “I just met him—for a moment—in the wood. He was not angry, though I should have been angry in his place. He said it was very hard to see mamma and me over there, but that of course we could not help

it; and that he was sure you would not really harm him even if you could."

Mr Pringle was not a bad man, and his whole being was quaking at that moment with something he had done. Like many another amiable person, led astray by a fixed idea, he had brooded over his injury till it filled all earth and heaven, and made every kind of revenge seem lawful and natural, until, as the climax of a world of brooding, he had launched the deadly shaft he had been pointing and preparing so long. Now it was done, and a cold chill of doubt lest it were ill done had seized upon him. He had called Violet to him on purpose to escape from this, and lo! Violet seized upon him too, like an angel of penitence. He paused a moment, casting a perturbed glance towards Lasswade, whence probably by this time his shaft had been launched—poor little innocent village, under its trees! Had there been time to draw back I almost think he would have done it; but as there was not time, Mr Pringle took the only alternative. He shook off his daughter's arm, and told her to go in to her mother, and concern herself with things she understood; and that when he wanted her advice and her friend Val's,

he would ask for it, not sooner. “A couple of babies!” he said contemptuously, not perceiving, in his remorse, and resentment, and sore impatience, that even now he had linked the name of his young enemy, upon whom he had revenged himself, with that of his favourite child.

CHAPTER XXVII.

So early as next morning the messenger of vengeance had gone like a fiery cross all over Eskside—up the water and down the water, placarded in the hamlets, sent flying by the post over all the county. It came by the morning's post to Rossraig itself. The man who went for the letters got a copy from somebody, which was given with much solemnity and secrecy to Harding the butler for his private information. The upper servants laid their heads together over it in the housekeeper's room with fright, and yet with that almost agreeable excitement which moves a little community when any great event happens to the heads of it. Excitement is sweet, howsoever it comes; and the grim pleasure which servants often seem to enjoy, even in "a death in the family" is curious to behold. This was much more piquant than a death, and nobody

could tell to what it might lead ; and then there was the thrilling suspense as to who should venture to tell it to my lord and my lady, and how they would take it when they found it out.

As was to be expected, it was through Harding's elaborate care to keep it from his master that it was found out. Lord Eskside was in his library before breakfast, very busy with his lists of voters, and the calculations of each district and polling-place, all of which agreed so delightfully in the certain majority which must carry Val triumphantly to his place in Parliament—a triumph which, all the more perfect that it was late, filled the old lord's heart. His wrinkled forehead was smoothed out as if he had swallowed an elixir of life ; his shaggy eyebrows, almost white now, were still, or nearly so ; his under lip had subsided peacefully. How many disappointments had passed over that rugged old head ! His son Richard had been nothing but one disappointment from beginning to end, sometimes giving acute pain—always a dormant dissatisfaction to his parents. For years and years he had been lost to them altogether : he had sinned like a prodigal, bringing in a wild and miserable romance into the family records, without making

up for his sin by the prodigal's compensating qualities,—the readiness to confess, the humility of asking pardon. Richard had done badly by his family, yet was as proud, and took up as superior a position, as if he had done well. He had not only disappointed but scorned his father's hopes. Neither father nor mother had any comfort in him, any good of him, any more than if they had no son.

But there was recompense for all their suffering in Val; he was altogether their own, their creation: and the pleasure with which the old lord found all his hopes realising themselves in this boy, who was still young enough to be under his own influence, to take his opinions as a kind of *credo* and symbol of faith, to carry out his wishes, and take up the inheritance of the Rosses, as he had perfected and filled it up during his long life—was, I think, far greater, more perfect and delightful, than the success of any middle-aged man like Richard, who, as old Jean Moffatt said, was quite as old if not older than himself, could have given him. There were a hundred things in Richard's character that jarred upon his father, which his good sense made him accept and submit to, knowing how

hopeless it would be to attempt to shape a man of the world, who half despised even while he respected his rustic father, into anything like his own image. But there was nothing yet which was grieving or contradictory in Val. The boy was passionate, but then every boy had some defect; and a little wayward and wilful if roused, but always submissive as a child to the arguments of affection, and candid to understand when he was wrong. Lord Eskside saw with fond eyes of affection, and heard from every one—scholastic Grinders, and persons in society, and men of the world—that no more promising lad could be than this hero of his, who had accepted all his schemes and fallen in with all his views. To attain this rare pleasure in your old age is not a common blessing, and it was all the more exquisite because he knew how rare it was.

In this state of mind he rose from his library table and his lists of voters, and stalked out with his hands clasped under his coat tails, to look at the great registering thermometer which hung outside on the shady corner at the west wing. When he came into the hall, Lord Eskside saw Harding in the distance, poring over

a paper which he held in his hand,—a large white broadsheet, very much like Val's address, of which there were some copies about the house. Harding's obtuseness was a joke with the old lord. "Has he not got the sense of it into his old noddle yet?" he said to himself, half laughing, and watched with quiet amusement the butler's absorption. Lord Eskside's patience, however, was none of the longest, and he called Harding before many seconds had passed. The man was too much occupied to hear him, and did not stir. Then the old lord, half irritated, half laughing, called again. "If that's Mr Ross's address you are reading, bring it here, you haverel, and I'll explain it to you," he said. Harding turned round with a scared look, and, crushing up the paper in his hand, he thrust it into his pocket with hurried and almost ostentatious panic.

"It's not Mr Ross's address, my lord," he said.

"Hey! what is it then?—let me see. Lord bless us, man!" said his irascible master, "why do you put on that look? What is it? Let me see!"

"I assure you, my lord, it's nothing—nothing of the least consequence," said Harding. "Your

lordship would not look twice at it ; it's nothing, my lord." And he put his hand upon his pocket, as if to defend that receptacle of treason, and stood with the air of the hero in the poem—

“Come one, come all, this rock shall fly
From its firm base as soon as I.”

Harding, for the first time in his life, was melodramatic in his determination to give his blood sooner than the objectionable paper. While the old lord stood looking at him half alarmed, and becoming more and more impatient, Mrs Harding strayed from her room, which was within reach of the voices, as it was her habit to do when her husband was audible in too prolonged colloquy with my lord.

“Marg’ret,” said Lord Eskside, “what has that haverel of a man of yours got in his pocket ? I never can get a word of sense out of him, as you well know.”

“Hoots, my lord, it’s some of his nonsense papers. What have you in your pocket, man ? Cannot you give my lord a sensible answer ? It’s some of the squibs or things about yon auld Seisin, the lawyer body that’s set up against us,—a bonnie like thing in our county, that has never had a Whig member as lang as I can mind.”

“That’s true,” said Lord Eskside, mollified; “it’s scarcely worth the trouble to publish any squibs. Let’s see it, Harding,—and don’t look so like a gowk, if you can help it. What is the matter with the man?”

“Give it him without more ado,” whispered Mrs Harding peremptorily to her spouse. “He maun see it sooner or later, and he’ll think we’ve something to do wi’ it if you keep it back. Here’s the paper, my lord. Na, it’s no a squib on auld Seisin. I’m thinking it’s something on the other side.”

“What do you mean by the other side?” said Lord Eskside, his eyebrows beginning to work as he snatched it out of her hand.

“Nae doubt they have their squibs too,” said Mrs Harding, making her escape with as unconcerned a face as possible. Her husband, on the contrary, stood gaping and pale with horror, not knowing what thunderbolt might burst upon him now.

The old lord smoothed the crumpled paper, and held it out before him at a distance to read it without his spectacles. He stood so for a moment, and then he went back into the library, and shut the door. About half an hour after he

rang the bell, and asked that my lady should be called. "Ask Lady Eskside to be so good as to come to me here," he said, in strange subdued tones, without looking up. This was a very unusual summons. In all the common affairs of life he went to her, and it was only when something more grave than usual happened in the house that Lord Eskside sent for his wife. He did not rise when she came in, which she did at once, her old face flushed with alarm. All the ruddy rustic colour had gone out of my lord's face ; his very hand was pallid which held the paper. He drew a chair close to him with his other hand, and called to her impatiently, "Come here, Catherine, come here !"

"What has happened ?" Her eye ran over the papers on the table, looking for the yellow cover of a telegram—thinking of her absent son, as mothers do. If it was nothing about Richard, it could not be anything very terrible. Having satisfied herself on this point, she sat down by him, and put her hand upon his arm. "My dear, you are not well ?"

"Never mind me," he said ; "I am well enough. Read that."

Lady Eskside looked at it, wondering, then

looked up at him, gave a low cry, and drew it towards her. This was what she read :—

*“ To the free and independent Electors of
Eskshire.*

“ GENTLEMEN,—You were called upon to listen to, applaud, and accept certain statements yesterday, coming from no less a person than Sir John Gifford, and other great personages of the county, which it may perhaps be well to examine dispassionately before acting on them so far as to send to Parliament as your representative a young man possessing no real right to such an honour.

“ I mean to say nothing against the gentleman calling himself, and called by others, Mr Valentine Ross. He is young and absolutely untried ; therefore, though it cannot be said that he has done anything to justify his claims on your support, it is equally true that he has done nothing to invalidate them, so far as he possesses any. This however, is the fundamental question which I wish to assist you to examine. What are his claims upon you ? They are those of Lord Eskside’s grandson, heir of one of the most consider-

able families in the county—a family well known and respected by all of us, and about whose principles there can be no doubt, any more than of their high honour and estimation in the district. These are the pretensions of the party who support Mr Ross as a candidate for your suffrages. Sir John Gifford—and no one can respect Sir John more than I do, or would give more weight to his opinion—introduced his name to you with high eulogies, as ‘one born among us, brought up among us, the heir of one of the most ancient and honourable families in the county.’ Now the question I have to lay before you is straightforward and simple—‘Is this true?’ Sir John’s first statement is of course to be taken as a figure of speech, and I will not be so ungracious as to press it, for we all know that the young gentlemen in question was not born among us. He made his first appearance at Eskside, as most of you are aware, when a child of about seven years old. How did he make his first appearance? Was he brought home carefully, out of one comfortable nursery into another, under the charge of suitable nurses and attendants, as our own children are, and as it is natural to suppose the son of the Honourable

Richard Ross—a man holding an important appointment in Her Majesty's diplomatic service, and the heir of an old title and very considerable estate—would be? I answer, unhesitatingly, No. The child, in the dress and with the appearance of a tramp-child, was brought to Lord Eskside's door by a female tramp—a wandering vagrant—who lodged that night in a low tavern in the neighbourhood. He was thrust in at the door, and left there without a word; and equally without a word he was received. The persons who were present know that no message nor letter nor token of any kind was sent with the child. He was left like a parcel at Lord Eskside's door. Lord Eskside immediately after announced to the world that his grandson had been sent to him, to be brought up at home. And the child thus strangely introduced, without mother, without pedigree, without resemblance, without a single evidence of his identity, is the young gentleman who is known to us by the name of Mr Valentine Ross, and who now asks our suffrages on his family's merits rather than his own.

“Gentlemen, I am not one to disregard any claim which a man, who has in any way served

his country, makes upon his own merits. To such a man I reckon it an impertinence to ask any question as to his pedigree. But when a young man says to me, Elect me, because I am my father's son, I ask, Is it certain that he is the son of the man he claims as father? All that we know of his history is against it. His reputed father has studiously kept out of the way. Why, if he is Richard Ross's son, whom we all know, is not Richard Ross here to acknowledge him? Instead of Richard Ross, we have nothing but a fond old man who has adopted an ingratiating boy. Lord Eskside has a right to adopt whom he pleases; but he has no right to set up some base-born pretender—some chance child thrown on his bounty—as the heir of his honours and the representative of his family. Will you send to Parliament, as a Ross of Eskside, an old man's pet and pensioner, a supposititious heir? or will you not rather demand a searching inquiry into a history so mysterious, before you strengthen, by your election of him, the pretended rights of an impostor? He may be an innocent impostor, for I say nothing against the young man in his own person; but until his claims have been investigated, and some reasonable evidence af-

forded, an impostor he must be considered by all Eskside men whose ambition it is to have everything about them honest and above-board.

“AN ESKSIDE ELECTOR.”

“The demons!” cried Lady Eskside. Hot tears were shining in her eyes, forced there by pressure of rage and shame. She clenched her hand in spite of herself. “Oh, the word’s not bad enough! Devils themselves would have more heart.”

“It’s Sandy Pringle’s doing,” said the old lord. “I thought he was too mim and mild. He’s been preparing it these dozen years; and now the moment’s come, and he’s struck home.”

“It’s too bad for Sandy Pringle,” said the old lady, pushing her chair from the table. Oh no, no; it’s too bad for that; the man has bairns of his own.”

And the tears ran down her cheeks with sheer pain. “We were never ill to anybody,” she moaned; “never hard-hearted that I know of. Oh, my poor old lord!—just when your heart was light, and you had your way!”

She turned upon him in the midst of her own pain with a pathetic pity, and the two pairs of

tremulous old hands clasped each other closely with that sympathy which is far deeper than any words. I do not think it would have taken much to bring a tear down the old lord's rugged cheek as well as his wife's. The blow had gone straight to his heart. Pain—helpless, bitter, penetrating, against which the sufferer surprised by it can do nothing but make a speechless appeal to heaven and earth—was the chief sensation in his mind. He was so unprepared and open to attack, so happy and proud, glad and rejoicing in the last evening lights, which were so sweet. For the first moment neither of them could think—they could only feel the pain.

Then there came a sense of what had to be done, which roused the old pair from the pang of the first shock. "It will be all over the county this morning," said Lord Eskside. "Of that we may be sure. A man could not be bad enough to do so much without being bad enough to do more. We'll say nothing about it here, Catherine ; especially, we'll tell the boy nothing about it. Leave him at peace for the moment ; to-morrow he is sure to hear ; but in the mean time, as soon as breakfast is over, I'll make some excuse, and drive over to Castleton. We'll keep

him out of the way. I'll see Lynton, and Sir John, and as many more of the committee as I can, and consult what's to be done."

"You'll tell them how false it all is, and how devilish," said my lady; "devilish, that is the only word."

"Devilish, if you please," said Lord Eskside; "but how am I to say it's false? Half the county know it's true."

Lady Eskside stopped the contradiction which came to her lips. She wrung her hands in that impotence which it is so much harder on the strong to bear than on the weak. "Oh, that woman! that woman!" she cried; "the harm she has done to me and mine!"

"I will lay the whole matter before them," said Lord Eskside; "there is nothing else for it now—they must hear everything. At times it may be prudent to hold your peace; but when you must speak, you must speak freely. I will tell them everything. It would have been better to have done it long ago."

"Oh, what is the need of telling them?" cried my lady—"do you think they don't know? Ay, as well as we do; but do what seems to you good, my good man. It's like to break my

heart ; but I am most sorry for you, my dear, my dear !”

“ Dry your eyes now, Catherine,” he said, hoarsely ; “ we must not show our old eyes red to strangers. Come, the bell has rung, and we’ll all be the better of our prayers.”

They went in, arm in arm, to the great dining-room, where the servants were waiting, more curious than can be described, to see how my lord and my lady “ were taking it.” They had no satisfaction, I am glad to say. The old lord read his short “ chapter,” and the short prayer which followed, in a tone in which the most eager ear could detect no faltering. And my lady, if perhaps not so buoyant in her aspect as yesterday, did not betray herself even to Mary Percival, who knelt calmly by her side, and did not know how her old heart was sinking.

“ We will give you a holiday to-day, Val,” Lord Eskside said, after breakfast ; “ but for me, I will drive over to Castleton and see how everything is going on.”

Val, who had visions of rushing up to the Hewan, and who felt himself perfectly safe in his grandfather’s hands, consented gaily. “ If you are sure you don’t want me,” he said ; and

the old man drove off smiling, waving his hand to the ladies at the door. Harding and the other servants were very much puzzled by their master. They had thought it not unlikely that he might afford them still further excitement by fainting dead away or going off in a fit.

I do not know which had the hardest task—Lord Eskside telling the story of his son's marriage, with all its unfortunate consequences, to the serious county magnates assembled round the table of the committee room, and looking as grave as though Valentine had committed high treason—or his wife at home, trying to look as if nothing had happened, and to keep Val by her side that he might not hear of the assault upon him. At one period of the day at least my lady's work was the hardest. It was when Val insisted upon having from her a message to Violet Pringle or her mother, asking that the girl might accompany her next morning to see the election.

“Violet Pringle,” cried the old lady, tingling in every vein with resentment and indignation—“of all the people in the world, why should I take her father's daughter about with me? You are crazy, Val.”

“Perhaps I am,” said Val, with unusual gravity and humility ; “but if I am crazy, I am still more crazy than you think. Grandma, I want you to take Vi about with you everywhere. Don’t you know what friends she and I have always been ? Listen, and don’t be angry, Granny dear. When all this is over, and there is time to think of anything, I want you to give your blessing to Vi and me. She is going to be my wife.”

The old lady gave a scream : it was nothing else. She was wild for the moment with wonder, and anger, and horror. “Never ! never ! it must never be ! Your wife !” she cried. “Oh, Val, you are mad. It can never be !”

“How can you say it can never be, when it *is* ?” said Val, gently, with the smile of secure and confident happiness. “Yes, I don’t mind Mary hearing, as she is there. Last night I met Vi in the woods. I was half mad, as you say, to think they had kept her away from me on such a day. I asked her to promise that it should never be so any more ; and now nothing can come between us,” said the young man in the confidence of youth. The idea of any strenuous objections on the part of the old people, who

had yielded to every wish he had formed all his life, did not occur to him. Why should they object? He knew no reason. He had not announced it last night because there was a great dinner-party, and the house was full of strangers, but not because he felt any alarm as to how his news would be received.

“Val, I tell you you are mad,” said Lady Eskside, deeply flushed with anger, of which she did not venture to show all the causes. “Your grandfather will never hear of it for a moment. Sandy Pringle has always been your enemy—always! and has he not shown himself so, openly, now?”

“Oh, of course he must stick to his party,” said Val, lightly. “As for being my *enemy*, that is nonsense. Why should we be melodramatic? I am sure he wishes me well in his heart.”

“A likely story!” said the old lady, her old cheeks blazing hotter and hotter; and when Val announced his intention of going off at once to make his proposal known to Mr Pringle, and claim his consent, the passionate resentment and indignation which she strove to suppress were almost too much for her. She bade the boy

remember that he owed it to his grandfather at least to tell him first of so important a step, but at last had to come down to arguments of convenience and expediency. "You may be sure Sandy Pringle is not at the Hewan to-day. He has too much mischief in hand to stay there in his hole. He is at work, doing you all the harm he can, the old sneck-drawer!" said the indignant old lady—not daring to put half her indignation into words.

"As he is to be my father-in-law, you must be more civil to him, grandmamma," said Val, half laughing at her vehemence. He gave in at last, very reluctantly, to put off his going for the day. But even when this was attained, Lady Eskside's work was but half done, for Val had to be kept at home if possible, kept occupied and amused, that he might not discover prematurely the cruel attack of which he was the victim. She was afraid he might do something rash, and compromise himself before the election. In the excitement of that day itself, and when the business was too near completion to be capable of being deranged by any hotheaded folly poor Val might be guilty of, the risk would be less—or so at least the old people thought.

Thus things went on until the evening. Lord Eskside had fortunately left some business behind him to be completed, which gave Val occupation, and my lady had a moment of ease in which she could confide all that had happened to Mary. This last complication about Violet made everything so much the worse. Lady Eskside would have thought Sandy Pringle's daughter a poor enough match for her boy at any time; but now! Her only trust was that Mrs Pringle was a sensible woman, and might see the necessity of putting a stop to it; but with the precedent of his father's reckless marriage before him, and Val's hot and hasty disposition, the old lady's heart sank at the prospect. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," she said at last, letting fall a silent tear or two, as she sat with Mary waiting in the dusk of the evening for her husband's return. "My poor old lord is long of coming; he'll be worn to death with this terrible day."

Lord Eskside was very late. The dressing-bell had rung, and the ladies were lingering, waiting for him in the pale dusk, which had come on earlier than usual. The time and the season and the hour were very much like that

other bleak night, fifteen years ago, when Val came first to Rossraig. There was no storm, but it had been raining softly all the afternoon, refreshing the country, but darkening the skies, and increasing the depression of all who were disposed to be depressed. Val had gone out in the rain into the woods after his day's work, not knowing why it was that some uneasiness in the house had taken hold upon him, some sense of contradictoriness and contrariety. Were things going wrong somehow, that had been so triumphantly right? or what was it that irritated and oppressed him? The ladies, in their anxiety, which he was not allowed to share, were glad when he went away, releasing them from all necessity for dissimulation. They sat in different parts of the room, not even talking to each other, listening to the rain, to the taps of the wet branches upon the windows, and all the hushed sounds of a rainy night. Lady Eskside had her back to the window, but, for that very reason, started with the greater excitement when a sound more distinct than the taps of the branches—the knocking of some one for admission, and a low plaintive voice—came to her ear, mingled with the natural sounds of the

night. Crying out, "Mary, for God's sake! who is it?" she rose up from her chair. Just about the time and the moment when one of the boys was brought to her! I think for the time the old lady's mind was confused with the pain in it. She thought it was Val's mother come back at last with the other boy.

A little figure, young and light, was standing outside the window in the rain, — not Val's mother, in her worn and stormy beauty, but poor little Violet in her blue cloak, the hood drawn over her golden hair—her eyes, which had been pathetic at their gayest moment, beseeching now with a power that would have melted the most obdurate. "Oh, my lady, let me in, let me in!" cried Vi. Lady Eskside stood for a minute immovable. Her "heart turned," as she said afterwards, against this trifling little creature that was the cause of so much trouble (though how poor Vi, who suffered most, could be the cause, heaven knows!—people are not logical when they are in pain). Then I think it was the rain that moved her, and not the child's pleading face. She could not have left her enemy's dog, let alone his daughter, out in that drenching rain. She went

across the room, slow and stately, and opened the window. But when Violet in her wet cloak came in, Lady Eskside gave her no encouragement. "This is a wet night for you to be out," was all she said.

"Oh, Lady Eskside!" said poor Violet, throwing herself down in a heap at the old lady's feet — "I have come to ask your pardon on my knees. Oh, you cannot think we knew of it, mamma and I. She is ill, or she would have been here too. Oh, my lady, my lady, think a moment! if it is hard for you, it is worse for us. It will kill mamma; and my heart is broken, my heart is broken!" cried poor little Vi.

"Miss Pringle, I do not think, on the spur of the moment, that there is much to be said between you and me."

"Oh, my lady!" Violet cried out, as if she had been struck, at the sound of her own name.

"Nothing to be said," continued Lady Eskside, though her voice wavered. "Who would blame you, poor thing—or your mother either? but between your father's family and mine what can there be to say? That is not a fit posture for a young lady. We are not in a theatre, but private life," said the old lady, severely calm.

“If you will rise up and put off your wet cloak, I will order the carriage to take you home.”

“Oh, no, no!” cried Violet, rising to her feet. Her soft eyes sent forth an answering flash; her pale little face flushed over. “If you will not have any pity—I meant nothing else, my lady—will you tell—Val,” she added, with a hysterical sob rising in her throat, “that he is not to think any more of what he said last night. I’ll—forget it. It cannot be now, whatever—might have been. Oh, Mary,” cried the girl, turning to Miss Percival, whom she saw for the first time—“tell him! I never, never can look him in the face again.”

“If you please, my lady,” said Harding, appearing at the door in the darkness, “my lord has just come home; and he would be glad to see your ladyship in his own room.”

Lady Eskside hurried away. She did not pause even to look again at the suppliant whom she had repulsed. Violet stood looking after her, wistful, incredulous. The girl could not think it was anything but cruelty; perhaps at the bottom of her poor little distracted soul she had hoped that the old lady, who was always so kind to her, would have accepted her heart-

broken apology, and refused to accept her renunciation. She could not believe that such a terrible termination of all things was possible, as that Lady Eskside should leave her without a word. She turned to Mary, and tottered towards her, with such a look of surprised anguish as went to Miss Percival's heart.

"My dear, my dear, don't look so heart-broken! She has gone to hear what has happened. She is very, very anxious. Come to my room, and change your wet things, my poor little Vi."

"No, no! Not another moment! Let me go, let me go!" cried the girl, escaping from her hold; and, with the swiftness of youth and passion, Violet turned and fled, through the open window by which she had entered, out into the darkness, the rain, and the night.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

VALENTINE, poor boy, was in his room dressing for dinner, fearing and knowing nothing of all that was happening, when Violet made that hapless visit to throw herself on Lady Eskside's mercy. He was whistling softly before his glass, tying his necktie and chafing at the thought that to-morrow must again be a blank day on which he could not see her—and that only after the election could everything be settled. He was uneasy and restless, he did not know why, with a sensation of something in the air which he did not understand, but which made him by moments vaguely unhappy. When he began to dress he had seen from his window, or thought he saw, old Jean Moffatt, with a huge umbrella, standing at the corner of the path which led into the woods, and had sent down his man in great eagerness to ask if any note had come for him,

thinking the old woman might have been Love's messenger for lack of a better. But there was no note, and Val consoled himself, in that delicious sense of the poetic elevation of being in love which is so sweet to girls and boys, with thinking that his Violet was so much the centre of his thoughts as to throw her sweet shadow upon everything. Few people fully estimate the happiness of a young lover, even when separated from the beloved object, in being able to make such delightful reflections. Val dressed and came down-stairs, all unconscious of what it was which had made the rain beat in upon the carpet in the drawing-room. "Why, you must have had the windows open! What an idea in such a night—with the wind due west!" he said. But even Mary, though she gave him a warning look which he could not understand, said nothing to him; and dinner passed off as usual, though somehow more quietly. Lord Eskside was tired—worn out with his long day's work. "And I am tired too," said my lady; "it is the weather, I suppose. I think we should all go early to bed, to be fresh for to-morrow." When the gentlemen were left alone, the old lord called Val to him. "We will take our wine

in the library; I have a great deal to say to you, my boy," he said, leading the way into his own particular retirement. And then the worst moment of Val's life came to him unawares. He felt already that there was something to be revealed, from the moment they entered the room in which he had always received his admonitions when a child, and which was associated to him—but up to this time how lightly!—with all the clouds and shadows of his early life.

"Sit down here, Val," said the old lord. "You must pluck up a heart, for there's something unpleasant coming. Not of any consequence, or that can affect you seriously—but very unpleasant. Val, in every election there's things of this kind," he continued, slowly unfolding a paper. "I've seen a great deal worse. I've seen ill deeds, that a man had forgotten for twenty or thirty years, raked up to bring shame on his grey hairs. Thank God, there's nothing of that kind possible with you! But it's unpleasant enough, unpleasant enough."

"For heaven's sake, sir, tell me what it is at once! Don't keep me in this suspense."

"Val," said the old lord, almost sternly, "no passion, sir! none of your outbursts! I'll al-

most think it's true, and that you're not of my race, if you cannot set your teeth and bear it like a man."

After this adjuration, which was very necessary, I think Val would have let himself be torn to pieces sooner than "give way." He read the paper in the dim library, lighted only round the table at which they sat, the wall all dark with books, the dark curtains drawn over the windows, the fire without a glimmer in it. Lord Eskside sat watching the lad from under his shaggy eyebrows. So far as he was himself concerned, the old lord had worn out all capacity of feeling in the work he had gone through that day. He had revealed to his friends, in full detail, what he considered as the shame of his family, and had done so like a Stoic, without showing any emotion ; but now he watched Val, tender as a mother over her baby, following the boy's eyes from line to line, his starts of indignation and pain, the furious colour that came over his face, the quick-drawn panting breath, which showed the immense constraint he put on himself. Lord Eskside put out his hand once or twice, and laid it on Val's arm with an instinctive caress, which from him was more than an

embrace would have been from another. Val took a long time to read it, for the struggle was hard ; not that the sense of it did not flash into his mind almost in a moment, with all those curious sensations of familiarity—as if it had happened before, or as if we had known and expected it all our lives—which so often attend a great event. When he laid it down at last, he turned to his grandfather, his face partially distorted by that strange dilation of suppressed pain which seems to change every line of the countenance. “This, then, I suppose, was what my father meant,” he said.

“Your father ! What did he say ? Did he warn you ? Val, I would not be hard upon your father—but we are reaping the whirlwind, you and me, for the wind he has sown.”

“He told me that all a man’s antecedents, all the secrets of his life were raked up. He should have said, the secrets of other people’s lives,” said Val, with a short and bitter laugh. Then he added, dropping his voice, “I suppose it is all true.”

“All true to the facts, that is the devilishness of it. Val, can your recollection carry you further back than your coming here ?”

Val shook his head. A deep, hot, crimson flush covered his face. How could he put into shape the vague reminiscences as of a dream—of childish wanderings, sports, and troubles? He recollected nothing that could be put into words, and yet something like the confused images of a dream.

“Is she living still—my mother?” he said, in a very low voice.

“For all we know,” said Lord Eskside. “If she was dead, I think we must have heard somehow. I have often thought you ought to be told, Val. God knows, many a hard hour’s thinking it’s given me. You had a brother, too. Probably he is dead long ago; for children die, I hear, like sheep, with all the exposure of that wild life.”

Val shuddered in spite of himself. His brother had faded away altogether out of his recollection, and he felt but little interest in the suggestion of him. No doubt he must be dead long ago. Val could not realise himself in such a relationship. It was impossible. He escaped from the thought of it. The thought of a mother, and such a mother, was sufficiently bewildering and painful.

“But there is time enough for considering this part of the subject,” said the old lord. “In the meantime, Val, I’ve been at Castleton, working hard all day. I have seen almost everybody it was important to see.”

“Why did you not take me with you? If I had but known——”

“It was better you should not know. I did better without you. They all know the true state of the case now—and you are prepared to meet them. And, Val, I may say to you, which is of more importance than saying it to them—that though that devilish paper is true enough, I am as sure you are my son Richard’s son, as if you had never left my sight since the day you were born.”

Val looked at him with hasty surprise. The tears came in a rush to the young man’s eyes. “Do you need to tell me this, grandfather?” he cried piteously, and covered his face with his hands. All that he had read had not made his position real to him, like those words from the old man, whom he had so confidently laid claim to all his life.

“No, no, no! I was wrong—forgive me,” cried the old lord. “But come, Val,” he added,

quickly ; “ we must meet this difficulty with our best courage. We must not allow it to weigh us down. When you face the public to-morrow, there must be no sign either of depression or of passion. You must keep steady—as steady as you were before you knew a word of it—and confident as at the nomination ; there must be no change. Can you trust yourself to meet your enemies so ? It is the only way.”

The lad put his hand into the old man’s and grasped it, crushing the feeble fingers. “ I will,” he said, setting his teeth. This was almost all that was said between them. When they parted for the night, the old lord took him by the shoulders, shaking him, as he pretended. This gentle violence was the greatest demonstration of tenderness of which, in his old-fashioned reserve, he was capable. “ Go to your bed, my boy, and rest well before to-morrow’s trial,” he said.

All this time there had not been a word said about the author of the placard which, next morning as they drove into Castleton, was to be seen on every wall, in every village, near every house they passed. Valentine recognised, with a heightened colour, the first copy of it he saw,

but said not a word, restraining himself, and turning his eyes away. In Castleton the whole town was placarded with it, and the streets brimming over with excitement. Wherever the carriage passed with its four horses, the groups which were gathered round, reading it, would stop, and pause, and turn to gaze at the handsome young fellow, the very flower of the country, who yet might not be Mr Ross after all, but only some chance child — a vagrant of the street. Valentine did all that man could do to banish from his face every appearance of knowing what these looks meant, or of being affected by them ; but how hard it is to do this with the certainty that everybody around you knows that you know ! He made a brave stand ; he smiled and bowed to the people he knew, and spoke here and there a cheerful word, restraining his sense of shame, his wounded pride, the horror in his mind, with a strong hand. But his young face had lost its glow of healthful colour, the circles of his eyes seemed somehow expanded, and his nostrils quivered and dilated like those of a high-bred horse at a moment of excitement. The effect upon his face was curious, giving it a certain elevation of meaning and power—but it was the

power of nature at its utmost strain, so quivering with the tension that one pull tighter of the curb, one step further, might burst the bond altogether. The polling had already begun when they reached Castleton, but the voters in the Ross interest flagged—nobody could tell how. Mr Seisin's name was above that of Val when the state of the poll was published. This, everybody said, told for nothing ; for, as it was well known, Mr Seisin had not the shadow of a chance. His supporters had been probably polled at once, to strike a bold keynote, and prove that there were still possibilities, even in Eskshire, for the Liberal party. It told for nothing, they all said to each other, surrounding Lord Eskside, who sat somewhat grim and silent, in the committee-room ; but the men there assembled, though stanch as partisans could be, undeniably grew anxious as the moments went on. It was impossible there to ignore the attack, which had never been mentioned by any of his family to Valentine, except on the previous night, when he was told of it solemnly. Here it was of course the chief subject of discussion ; and though he took no part in the talk, he had to hear it referred to without flinching. “ Depend upon it,”

said Sir John, "it's a sign of weakness; it is an expedient of despair. They know their cause is desperate, and they don't mind what they say." But reassuring as this was, a cold shiver of alarm began to run through the party. One man stole out after another to see what news there was, to send off messengers hither and thither. The county was stanch;—of that there could be no doubt. Nothing would induce the Eskshire men to give their votes to Mr Seisin; but their minds might have been so affected by this sudden assault, coming just at the critical moment when there was no time to contradict it, that, bewildered and uncertain, they might refrain from voting at all.

Twelve o'clock! The business of the election seemed to have come to a pause. One individual now and then came up to the polling-booths. Already a great yellow placard, "What has become of the Tory voters?" had flashed out upon the walls. A dramatic pause fell into the midst of the excitement. The people of Castleton looked on curiously, as if they had been at a play. Even the crowds in the streets slackened—almost disappeared. When Valentine walked up the High Street to speak to Lady Eskside, who sat tremb-

ling and pale at the window of the Duke's Head, looking on, he was taken no more notice of than on the most ordinary occasion. For one thing, a smart shower had come on, and the idlers had taken refuge under the porches of the houses, and at the shop-doors, where they gazed at him calmly, without a cheer, without a salutation. Lady Eskside, looking out of the window, watched all this with an aching heart. It seemed to her that all was over. She could not take her eyes from the impertinent placard opposite on the Liberal headquarters—"Seisin, 355 ; Ross, 289." The yellow ribbons seemed to flaunt at her ; her very heart was sick ; and the chillness of mental suffering crept over her old frame. "Oh, Val, my dear, I wish this was over," she said, taking his hand between hers. "Never fear, grandma," he said, smiling at her dimly, as if from the midst of a dream. He scarcely knew what he was saying ; and so far as he was conscious of the words, he did not believe them. The young man gave a glance across at the other window, but Violet was not there, which was a kind of vague consolation to him. He held the old lady's hand, and tried to smile, and talk, and encourage her, without the least idea what he said.

At that moment the tide turned. The impatient little rattle of a small pony-carriage came up the long street, heard rattling over every particular stone all the way up, so great was the stillness of this strange moment of suspense. The pony-carriage drew up before the Duke's Head, and Dr Rintoul, who lived in one of the new villas on Lord Eskside's feus, got out and walked towards the polling-booth. His daughter, who had driven him, stood up—a large woman, bigger than the pony she drove—with a wave of her whip, on which there streamed a blue ribbon. “Good morning, Lady Eskside,” cried Miss Rintoul. “We are all Liberals, but we hate a mean advantage, and all blows in the dark. I've driven papa over to vote for Ross for ever, against all your sneaking enemies!” Miss Rintoul was not afraid of the sound of her own voice—she had outlived all such weaknesses. She said out what she had to say roundly, seeing no reason to be ashamed of it, standing up as on a platform, and waving her whip with the blue ribbon. Her vigorous voice caught the capricious ear of the crowd; for just at that moment the shower had stopped, the sun shone out, and the bystanders began to

burst out from their hiding-places. "Ross for ever!"—two or three caught up the cry. It was echoed with a lusty roar from the Edinburgh road, whence a string of hackney-cabs, and an old coach which had once plied between Lasswade and Princes Street, and bore their names emblazoned on it, came clattering full speed round the corner. "Down with Pringle, and Ross for ever!" cried the Lasswade men, packed like herrings in their cabs. Blue flags streamed from the dusty roofs; familiar faces, hot and breathless, but beaming, looked up at the old lady and her boy. The shout ran down the length of the High Street, and called out the committee-men to their balcony. When Val turned away, moved by the restlessness of excitement, his way down the street was a triumph: the crowd divided to let him pass, cheered him, held out damp hands to be shaken, and strewn his path, so to speak, with smiles. He was received by his committee almost with embraces, with shaking of hands, and general tumult, half-a-dozen speaking together.

"All right, Mr Ross, all right! all right, my lord!" said one eager Castleton supporter. "The Lasswade men have come—Loanhead's

on the road—and there's a perfect regiment coming up the water. Hurrah for Ross, and fair play for ever! Pringle will have little to brag of his day's work."

"He'll have got us the best majority we've had yet," cried another; "it was too barefaced, and him the next heir." The room, which had been half empty, began all at once, no one knew how, to surge and overflow with enthusiastic supporters. Val felt himself tossed about on the crest of this wave of triumph. He began to get dizzy with excitement, with the sight of the groups pouring along the street towards the polling-booths, all in his interest, and with the agitation and tumult of talk about him. Long before the close of the poll his victory was secure.

But while the excitement of the crisis thus settled into assurance, another excitement rose in the young man's mind. All round him, loud and low, in every different tone, he heard the name of Pringle identified with the assault which had shaken all the foundations of his life. He had said nothing about its effect upon his mind;—had even postponed realising it, at his grandfather's entreaty, and the still greater urgency of circumstances, which compelled him

to put a bold face on the matter, and show no emotion to the world. But all the while he knew that the stroke, though he had no time to think of it, had struck at his very heart. He had not slept all the previous night; he had made such a tremendous effort of self-control as his young frame and undisciplined mind were scarcely capable of; and the reaction was beginning to set in. Every faculty, every feeling began to concentrate in the sense of injury which he had shut out of his mind by such an effort while necessity required it—of injury, and of that passionate impulsive rage which was the weak point of his character. From the moment when he fully realised who it was that had struck this dastardly blow at him, his blood had begun to boil in every vein. Pringle! that was the man—his pretended friend, his relation, a man who had smiled upon him, eaten with him, called him by friendly names, sought him out. I cannot tell how it was that Violet, and everything connected with her, disappeared altogether at this crisis from the young man's agitated mind. He never paused to think that it was Vi's father against whom his whole passionate soul rose up in one longing to punish and avenge.

She and everything gentle in his life disappeared and was swept away, the burning tide of fury being too strong for them. Before his confused eyes, while the very different scenes of the day were still going on around him, another panorama seemed to be passing, mixed up somehow with the actual events, the central figure in which was always this man, looking like a friend, yet preparing this deadliest sting for him. That burning sense of the intolerable which is in all human affairs the most intolerable of sensations, came upon Val with a force which he seemed helpless to resist. He felt that he could not bear this injury—he could not pass over it, let it go by as if it had not been. His arm tingled to make some stroke. An agitation of haste and anxiety to get through his present business, that he might be free for the other, took hold of him. He went on, doing everything required of him, smiling, shaking hands, speechifying, he could not tell what, answering to the necessities of his position like a man in a dream, and hearing a confused din in his ears of cheers and plaudits, of meaningless talk, congratulations, pæans of victory, through all of which he tried to rush, faster and ever faster,

longing to have it over, to get away—to fly at the throat of his enemy. And yet I don't think that he betrayed himself. He was excited, but what so natural?—and perhaps worn out with his excitement, to the eyes of one or two close observers. “Get him away as soon as you can—he's overdone,” Sir John said to the old lord. “Tut,” said Lord Eskside, himself feeling ten years younger in the fulness of his triumph, “no fear of Val ; his blood is up, and he can stand anything.” Thus the triumphant day came to an end.

The carriage stood in front of the Duke's Head, Lady Eskside and Mary Percival having already taken their places in it, awaiting the new Member and his party, who came up the street, a little murmuring crowd, buzzing forth satisfaction, pride, and mutual plaudits. Val was carried along in the midst of it, more silent than any, feeling almost at the end of his forces, and sick with eagerness to get free. It was at this unhappy moment that a party of young men, recently arrived, came down the street, meeting Valentine and his body-guard. The first of these was Sandy Pringle—the son, not the father. He had come straight from Edin-

burgh to ascertain the result of the election, knowing nothing whatever of all that had happened till he heard his own name in every mouth, denounced, by this time, by both sides alike. Sandy, as was natural, was deeply excited : he would not allow the universal censure. "If my father were here he would disprove it," he had been saying, but vainly. He came straight up in front of Lord Eskside upon the narrow pavement, blocking up the way with his broad shoulders and well-developed form. "Lord Eskside," he cried, "I appeal to you for justice. I hear my father's name in every mouth——"

"Stand aside, sir!" cried Val, in a voice so loud and harsh, and so full of emotion, that it seemed to silence every sound about him. The bystanders felt as one man that something was coming. All the young man's fictitious composure was gone, the veins were swollen on his forehead, his paleness changed into crimson, his eyes flashing fire. Sandy Pringle looked at him with angry surprise.

"I will stand aside when I please," he said—"no sooner. Lord Eskside, my father——"

"Oh, your father!" cried Val. He stepped

out from the group with a movement as swift as lightning. A few words were interchanged, too quick, too furious, for any one to recollect afterwards ; and before any of their friends could interfere,—before, indeed, the little group around could divine what was wrong—young Pringle, who was twice as heavy a man as his opponent, fell suddenly without a word, struck down by one tremendous blow. “Pass on, gentlemen,” cried Valentine, quivering with passion ; “no man shall stop Lord Eskside in the public streets while I am by !”

I must not attempt to describe the tumult which ensued, or how Val was surrounded and forced away by one party, and Sandy, who sprang to his feet with a mixture of amazement and rage which could not be put into words, was caught by another, everybody eager and vigilant as soon as the harm was done. “I am at Mr Pringle’s service, however he chooses and whenever he chooses,” cried Val, half mad with passion, as they hurried him away.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MR PRINGLE had prepared his stroke for years ; he had pondered it in his mind ever since he knew of Lord Eskside's hopes in respect to the election. He had written the letter itself over and over in his mind, getting a kind of secret joy out of it, all the more intense that nobody was in the least aware of this private vengeance of his own. Even now nobody was aware of it, except by conjecture. As it was intended for the gratification of his personal feelings rather than for the advantage of his party, he had taken none of them into his counsel : they were as much taken by surprise as were his opponents ; and when they had time to reflect and to see the state of public feeling, Mr Seisin and his party condemned and repudiated the attack, though for one moment they had hesitated over it, not sure whether a stroke so telling might not be

justifiable seeing that, politically speaking, the means are justified by the end. Finding, however, as was soon apparent, that it brought about no revolution in the feeling of the county, but rather the reverse, the party to which Mr Pringle belonged denounced and repudiated the performance as heartily as could be desired ; and Mr Seisin himself “ begged emphatically to protest against an attack so thoroughly against his principles, and trusted his honourable opponent would not connect himself or his party with any such anonymous slander.” This was clearly the *amende honorable* on Mr Seisin’s part ; and the Liberals turned as fiercely upon Mr Pringle for disgracing them, as their antagonist did for traducing their candidate. He was given up on all hands. I do not believe, however, that he either knew of, nor cared for this, at the moment at least. Something much more terrible had fallen upon the man—something which threatened him the moment he had let the winged shaft fly from his hand, but which came down with unimaginable force, now when it had flown into the world, never to be recalled. He had brooded over it, prepared it, taking a fearful joy out of the intention, for years ; but the moment

it was done, the man was penitent and ashamed. On the morning after its publication he was more completely struck down with horror and shame than even the family he attacked—so much so that he forgot to think of appearances, or to do anything which should divert suspicion from him. He who had taken so prominent a part hitherto did not even go to Castleton on the election day. He gave no vote; he abandoned his good name and his friends together. Some one of the old divines, in quaint familiarity with the Prince of Darkness, tells his readers, if I remember rightly, how Satan sometimes puts so big a stone into the hands of a sinner that it slays himself. This was what poor Mr Pringle had done. He might have got through a hundred little efforts of malice without much after-suffering, but this tremendous javelin struck himself first, not his enemy, to the ground.

The Hewan was a miserable house during the night previous to the election, after the letter, which was the source of all this trouble, came into it. “This is your writing, Alexander!” his wife had cried, when she read it. She waited for a denial, but none came. It was his writing, then! She had thought it, but she had hoped

to be contradicted. I dare not repeat what this good wife and upright woman said to her husband after so terrible a discovery. I should not like to describe such a punishment. Mrs Pringle fell upon the unfortunate culprit, in all the mingled wrath of his own wife, compromised by his personal disgrace, and Vi's mother, concerned for her child's happiness. "You have shamed us all ; you have put a stigma on my boys that years will not wear out ; and you have ruined my Violet, and broken her heart !" she cried, indignant. It was after this scene that poor little Vi, lonely and miserable, stole down through the rain, old Jean bearing her company, to beg Lady Eskside's pardon. No one knew of this forlorn expedition except old Mrs Moffatt, who knew that poor Vi was in trouble without knowing why. When Violet left the house her mother had retired to her room with a headache ; her father had shut himself up in the new dining-room. The house was wretched, and the child still more wretched. No such domestic commotion had ever happened before in the house. Violet had not known what to do. She had her private misery to swell to overbrimming the trouble which her friendly young soul

would have felt even in a case less intimately affecting her. She gave up her own happiness without a struggle, or at least so she thought, as she hastened down the rough paths through the woods, with her hood over her bright hair, and old Jean toiling after her with her big umbrella. She thought she gave it up without hope or question. Poor Vi! for when the old lady, who had always been so kind, made no movement of affection towards her, when she turned away without a sign, Violet felt for the first time all the bitterness of being without hope. She had meant to give Val up, and her happiness and her life—but, alas, poor little Violet! I fear she had not thought of being taken at her word. In her little breaking heart there had survived an unspoken hope that Lady Eskside would gather her up into her kind old arms, kiss her, forgive her, and make everything again as though this misery had never been. At twenty it is so easy to believe that everything can be made up, if only those who have the power could be persuaded to have the will also. It was not till Lady Eskside turned away that Violet felt that this thing was, and could not be mended. She rushed out again into the rain and night in a

real despair, of which her former anguish had only been the similitude. Wretchedly, in a silence which she could scarce keep from breaking with sobs, she fought her way through the rain among the bare trees, her eyes so full of bitter tears that she could see nothing. Ah, what a difference from the day before, when Val was by her side, whom her father had injured, striking at him cruelly in the dark, slandering him before all the world! "One thing is good, at least—it is soon over, soon over!" poor Vi said in her heart.

Next day this unhappy family met estranged, saying nothing to each other, and worn out with the tumult of the past night. Mrs Pringle waited, expecting her husband to set off to Castleton for the election all the morning through, but she would not condescend to ask him if he were going. He did not go. Shame had taken hold upon the man. He shut himself up in the room which he had built, and saw no one except at luncheon, when they met and sat down together, making a pretence to eat, without exchanging a word which could be avoided.

"How long is this to last, mamma?" said Violet, as they sat together on the embankment,

looking down the vale of Esk, with all its trees beginning to grow green, and the turrets of Rosscraig shining in the sun.

“How can I tell?” said Mrs Pringle; “as long as your father chooses, I suppose. God knows what has come over him, Vi. He has done this for his party, destroying all our peace of mind, and now he will not even go to give his vote. I do not know what can have come over him. Sometimes I think it must be illness,” said poor Mrs Pringle, drying her eyes. Compunctions were beginning to steal upon her too, and meltings of heart towards the sufferer.

“By this time it must be settled,” said Violet, looking down the valley with tears in her eyes which hid it from her, and with quivering lips; “and oh, mamma, if Val has lost!”

“He has not lost,—you may be sure of that,” said her mother. “But, Violet, my darling, don’t say Val any more. You must make up your mind that *that’s* all over, Vi. They would never suffer it—I could not myself in their place.”

Violet looked at her mother with her lips quivering more and more. “I know,” she said, with an attempt at a smile. Too well she knew.

She had not said anything about her visit to Lady Eskside. Why should she? Her heart was too sick and sore to be able to enter into prolonged confidences; and what was the use?

Sandy got home almost as soon as the Eskside party did with their four horses. He had thrown himself free as soon as he could of the friends who had flung themselves upon him to "hinder mischief," as they said. "Mischief? what mischief?" he cried, fiercely; "do you think I am going to make a fool of myself fighting a duel with Val Ross?" He was too dangerous an antagonist, notwithstanding the humiliation which, taken at unawares, he had sustained, to dispose any one to renew the quarrel on Val's behalf; and he had shaken them off and hastened home, possessed by many painful thoughts. It was not until he had got miles from Castleton on an unfrequented road that he ventured to stop and read the paper which, up to this moment, he had only glanced at. Deeply though he felt the affront he had received, I think the wound this paper gave him was deeper still. He too judged, as everybody did, that it was his father's writing, his father's attempt anonymously and under pretext of

serving his party, to give a deadly personal blow to the young man whom he had always looked upon as his own and his son's supplanter. Sandy's sense of humiliation, of bitter pain and discomfiture, grew as he approached home. How was he to meet his father, to meet them all ; for what more likely than that mother and sister in the heat of controversy had taken his father's side ? Every step he took towards the Hewan made him think less of Val's sin against him and more of his father's, which was a worse sin against him (Sandy) and all his brothers than it was against Val. The time of dinner was approaching when he reached the Hewan, and no one was visible. Sandy went to his room to dress, and I need not say that his mother went to him there and told him her story, and had his in return. They exchanged sentiments as they exchanged confidences ; for Mrs Pringle, forgetting her husband's offence, on which she had dwelt so long, was seized with a violent indignation against Val, who had insulted her boy. But Sandy, poor fellow, forgot Val's offence altogether, and forgave him, in horror of the greater offence. Never had there been such a dinner eaten by the Pringle family, who up to

this moment had been a model of family union. "I suppose you have heard how things went at Castleton," the father said, not looking at his son. "I have been there," said Sandy, pointedly, "and I am glad to say that Val Ross was returned by the largest majority that has been known since '32." "Glad! why should you be glad?" cried Mr Pringle; and this was all that was said. Afterwards, when he withdrew again into his loneliness, Mrs Pringle's heart failed her. She had never quarrelled with her husband before, and she could not bear it. She went to the room where he had shut himself up, and after an hour or two emerged again tearful but smiling. During this interval the brother and sister were left alone, and Sandy told Violet his story, over which she wept, poor child, crying, "Oh, dear Sandy!" and "Oh, poor Val!" "I think you think as much of him as you do of me," her brother said, not knowing whether to be offended with Violet, or to take the side of his assailant too.

"Oh, Sandy, have I not reason?" cried poor Vi, hiding in her soft heart the deeper reason which only her mother knew. "Was he not always like another brother to me—and to us all?"

“That’s true,” said Sandy, softened and thoughtful; “he was always fond of you.”

This was balm to poor Vi, who could suffer herself to cry a little when Sandy was so ignorant and so kind. “He was fond of—us all,” said Violet; “do you mind how good he was to the children? Never till now was he unkind to any one. I am sure he is like to break his heart already for what he has done.”

“He must say so then. He was a hasty beggar always,” Sandy admitted, “and it was enough to drive a man out of his wits; but why should he have laid hands on me? What had I done? You are a girl, Vi, you don’t understand; but, by Jove! to stand being struck—by another fellow, you know.”

“And hadn’t he been struck, and far deeper? Oh Sandy, only think—all that about his mother, and about his coming here! I don’t think he knew of it, or remembered. And to be exposed to the whole county, everybody, all these great people, and all the poor folk—everybody! Oh, poor Val, poor Val!”

Sandy was half inclined to cry too, he was so miserable. He got up and walked about the room, his mind disturbed between the insult to

himself and the far deeper insult which Val had first received.

Violet got up too after a while, and stole her arm softly within his. "What shall you do?" she said, looking up to him with her appealing eyes.

"Oh, Vi, how can I tell?" cried the young man. "I'd like to kick him, and I'd like to go down on my knees to him. What am I to do? Till to-day I would have stood up for Val Ross against the world. Why did he insult me before everybody? I forgive him; but I know no more what to do than you can tell me. One thing," he said, with a short laugh of disdain, "I certainly shall not make a fool of myself, and fight a duel, which is what I suppose he meant. I am not such a ridiculous idiot as to do that."

"A duel!" cried Violet, with a suppressed scream, holding fast by his arm.

"No, I am not such an idiot as that," said Sandy; "though I suppose that is what he must have meant."

"He did not know what he was saying," said Violet. "Oh, Sandy dear, you are brave enough and strong enough to be able to forgive him. Oh, Sandy, will you forgive him? I should not

be quite so miserable to-night if you would promise : forgive him, that he may forgive poor papa."

"Why should you be so miserable, Vi?" said her brother, looking earnestly into her face; but fortunately for poor Violet, her mother here made her appearance, and the conversation was stopped. The girl stole away to her little room soon after—the room with the attic window which commanded the view of Esk and its valley, which had been hers since she was a child. It was a moonlight night, and the sometimes golden turrets of Rossraig shone out silvery from among the clouds of leafless trees. Vi pretended to be asleep when her mother came into her room on her way to her own, feeling unable to bear another word; but after that visitation was over, the girl got up in her restlessness and wrapped herself in her warm dressing-gown, and sat by the window watching the steadfast cloudless shining of that white moon in the great, blue, silent heavens, over the dark and dreamy earth. How different it was from the sunshine, with all its sudden gleams and shadows, its movements of life and mirth, its flutterings and happy changes! The moon was as still as death, and as unchange-

able, throwing her paleness over everything. The girl's sad soul played with this fancy in a melancholy which was deep as the night, yet, like the night, not without its charm. She sat thus so long that she lost note of time, too wretched to go to bed,—sleepless, hopeless, as she thought ; now and then looking wistfully at the silver turrets, thinking, oh if she could only speak one word to Val ! only say good-bye to him, though it must be for ever. Notwithstanding these thoughts, it was with a pang of fright beyond description that she saw, quite suddenly, a dark figure rising over the dyke on to the little platform upon which the Hewan stood. Violet was so much alarmed that it did not occur to her who it was who thus invaded the safe retirement of the place in the middle of the night. She would have screamed aloud had she not been too much frightened to scream. Was it a ghost ? was it a robber ? She forgot her misery for the moment in her terror ; then suddenly felt her misery flood back upon her heart, changed into a desperate joy. It was no ghost nor robber, but Val, poor Val. He climbed up noiselessly and sat down upon the edge of the dyke, with his face turned to the house—in all that quiet,

silent, lifeless world, the only living thing, doing nothing to attract attention, scarcely moving, looking at her window in the moonlight. She watched him for a time, with her heart leaping wildly to her mouth. All was perfectly still, the household asleep, not a stir to be heard anywhere but that of the soft night-wind sighing through the trees. Her heart yearned over her young lover in the pathetic silence of this night-visit, which seemed made without any hope of seeing her, without hope of anything—only, like herself, out of the sick restlessness of misery. She opened her window softly, and put out her head. When he saw this, he rose with a start and came towards her. The night-wind blew softly, the trees rustled, a whisper of sound was in the air, like the breath of invisible spectators standing by.

“Oh, Val, is it you!”

“It is me,” said Val. “I came to look at your window before I went away.”

“Where are you going?” she whispered in alarm.

“Somewhere. I don’t know; I don’t care,” said the lad. “I cannot bear it. How can I face the world any more? I wish I could die

and be done with it all ; but you can't die when you please. I wanted to say good-bye to you somehow. Vi, dear Vi, don't forget me altogether ; and yet it would be better that you should forget me," he added, drearily. Oh, if she had been but near to him to console him ! It was hard to hear him speak in this miserable tone, and have no power so much as to touch his hand.

"How can you speak of forgetting ?" said poor Vi ; "as if I could ever forget ! But, Val, I know you ought not to think of me any more."

"I wish I might not think of anything long," he said. "God help us, Vi ! everything seems over. Tell Sandy I am sorry I struck him. I was mad. He can call me a coward if he likes, and say I ran away."

"Oh, Val, Sandy is sorry too ; he would ask your pardon too. Val, for pity's sake try and think of us no more ; but don't go away—don't go away !" cried Vi.

Another faint sound, as of some one stirring in the house, here caught the ears of both. Val looked up in the moonlight, which shone for a moment upon his face, holding out his hands and waving a farewell to her. "Good-bye, good-

bye," his moving lips seemed to say; or was it a tremulous kiss they sent her through the sorrowful sighing night? In another moment he had disappeared as he came. Vi sat trembling and weeping silently at her window, watching him disappear into the darkness—trembling as if with guilt when she heard another window thrown open, and the sound of her mother's voice. "I am sure I heard a step on the gravel," Mrs Pringle said, looking out. But the white moonlight shone so full and broad over the cottage and its surroundings, that it was evident no nocturnal visitor was there. "I suppose it must have been my imagination," she added, drawing in her head, and bolting and barring the window. It was long before Violet dared do the same, or dared to make even so much noise as rise from her chair. She sat there half the night through, crying silently, chilled and miserable. Only two nights before, how happy had she lain down!—happy as a child—far happier than any queen! and now it was all over. Even Val himself saw and acknowledged that it was so;—all over, as if it had been a tale read out of a book; and how soon the longest tale comes to an end!

Violet told her mother next morning of this nocturnal visit. She would rather, had she dared, have told Sandy, and kept it back from her mother, who was too angry in consequence of Val's assault upon her son to do him full justice—but dared not, fearing her brother's questions, to which she could give no answer. And then dead silence—one of those blank intervals of existence which are perhaps the hardest to bear—fell upon the poor little girl at the Hewan. When the rest of the family went back to Edinburgh, she begged to be allowed to stay behind for a day or two. I cannot tell for what reason, for probably Vi would have been less miserable at home among her brothers and her occupations. But at Vi's age one does not wish to forget one's misery—one prefers to take the full good of it. She secured that advantage, poor child! After the events, which had crowded on each other, came silence and stillness, so complete that they weighed upon her like a positive burden, not a mere negation of movement or sound. The long spring days, bright and cold—the long days of rain, when she stood at the window and watched the showers falling over the valley with all its trees, some-

times crossed by a sunbeam, and gleaming under it, but most frequently falling in a mist of moisture, dull, persistent, untouched by any light. Even the news of the village scarcely reached her, and nearly a week elapsed before Violet heard as a piece of public news that Mr Ross had been obliged to leave home on business—that he had not even been present at the great dinner at Castleton, which was given in honour of his election. But not even Mary Percival came up to the Hewan through the woods in that first week of silence, which almost killed Vi. They were all too angry, too deeply offended, and at the same time too anxious about Val, concerning whom Lady Eskside smiled and told stories of the urgent business which compelled his absence, but of whose whereabouts they knew nothing, and had heard nothing since the night when he went away.

CHAPTER XXX.

ON the evening of the day after the election, Richard Ross, in Florence, received two telegrams,—one from his father, announcing the result of the election, sent off from the nearest telegraphic station, in Lord Eskside's own name, and with full official pomp. The other was from Edinburgh, from "Catherine Ross," asking "Is the boy with you? He has left us, and we don't know where he has gone. Write at once, or come." These two announcements threw the clearest light upon each other to Richard. He said to himself that what he had predicted had happened—that his son had been assailed by the story of his birth, and that in shame and rage he had fled as *she* did. Valentine had not paid his father that long visit for nothing. The *dilettante* had found out that he was a man after all, with some remnants in him of human

feeling. A man's child brings back this consciousness more easily than his parents do, by some strange law of nature which is very hard upon the old. Probably had Richard gone back to Eskside, he would have been impatient of the old house and its unchangeable order before he had been two days there, and as glad as ever to get away. But Valentine had interfered with none of his habits; he had amused him, he had aroused a spark of paternal pride in his mind, which was so little affected by such emotions; and when the boy went away he missed him, and wondered at himself for doing so. And he had taken an interest of a much stronger character than he could have believed possible in the election. He said to himself now, that he knew and had always predicted what would happen, and a pang of anxiety sprang up within him, the strangest feeling to make itself felt within the polished bosom of a man of the world. Tut! he said to himself; what was he anxious about? a boy who was not a simple rustic from the country, but a man of Eton and Oxford, "up" to everything. He laughed at his own weakness. That very night he was dining out at a brilliant party, the most brilliant that could be collected in the

highest circle of Florence at the time of her last revived and temporary magnificence. He was astonished at himself to think how dull he found it. The ladies were less fair, the talk less witty, the diamonds less bright, than he had ever known them. What was the matter with Richard ? “ You look depressed and out of sorts,” some one said to him next morning. “ Oh no, not I ; it is a bad dinner I had yesterday.” A bad dinner ! He trembled after he had said it, wondering if perhaps his questioner would take the trouble to inquire where he dined. But it was not the dinner which was in fault. He felt himself asking himself in the midst of it—where was the boy ? what had become of him ? What might Valentine have done if he had been assailed by something specially hard to bear ? He was uneasy and restless all night, slept badly, and again asked himself, as soon as he woke, where was the boy ? “ Confound the boy ! he can take care of himself better than I could,” Richard said to himself under his breath ; but all his reasoning did nothing for him. He was anxious, uneasy, as parents so often are ; his imagination in spite of him strayed into a thousand wonderings ; he had to call himself back, even when in

the middle of a despatch, from those ridiculous questionings about Val ; and at last the commotion in his mind became more than he could comfortably bear.

Nor was it only Valentine who had roused the life which had half congealed within his father's veins. The photograph which chance had thrown into his hands had not been without its effect in rousing him. When he murmured *maladetta!* between his closed teeth, he was as much in earnest as a man can be when he looks, disenchanted, and with all the glamour gone out of his middle-aged eyes, upon the fair face, no longer so fair, which had made havoc with his youth. But somehow the knowledge that he had that scrap of paper in his desk affected Richard in a way which no one who knew him could have believed possible. He had no portrait of her—nothing by which he could recall her face ; and this glimpse of her—so unexpected, so changed, and yet so unmistakable—the face of the woman who was her, yet not her—the same creature whom he had married, yet another being of whom he knew absolutely nothing—had moved him as I suppose nothing else connected with her could have done. He

would have been as intolerant now of any attempt to recall his affections to her as when Lady Eskside tried, and failed, to rouse him to interest in his wife. Even had any other creature been aware of the existence of the portrait—had any one known that he had kept and secured it, and would take it out now and then, with a half sneer on his face, to look at it, when he was certain no one could disturb him—Richard would have been as hard, as unyielding, as defiant as ever. But the fact that no one knew opened his heart so far. Sometimes he would say to himself with a curious subdued laugh, “ Looks as if she had been a lady ! ” The thought filled him with a strange amusement, a satirical sense of the incongruities of life. She whom it had been impossible to tame into any semblance of quiet, vagrant-born and vagrant-bred, a wild creature of the woods as long as she was in the atmosphere where a lady’s demeanour was necessary ; and now, in a sphere where it was not necessary—where it brought remark upon her—facing him with that still look, which (he could not deny) was full of a wild gravity and dignity ;—he laughed at the strange thought, but the sentiment his laugh expressed was not

mirthful: it was the only way in which he could embody the grotesque sense of confusion and bewilderment that rose in his mind. Would she bear that same aspect of dignity, he wondered, if he saw her? Would she know him at a glance, as he had recognised her? Did she know Val? The little picture was like a romance to him. It worked upon him as nothing in his life had done for years.

Did she know Val?—how curious was the inquiry!—had she any intentions, any hopes, about the other boy—he whose figure, stooping on the little pier to push off somebody's boat, was all his father knew of him? His father! Can you imagine, dear reader, the strange thrill that went through the man of the world, in spite of himself, when he thought of this “other boy”? The elegant calm of the accomplished diplomatist, who had lived for nothing but the State and society, fine talk and fine people, and pictures and china, for years, was completely disturbed and broken up by this invasion of unusual thought, and something which he tried to persuade himself was simply curiosity and not feeling. He had written at once, as I have said, to his confidential solicitor, bidding him to in-

quire into all the particulars he had learned from Val, and to ascertain the facts in strictest secrecy, without doing anything to awaken the woman's suspicions, and to keep an eye upon the mother and son, taking care that they did not escape him again, but were always within reach if wanted. When he had done this, he thought that he done all it was his duty to do. They did not require anything from him—neither help nor supervision. They had sufficed to themselves for so many years, and doubtless could do so still ; and all that *he* wanted (he said to himself) was to know where to lay his hand upon them for Val's sake—to be able to prove his complete identity at any moment. For this purpose it was enough to know where the mother was, and to take care that she never again stole out of their ken, either by her wandering tastes or by the final way of death. This was all that was necessary in Val's interest. And yet, after a while, it did not content Richard. He felt an uneasiness take possession of him ; not that he wanted anything to say to the woman who had worked him so much harm, or wished to acknowledge and bind to himself the uncultured young tradesman, who was his son

also as well as Val. No instinct of paternity moved him here. "The other boy" could, he was sure, be nothing but a bore to him—a creature whom he must be ashamed of. A girl might have been different,—might have been capable of training; but a boy who had spent all his youth as, at best, a working man, earning his bread day by day—no, he could not suppose himself to be moved by any inclination towards these unknown persons. He was only anxious to know where they were, to be able to lay his hand upon them when necessary, nothing more. All that he desired was that they should remain unknown in the condition they had chosen, neither troubled by him nor troubling him, only ready to be produced on Val's behalf, should that be needful. What other feeling could he be expected to entertain.

But, reasonable as all this sounded, some disturbance, for which he could not account, had got into Richard Ross's soul. He could not tell what he wanted. Movement he supposed, change, even the bore of giving up the life he preferred, and visiting home, and seeing with his own eyes what had happened and what was happening. He would not like it, he knew,

when he was there, but still, perhaps, it would do him good to go. His digestion (he thought) must have got out of order—a certain monotony had crept into his life. That which he possessed seemed less desirable than usual; that which was out of his reach more attractive. The telegram about Val gave the last touch to his uneasiness. Yes, he thought it would be better to go. He could bring Val to his senses, no doubt, better than anybody else could, and it would please the old people, and the change would be good for his own health. He made up his mind quite suddenly, and concluded all his arrangements in twenty-four hours, and set out for England. But in order to do what he intended quite effectually he made a curious *détour* on the way. He went to the little village on the coast where his children had been born. I think it was the lovely little town of Santa Margherita, on the eastern Riviera, or some other of the little glimpses of Paradise there. The children had been baptised by the English chaplain from Genoa, and he turned aside to get the register of their baptism with a business-like precaution for which he smiled at himself. He felt that he could do this more quietly, with less likelihood

of attracting curiosity, in his own person, than if he had done it by letter. He got the copy and attestation properly drawn out and in full legal form, and carried them away with him, without even examining the packet, intending to hand it over to his father, whose orderly soul would be satisfied. And thus prepared and ready for any emergency, he went home.

He found only his mother at Rossraig. The old lord had gone, very unhappy and anxious, to London, hoping for some news of the boy. He had now been nearly a week absent, and nothing had been heard of him; and Lady Esk-side met her son with worn looks and a miserable excitement, which already seemed to have worn her strength out more than the pressure of years had done. Even in the act of welcoming her son, her eyes and ears were on the alert, watching doors and windows with feverish eagerness. "I know I am foolish," she said, with a wan smile; "for, indeed, Val is well enough able to take care of himself, as you say. He is not a rustic—no, nor a simpleton, nor one unused to the world. No, Richard, I know: nothing of all that. Of course, his training has just been of the kind to make him able to take

care of himself ; and for a young man at his age to be away from home a week is nothing so wonderful. Yes, yes ; you are right. I know you are right, and I am foolish, very foolish ; but I cannot help it, my dear—it is my nature. You can't reason anxiety down. Oh, I wish I could help it ! I know I am unjust to my poor Val."

"Well, mother, boys will be boys, and they must have their swing, you know," said Richard, despising himself for the words without meaning, which were no more satisfactory to himself than to her. "Besides, I suppose he has always been a steady fellow hitherto," he added, "which should make you less anxious now."

"Oh, always, always," she cried, almost with tears ; "no one could be more trustworthy. My poor old lord is very unhappy, Richard ; he is as foolish as me ; because he has always been so good, we think he should continue the same for ever—never step out of the beaten path for a moment, or take his own way ;" and she tried to laugh at her own foolishness, but breaking down in that, was so much nearer crying that she walked to the window instead, and looked out with an eager wistfulness that

had become habitual to her, looking if possibly some one at that very moment might be arriving with news.

“Does anybody know?” he asked.

“We have taken every precaution,” said Lady Eskside. “We gave it out he had been called away by you on family business. I drove into Edinburgh myself, and went to the telegraph office on foot, Richard, and gave them the family name—no title, as you would see, that the telegraph people might not know—for how could I tell if they might spread it? I don’t think anything is suspected out of doors, but I could not say for the servants. They always find out what is doing. They read it in your face, in the hour you go to bed, in the way you take your dinner. That Margaret Harding knows I am unhappy is plain enough; but I am not sure that she knows what is the cause.”

“Oh, you may take that for granted too,” said Richard; “they find out all one is thinking. Never mind, mother; everything in this world is like the dew. It dries up and disappears, so that you could not tell where it had been. Now tell me what clue you have, and where you think he is likely to have gone.”

“ We have no clue at all,” said the old lady. “ Had he gone to see any of his friends we should have heard of him ere now ; and had he gone abroad, Richard, he would have gone to you. That is one of the hardest things of all—we don’t know where to look for him. Your father is in London, wandering about.”

“ Did you ever think of Oxford ? ” said Richard.

“ Oxford ? — what would he do in Oxford ? He has no friends he is fond of there. His friends were lads of his own standing, who left Oxford when he did. It never occurred to me ; but, my dear, if you think it’s a likely place, we’ll send there at once.”

Lady Eskside put out her hand to ring the bell. If Siberia or Egypt had been suggested to her, I think she would have rung the bell all the same, and directed some one at a half-hour’s notice to go.

“ What are you going to do, mother ? do you mean to send Harding to Oxford to look for Val ? ”

She smiled a forlorn smile as she saw the foolishness of her instinctive movement ; and then Richard explained to her that he would

go, having some reasons of his own for thinking it possible that Val might have gone to Oxford, as well as some business to do there in his own person. "But you will let no business detain you if you do not find the boy?" Lady Eskside said, and listened with an impatience she could not conceal while Richard explained that business must be done whatever Valentine might do. "Besides, you don't think that a young man like Valentine—a newly elected member of Parliament, and your grandson—can be lost like a child, mother?" he said, half laughing, though he was not without anxiety too. I am afraid the old lady felt his ease, and gentle way of taking this tremendous calamity, jar upon her; and she was so anxious that he should set out at once to look for her lost child, that Richard was affronted too, and with some reason. He was less annoyed by her evident preference of Val to himself than he had been fifteen years ago; but it still struck him half whimsically, half painfully. He remained all night after his long journey, almost against her will. She could think of nothing but Val; and when he was ready to start next day, all that she said and seemed to think was about her dar-

ling. "You will telegraph to me at once, if you hear anything? Oh, my dear, think how hard it is to be left here in the quiet, hearing nothing, not able to do anything, but wait!" she said; and was restless all the morning, and afraid that he would be late for the train. Richard could not help making a few reflections on the subject as he went away. He was not so deeply attached to his son as to tremble for his safety as Lady Eskside did: and he was not so much devoted to his mother as to feel very deeply her abandonment of himself altogether, and substitution of Valentine in his stead. But in his comparative calm he noted and made reflections on the subject more than he could have done had his interest been more deeply engaged. It was a curious psychological inquiry to him;—and at the same time he felt it a little. It gave him an odd prick which he had not expected. "After all," he said to himself, "the Palazzo Graziani is the place for me."

He set out for Oxford about noon. His mother could scarcely forgive him that, because of mere unwillingness to be disturbed a little earlier than usual, he had missed the early train. "Oh," she said to herself, "when would I have

been kept from my boy for the sake of an hour's longer lie in the morning!" She was relieved to get him out of the house at last, bearing a hundred messages for Val if he should be found, and under solemn charges to telegraph at once to her the result of his mission—glad, very glad, to get him out of the house, though he was her only son, whom she had not seen for years. I suppose few things could make a man feel more small than the fact that his mother was absolutely indifferent to him,—could scarcely even see him, indeed, except by the borrowed light of his son. Richard went away smiling to himself over this curious fact, but slightly wounded at the same time, and set off for Oxford with many thoughts in his heart. He was letting himself drift unconsciously to the place in which that woman was. Should he see her? and if he saw her, should he make himself known to her? or what would happen? He could not tell. There was no love, not even the ashes of a dead one, in his heart. What could that love be which Richard Ross once felt for a tramp-girl, without education of any kind—a fair weed without any soul? It had dried up and left no remnant behind. But he was curious, very curious; what

had time done, perhaps, for the creature whom *he* had been able to do nothing for ? Looks as if she had been a lady once." These careless words of Val's had influenced his father more than anything more serious. He wanted to know how this strange result had come about.

Lady Eskside watched the carriage roll over the Lasswade bridge, on its way to the railway station ; and after it had passed, still sat musing at the high window of the turret, from whence she could see it. She saw people, too far off to be distinguishable, passing the bridge from time to time, and watched them with a feverish anxiety till she could see which way they took—the road to Rossraig, or away on the other side to the village, and to Castleton. She thought no longer of her son, her Richard, who had once been the most important object in the world to her. Her heart went past him, impatiently thinking of another more dear—of her boy who was in danger or trouble somewhere, the child of her heart and her old age. While she still sat thus musing, with a sick heart and longing eyes, at the window, she heard Harding's slow steps, with his creaking boots, come toiling up-stairs to call her. There had been so many

false alarms, that she sat still languidly with her hands crossed in her lap, and her eyes still fixed on the bridge, till he came to the door of the turret-room, and it was only when her ear detected something strange in the sound of his voice that she looked round. Harding certainly did not look himself; he had a startled half-scared expression in his eyes, and his rosy cheeks were paled, as with a tint of blue over the pink. "If you please, my lady,"—he began in a tremulous voice.

"What is it, Harding?" She rose up very alert and ready, trembling too, but not showing it, for she had not taken any one into her confidence, nor permitted it to be seen how anxious she was.

"There is a young—gentleman down-stairs, my lady; wishes to speak to you—if you please."

"A young gentleman! who, Harding?"

"I don't know, my lady; leastways, his face it is familiar to me, I won't deny, but I can't put a name to it. It's familiar to me, but I don't know as I ever saw him before."

"How can you know him, then?" said my lady, trying to smile; "you have perhaps seen

a picture in these days when everybody is photographed. And, Harding, what does he want with me?"

"Very likely your ladyship is right," said Harding; "everybody has their photograph, it is true. I'd like to know what your ladyship thinks. I've put him in the morning-room to wait."

"If he is a gentleman, you should have taken him to the library or the drawing-room," said Lady Eskside, going calmly down-stairs. I wonder if it is any news? she said to herself, and did not, I think, give any further attention to old Harding's apparent curiosity about the visitor. What time had she to think about any stranger, except to consider whether he brought her news or not? and quite likely it was but some tradesman from Edinburgh—some indifferent person. She turned round as she went down-stairs to ask if he had given his name.

"He said his name was Brown; but your ladyship wouldn't know it, as he was a stranger to your ladyship," said Harding. This quickened Lady Eskside's step. It might then be news after all.

The little morning-room was small and bare,

a room in which tradespeople and visitors on business were received. Over the mantelpiece there hung a boyish portrait of Val, an indifferent picture, banished here as not worthy a place elsewhere. When Lady Eskside entered the room, her visitor had his back to her, looking at this picture. He did not hear her come in, and she stood a second, silent, waiting till he should observe her; but getting impatient, said hastily, "You wanted to see me?"

"I beg your pardon," said the young man, turning sharply round. Good God! who was it? The old lady fell back as far as the wall would let her, with a loud cry. She held out her hands, half holding him off, half inviting his approach. "Who are you? who are you?" she cried, her heart leaping to her throat.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," said the youth. He did not know whether he ought to have said "my lady," and hesitated. "I hope I have not frightened you. I came to say that Mr Ross——"

Was it possible that Val, her darling, had gone out of her mind in that moment of wonder? She scarcely heard what he said, though they were words which would have raised her to the

height of excitement had any one else said them. She came forward to him with the same wild wonder in her eye, with her hands uplifted. "For God's sake, boy, who are you? who are you?" she said.

Richard had gone away from her only an hour before, a middle-aged man for whom her feelings were scarcely those of a mother's impassioned love; yet here Richard stood before her, her true Richard, the boy who had been her adoration and her pride a quarter of a century ago. Her head reeled; the light swam in her eyes; life seemed to turn round with her; and everything became a dream. "For the love of God! who are you?" she cried.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.