

THE  
STORY OF VALENTINE  
AND HIS BROTHER

BY  
MRS OLIPHANT  
AUTHOR OF 'CHRONICLES OF CARLINGFORD,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS  
EDINBURGH AND LONDON  
MDCCCLXXV

*ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN 'BLACKWOOD'S MAGAZINE'*



# THE STORY OF VALENTINE; AND HIS BROTHER.



## CHAPTER XXXI.

WHEN Valentine disappeared in the moonlight from the Hewan, his mind was in a state happily very unusual to youth, but to which youth adds all the additional bitterness of which it is capable. He was not only outraged, wounded to the quick, every comfort and consolation taken from him for the moment, but his heart and imagination had no refuge to fall back upon, no safe shelter which he could feel behind him whatever might happen. Everything he was familiar with and every being he loved was involved in the catastrophe that had overwhelmed him. In other circumstances, had anything equally

dreadful befallen him at home, he would have had his young love to fall back upon, and his tender, sympathising Violet, whose soft eyes would have given a certain sweetness even to misery itself ; or had Violet failed him, he might have had at least the tender peacefulness of the old home, the old people who adored him, and to whom he was all in all. But in this horrible crisis everything seemed gone from him. The very thought of home made his heart sick ; he had been shamed in it, and made a shame to it ; and poor Lord Eskside's kind mistaken assurance, so tenderly and solemnly made, that in his own mind there was not a doubt of Val's identity, had almost broken the poor young fellow's heart. Heaven above ! what must his condition be, when his grandfather, the old lord himself, whose idol he was, had to say this to him ? When the recollection recurred to Val, it was with all the fainting sickness of soul with which a deathblow is received. It was not a deathblow, but in his misery this was how he felt it. And Violet was separated from him, it seemed for ever, by her father's enmity and unprovoked assault ; and if that had not been enough, by his own mad assault upon Sandy, who, he knew well enough,

was his friend, and would never have harmed him. This completed, he felt, his isolation and miserable loneliness ; he had nowhere to turn to for relief. Once indeed he thought of his father ; but had not his father prophesied to him how it would be ? and could he go now and tell him all had happened as he prophesied, and yet expect consolation ?

Thus poor Val felt the ground cut from under his feet ; he had nowhere to turn to, no one to fall back upon. For my part, I think this makes all the difference between the bearable and the unbearable in human trouble. This is what clothes in armour of proof a man who has a wife, a woman who has a child. Something to fall back upon, something to turn to, whatever your ill is, to find support, backing, consolation. Poor boy ! he gazed round him with hot eyes, hopeless and unrefreshed, and saw nowhere to go, no one to throw himself on. It was not that he doubted the love of his grandparents, who had never given him a moment's cause to distrust them ; but there it was that his wound had been given him, and he wanted to get away, to get away ! to look at it from a distance and see if perhaps it might be bearable—but found nowhere

to go to, no one to receive him. And the kind reader must remember what blood Val had in his veins before he condemns him—wild blood, oftentimes almost more than he could struggle against even in his calmest moments, and a heart full of chaotic impulses, now fired by misery and left to torment him like a pack of demons. He did not know what to do, nor what he wanted to do ; but something must be done, and at once, for to keep still was impossible. Therefore as movement was the best thing for him at all events, he walked to Edinburgh through the moonlight, through the tranquil country roads, on which he met no one, through still villages where all the world was asleep. Now and then a watchful dog, roused by the passing step, barked at him as he went along, which seemed somehow to give him an additional conviction of being a castaway, abandoned by all the world—but that was all. Deep silence surrounded him, a still, soft night, but chill with a cold that went to his heart ; and the moon was cold and the world slept, and nobody cared what Valentine might do with himself—Val, who had been so loved, so cared for, and who was so sure three days ago that the whole world took an interest in him, and, in its heart, was on his side !

I do not know precisely why he went to Oxford—probably because he was accustomed to go there, and it gave him less trouble to think of that place than of anywhere else when the moment came to decide where he was going—for I don't think it was any conscious recurrence of mind to friendly Dick and his mother. He was too unhappy to remember them. Anyhow he went to Oxford—where he arrived half dead with fatigue and misery. He had not eaten, he had not slept, since Lord Eskside gave him that paper in the library, and he had been subject to all the excitement of the election while in this state. He went to bed when he got to the hotel, to the astonishment of the inn people, for he had not even a bag with him, no change of dress, or any comfort—and spent the night in a confused stupor, full of dreams, which was not sleep. Next morning he got up late, went down to the river side, hardly knowing what he was about, and got into a boat mechanically, and went out upon the river. As it happened, of all days in the year this was Easter Monday, a day when many rude holiday parties are about, and when the Thames is generally avoided by well informed persons. It was crowded with boats and noisy parties, heavy boatloads, with rowers unfit for

the responsibility they had undertaken—the kind of people who cause accidents from one year's end to another. Val did not think of them, nor, indeed, of anything. I doubt even whether he was capable of thought : his pulse was galloping, his head throbbing, his eyes dull and red, and with an inward look, seeing nothing around.

Unfortunately, as it happened, Dick was not on the wharf at the moment to notice who was going or coming, and was quite unaware of the presence of his young patron. Dick's mother, however, was standing in her little garden, looking out over the wall. She had no one to look for now, but still her eyes kept their wistful habit, and the even flow of the stream and perpetual movement seemed to soothe her. She was standing in her abstracted way, one arm leaning upon the little gate, gazing without seeing much,—not at the familiar Thames, but into the unknown. She came to herself all at once with a start, which made the gate quiver : came to herself ? nay—for herself, poor soul, had not much share in her thoughts then—but came back to consciousness of the one thing which seemed to give life a certain reality for her. All



in a moment, as if he had dropped from the skies, she saw Valentine stepping into his boat ; how he had come there, where he was going, she could not tell ; but there he stood, wavering slightly as he stepped into the light outrigger, swaying it dangerously to one side, in a way very unlike Val. Her heart sprang up in her breast, her whole nature came to life at the sight of him, and at something, she could not tell what, in the look of him—something uncertain, helpless, feeble. Her figure lost its droop, her head its musing attitude. She stood alert, in the intensest eager attention and readiness for everything, watching her boy.

Val paddled out into the stream, poising his long oars, I cannot tell how, in a vague uncertain way, as if he did not well know which end of them was in his grasp. Then he let himself float down past her, feebly steering himself, but doing little more ; and then some sudden idea seemed to come to him—or was it rather a cessation of ideas, a trance, a faint ? He stopped his boat in the middle of the crowded river, and lay there with long oars poised over the water—wavering, reflected in it like the long dragon-fly wings—his figure bent a little forward, his face,

so far as she could see it, blank and without expression. There he came to a dead stop, of all places in the world—in the middle of the stream, in the middle of the crowd—taking no notice of passing boatmen who shouted to him, “Look ahead !” and had all the trouble in the world to steer their course about him and keep out of his way. A thrill of strong anxiety came into the woman’s mind—anxiety such as had never moved her before. Heretofore she had been passive, doing nothing, taking no active part in any one’s affairs. This stir of life was such that it set her into sudden energetic movement almost unawares. She went outside her gate, and closed it behind her, watching intently, her heart beating high in her breast, and a sense as of some coming emergency upon her. There he sat in his boat, lying still upon the shining water, the long oars with a faint flutter in them as if held in unsteady hands, not straight and motionless as they ought to be—and crowds of unwary boats, ignorantly managed, stumbling about the stream, boats all ripe and ready for an accident, with people in them shouting, singing, jumbled together. There was a small green eyot, a bundle of waving willows, nothing more, just in front of

Valentine's boat, which was a partial shield to him ; but what had happened to Val that he lay thus, taking no precaution, with the long oars trembling in his hands ?

"Look ahead there ! look ahead, sir !" cried the men on the river. Val never moved, never turned to see what it was. What did it matter to him (the watcher thought), a capital swimmer, if anything did happen ? How foolish she was to be afraid ! Just then a great lumbering boat, with four oars waving out of it in delightful licence and impartiality, like the arms of a cuttlefish, full of holiday folk, came up, visible behind the eyot. There was a jar, a bump, a shout. "It aint nothing, he swims like a duck," cried some voice near her. She could not tell who spoke ; but through the dazzle in her eyes she saw that the long oars and the slim boat had disappeared, and that the holiday party—shouting, struggling about the river—were alone visible. Swim ? Yes, no doubt he could swim ; but the woman was his mother—his mother ! She gave a great cry, and rushed with one spring into the punt that lay moored at the steps immediately in front of her door. She was not like one of you delicate ladies, who, all the same,

would have done it too, had your boy been drowning. She knew how to do a great many rough, practical things. She pushed the big boat into the stream, and with her big pole, flying like a mad creature, was under the green willows looking for him before any one else could draw breath.

And it was well for Val, poor boy, that though he did not know it, his mother was by, with divination in her eyes. The best swimmer on the Thames could not have contended with the stupor of fever that was on him. When his boat was upset, rousing him out of a bewildering dream, he gave but one gasp, made one mechanical clutch at something, he knew not what, that was near him, and then was conscious of nothing more. His limbs were like steel, his head like lead. There was no power in him to struggle for his life. The boatmen about who knew him did not stir a step, but sat about in their boats, or watched from the rafts, perfectly easy in their minds about the young athlete, to whom a drench in the Thames was nothing. Only the woman, who was his mother, knew that on that particular day Val would sink like a stone. She was at the spot with the punt before any one knew what

she was doing, but not before one and another had asked, calling to each other, "Where is he? He is too long under water. He don't remember it's March, and cold." "He'll get his death of cold," said one old boatman. "Man alive!" cried out another, jumping over the boats that lay drawn up upon the rafts, "out with a boat! —he's drowning. Out with your boat!"

What Val had clutched at was the root of one of the willows. He caught it without knowing, clenched it, and when he sank, sank with his drooping head on the damp soil of the eyot—into the water to his lips, but yet supported and moored, as it were, to life and safety by the desperate grasp he had taken of the willow. There the woman found him when she reached the spot. He had fainted with the shock, and lay there totally helpless, the soft wavelets floating over his dark curls, his face half buried in the soft, damp soil, like a dead man, making no effort to save himself. She gave a cry which echoed over all the river. People a mile off heard it, and shivered and wondered—a cry of longing and despair. But before even that cry had roused the echoes, several boats had shot forth to her aid. The men did not know what

had happened, but something had happened ; they came crowding about her, while she, half sunk in the soft slime, dragged up in her arms out of the water the unconscious figure. She had his head on her arm, holding him up, half on land half in water, when they got to her. She was paler than he was, lying there upon her, marble white in his swoon. “Is he dead?” they said, coming up to her with involuntary reverence. She looked at them piteously, poor soul, and held the inanimate figure closer, dragging, to get him out of the water. Her pale lips gave forth a low moan. No one asked what right this strange woman had to look so, to utter that hopeless cry. No one even said, “He is nothing to her ;” they recognised the anguish which gave her an unspoken, unasked right to him, and to them, and to all they could do. And nothing could be easier than to draw him from the river, to place him in the punt, where she sat down beside him, and with a gesture of command pointed to her house. They took him there without a word. “Carry him in,” she said, and went before to show them the room. “Go for a doctor.” They obeyed her as they would have obeyed Lady Eskside herself. They thought

Val was dead, and so did she. She stood and looked at him, when they rushed away to get help for her, in a misery of impotence and longing beyond all words to say. Oh, could she do nothing for him! nothing! She would have given her life for him; but what is a poor mother's life, or who would accept so easy a ransom? She could only stand and gaze at him in hopeless, helpless, miserable anguish, and wring her hands. She did not know what to do.

Fortunately, however, the doctor came very speedily, and soon engaged all her powers. He turned away the good fellows who had fetched him, and called the servant from the kitchen. "Quick, quick! every moment he remains in this state makes it worse for him," said the man, who knew what could be done; and, though he was kind and pitiful, had no sword on his breast piercing him through and through. Val came back to life after a while, and to semi-consciousness. She had not expected it. She had obeyed the doctor's orders in a stupor, docile but hopeless; but what a tumult, what a tempest woke and raged in her as she saw life come back! She kept quiet, poor soul, not daring to say a word; but her joy worked through her veins like

strong wine ; and she felt as if she could scarcely keep standing, scarcely hold her footing and her composure against the rapture that seemed to lift her up, to make a spirit of her. Saved ! saved !—was it possible ? She had borne speechless the passion of her anguish, but it was harder to fight with and keep down the tumult of her joy.

“Come here,” said the doctor, speaking in peremptory tones, as it was natural when addressing a person of her class. “I want to speak to you down-stairs. Sit down. Have you any wine in the house ? where do you keep it ? Be still, and I’ll get it myself. Now take this ; what’s the matter with you ? Did you never see a man nearly drowned before ?”

“No,” she said, faintly, keeping up her struggle with herself. She wanted to cry out, to laugh, to dance, to shout for joy ; but before the man who eyed her so strangely, she had to keep still and quiet. She put the wine aside. “I don’t want anything,” she said.

“Your pulse is going like a steam-engine,” said the doctor ; “cry, woman, for God’s sake, or let yourself out somehow. What’s the matter with you ? Can’t you speak ?—then cry !”



She sank down on her knees ; her heart was beating so that it seemed to struggle for an exit from her panting, parched lips. "I think I'm dying—of joy !" she said, almost inaudibly, with a sob and gasp. "Poor creature, that is all you know," said the doctor, shaking his head ; "he is not round the corner yet, by a long way. Look here, do you know anything about nursing, or do you often give way like this ? On the whole, I had better have him moved at once, and send for a nurse."

"A nurse !" she said, stumbling up to her feet.

"Yes, my good woman. You are too excitable, I can see, to look after him. There's something the matter with him. I can't tell what it is till I see him again. Who is he ? but how should you know ? He had better go to the hospital, where he can be well looked to——"

"Sir," she said, eagerly, "I'm myself now. I am not one to get excited. I thought he was dead ; and you brought him back ; God bless you ! He has been as good as an angel to my boy. I'll nurse him night and day and never give way. Let him stay here."

"You are not strong enough ; you'll get ill

yourself," said the doctor. "Then you know who he is? Be sure you write to his friends at once. But he'd much better go to the hospital; you'll get ill too——"

"No, no," she said; "no, no. I never was ill. It was I who got him out of the water. I'm strong; look, doctor, what an arm I have. I can lift him if it's wanted. Let him stay; oh, let him stay!"

"Your arm is all very well, but your pulse is a different thing," said the doctor. "If you go and fret and excite yourself, I'll have him off in an hour. Well, then, you can try. Come and let us see how he is getting on now."

"They are as like as two peas," he said to himself, as he went away. "He's somebody's illegitimate son, and this is his aunt, or his sister, or something, and he don't know. God bless us, what a world it is! but I'd like to know which he's going to have, that I may settle what to do."

## CHAPTER XXXII.

I AM afraid I cannot tell any one "which" it was that poor Val had, not having any medical knowledge. He was very ill, and lay there for the week during which Dick was absent on his master's affairs, knowing nobody, often delirious, never himself, unable to send any message, or even to think of those he had left behind, who knew nothing of him. He talked of them, raved about them when his mind wandered, sometimes saying things which conveyed some intelligence to the mind of the anxious woman who watched over him, and often uttering phrases which she listened to eagerly, but which were all blank and dark to her. Poor soul! how she watched, how she strained her ear for every word he said. Her own, thus, once more; thus at last in her hands, with none to come between them; dependent on her—receiving from her the tend-

ance of weary days and sleepless nights. Receiving from her, not she from him—eating her bread even, so to speak, though he could eat nothing—living under her roof—dependent on her, as a son should be on a mother. I cannot describe the forlorn sweetness there was to her in this snatch of nature, this sudden, unexpected, impossible crisis which, for the time, gave her her son. I do not know if it ever occurred to her mind that the others who had a right to him might be wondering what had become of their boy. Even now her mind was not sufficiently developed to dwell upon this. She thought only that she had him—she, and no other. She closed her doors, and answered all questions sparingly, and admitted nobody she could help ; for what had anybody to do with him but she ? When the doctor asked if she had written to his friends, she nodded her head or said “ Yes, yes,” impatiently. His friends ! who were they in comparison to his mother ? They had had him all his life—she had him for so short a time, so very, very short a time !—why should any one come and interfere ? She could get him everything he wanted, could give up all her time to watch him and nurse him.

Once she said, when the doctor pressed her, "I have let his mother know;" and he was satisfied with the reply. "If his mother knows, of course it is all right," he said. "Oh yes, yes," she cried, "his mother knows;" and what more was necessary? She had not the faintest intention of revealing herself to him afterwards, of taking the advantage of all she was doing for him. No! it seemed to her that she could die easier than say to Val, "I am your mother;" a subtle instinct in her—delicacy of perception communicated by love alone—made her feel that Val would receive the news with no delight—that to be made aware that she was his mother would be no joy to him; and she would have died rather than betray herself. But to have him there, unconscious as he was, "wandering in his mind," not knowing her, or any one—but yet with her as if he had been a baby again, dependent on her, receiving everything from her! No words can say what this was. She passed the time in a strange trance of exquisite mingled pleasure and pain; suffering now and then to see him ill, to feel that he did not know her, and if he knew her, would not care for her; suffering, too, from the sleepless

nights to which she was totally unaccustomed, and the close confinement to one room, though scarcely realising what it was that made her head so giddy and her sensations so unusual ; but all the time and through all the suffering rapt in a haze of deep enjoyment—a happiness sacred and unintelligible, with which no one could intermeddle ; which no one even knew or could understand but herself. She had no fear for Valentine's life ; though the doctor looked very grave, it did not affect her ; and though her brain was keen and clear to understand the instructions he gave, and to follow them with pertinacious, unvarying, almost unreasoning exactitude, she did not study his looks, or ask with brooding anxiety his opinion, as most other women in her circumstances would have done. She never asked his opinion, indeed, at all. She was merely anxious, not at all afraid ; or if she was afraid, it was rather of her patient getting well than dying. The doctor, who was the only one who beheld this strange sickbed, was more puzzled than tongue could tell. What did the woman mean ? she was utterly devoted to the sick man—devoted to him as only love can be ; but she was not anxious, which love always

is. It was a puzzle which he could not understand.

In a week Dick came back. He had been away on his master's business, being now a trusted and confidential servant, with the management of everything in his hands. It was Easter week, too, and his business had been combined with a short holiday for himself. His mother was not in the habit of writing to him, though she did, in some small degree at least, possess the accomplishment of writing—so that he came home, utterly ignorant of what had happened, on one of those chilly March evenings when the light lengthens and the cold strengthens, according to the proverb. Dick was tired, and the landscape, though it was home, looked somewhat dreary to him as he arrived; the river was swollen, and muddy, and rapid; the east wind blanching colour and beauty out of everything; a pale sunset just over, and a sulen twilight settling down, tinting with deep shadows and ghastly white gleams of light the cold water. He shivered in spite of himself. The door was not standing open as usual, nor was there any light in the little parlour. He had to stand and knock, and then, when no one

answered, went round to the back door (which was his usual entrance, though he had chosen the other way to-night) to get in. The kitchen was vacant, the maid having gone to the doctor's for poor Val's medicine. Dick went into the parlour, and found it dreary and deserted, looking as if no one had been there for months. Finally, he went up-stairs, and found his mother at the door of a bedroom coming to meet him. "I thought it must be you," she said, "but I could not leave him." "Leave him? Leave whom, mother? what do you mean?" he said, bewildered. "Hush, hush," she cried, looking back anxiously into the room she had just left; then she came out, closing the door softly after her. "Come in here," she said, opening the next door, which was that of his own room. "I can speak to you here; and if he stirs I'll hear him." Dick followed her with the utmost astonishment, not knowing what his mother meant, or if she had gone out of her wits. But when he heard that it was Mr Ross who lay there ill, and that his mother had saved his young patron's life, and was now nursing him, with an absorbing devotion that made her forget everything else, Dick's mind was filled with a strange tumult of

✱



feeling. He showed his mother nothing but his satisfaction to be able to do something for Mr Ross, and anxiety that he should have everything he required ; but in his heart there was a mixture of other sentiments. He had not lost in the least his own devotion to the young man to whom (he always felt) he owed all his good fortune ; but there was something in his mother's tremulous impassioned devotion to Valentine that had disturbed his mind often, and her looks now, engrossed altogether in her patient, thinking of nothing else, not even of Dick's comfort, though she knew he was to return to-day, affected him, he could scarcely tell how. When he had heard all the story, he laid his hand kindly on her shoulder, looking at her. "You are wearing yourself out," he said ; "you are making yourself ill. But it's all right ; to be sure, when he was taken ill like this, he could go nowhere but here."

"Nowhere," she said with fervour. "Here it's natural ; but never mind me, boy, I'm happy. I want nothing different. It's what I like best."

"I'll just step in and look at him, mother."

"Not now," she said quickly, with an instinct of jealous reserve. She did not want any one to

interfere—not even her boy. Then she added—  
“He’s sleeping. You might wake him if he heard another step on the floor. Go and get your supper, Dick ; you’re tired—and maybe after, if he wakes up——”

“Is there any supper for me ?” said Dick, half laughing, but with a momentary sensation of bitterness. He felt ashamed of it the moment after. “Go in, go in to him, mother dear,” he said. “You’re in the right of it. I’ll go and get my supper ; and after that, if he wakes I’ll see him—only don’t wear yourself out.”

“I do nothing but sit by him—that’s all ; doing nothing, how could I wear myself out ?” she said. “But oh, I’m glad you’re home, Dick ; very glad you’re home !”

“Are you, mother ?” Dick said, with a vague smile, half gratified, half sceptical. Perhaps she did not hear him, for she was already in Val’s room, watching his breathing. Dick went downstairs with the smile still upon his face, determined to make the best of it—for after all Mr Ross had the best right to everything that was in the house, since, but for him, that house would never have belonged to Dick at all. He called the maid, who had come back, to get him his

supper, and stepped outside while it was getting ready, to take counsel of the river and the skies, as he had done so often. It was now almost dark, and the river gleamed half sullen, under skies which were white and black, but showed no warmer tinge of colour. Heavy clouds careered over the blanched and watery firmament—a dreary wind sighed in the willows on the eyot. They did not give cheery counsel, that river and those trees. But Dick soon shook off this painful jealousy, which was not congenial to his nature. What so natural, after all, as that she should give her whole mind to the sufferer she was nursing, even at the risk of momentarily neglecting her son, who was quite well, and could shift for himself? Dick laughed at his own foolishness, and felt ashamed of himself that he could have any other feeling in his mind but pity and interest. He stole up, after his meal, to look into the sickroom, and then the tenderest compassion took possession of him. Val was lying awake with his eyes open but seeing nothing—noticing no one. Dick had never seen him otherwise than in the full flush of strength and health. A pang of terror and love took possession of him. He thought of all Val had done

for him, since they met, boys, on the river at Eton, generously exaggerating all his boy-patron's goodness, and putting his own out of sight. The tears came to his eyes. He asked himself with awe, and a pang of sudden pain and terror, could Valentine be going to die? His mother sat quite motionless by the bedside, with her eyes fixed on the patient. There was in her face no shadow of the cloud which Dick felt to be hanging over the room, but only a curious dim beatitude—happiness in being there—which the young man divined but could not understand.

Dick stole down again quietly to the little parlour, where his lamp gave a more cheerful light to think by than the eerie river. It would be absurd were I to deny that his mind had been troubled by many painful and anxious thoughts touching the connection of his mother with the Rosses. He thought he had come to a solution of it at last. In his class, as I have already said, people accept with comparative calm many things which in higher regions would be considered very terrible. Dick had made up his mind, after many thoughts, to a conclusion such as would have horrified and driven desperate a man differently brought up. He concluded that

most likely Val's father was his own father—that his mother had been very young, beautiful, and easily deceived, and that he himself was the son of this unknown “gentleman.” Dick was not ashamed of the supposed paternity. It had given him a pang when he thought it out at first; but to a lad who has been born a tramp, things show differently, and have other aspects from that which they bear to the rest of the world. Putting feeling aside, this was what he thought the most probable solution of the mystery; and Val, she knew, was this man's son, and therefore he had a fascination for her. Probably, Dick thought, with a little pang, Val was like his father, and reminded her of him; and it did wound the good fellow to think that his mother could forget and set aside himself for the stranger who was nothing to her, who merely reminded her of a lover she had not seen for years and years. When he thought of his own problematical relationship to Valentine, his heart softened immensely. To think that it was to his brother he owed so much kindness—a brother who had no suspicion of the relationship, but was good to him out of pure generosity of heart and subtle influence of nature, was a very affect-

ing idea, and brought a thrill to his breast when it came into his mind.

These were the conclusions he had hammered out by hard thinking from the few and very misty facts he knew. Some connection there clearly was, and this seemed so much the most likely explanation. Dick thought no worse of his mother for it ; he knew her spotless life as long as he could remember—a life remarkable, even extraordinary, in her class—and his heart swelled with pity and tenderness at thought of all she must have come through. He had too much natural delicacy to ask her any questions on such a subject ; but since he had (as he thought) found out, or rather divined this secret, it had seemed to account for many peculiarities in her. It explained everything that wanted explanation—her extraordinary interest in Val, her fear of encountering the lady who had been with him, her strange lingerings of manner and look that did not belong to her class. Dick thought this all over again, as he sat in the little parlour gazing steadily into the lamp ; and, with a strange emotion in which pain, and wonder, and pity, and the tenderest sympathy, were all mingled together, tried to make himself

master of the position. His lip quivered as he realised that in reality it might be his brother, his father's son, who lay unconscious in the little room up-stairs. No doubt Val was like his father—no doubt he recalled to the woman, who had once been proud (who could doubt?) of being loved by a "gentleman," the handsome, noble young deceiver who had betrayed her. But Dick did not use such hard words; he did not think of any betrayal in the case. He knew how tramp-girls are brought up, and only pitied, did not blame, or even defend, his mother. It seemed to him natural enough; and Val no doubt recalled his handsome father as homely Dick never did and never could do. Poor Dick! if there was a little pang in this, it was merely instinctive and momentary. The thought that Val might be—nay, almost certainly was—his father's son, half his brother, melted his heart entirely. He would have sat up all night, though he was tired, if his mother had permitted him. His brother! and in his ignorance, in his youthful kind-heartedness, how good he had been! They had taken a fancy to each other the moment they set eyes upon each other, Dick remembered; and no

wonder if they were brothers, though they did not know. The good fellow overcame every less tender feeling, and felt himself Val's vassal and born retainer when he thought of all that had come and gone between them. He scarcely slept all night, making noiseless pilgrimages back and forward to the sick room, feeling, unused as he was to illness, as if some change might be taking place for better or worse at any moment ; and though he had as yet no real clue to the devotion with which his mother watched the sufferer, he shared it instinctively, and felt all at once as if the central point of the universe was in that uneasy bed, and there was nothing in the world to be thought of but Val.

"Mother, you've sent word to—his friends?" Dick had some feeling he could not explain which prevented him from saying "his father." This was early next morning, when she had come out to say that Val was asleep, and had spent a better night.

She looked at him with a look which was almost an entreaty, and shook her head. "No—don't be vexed, Dick ; I'm bad at writing—and besides, I didn't want no one to come."

"But they must be anxious, mother. Think !



if it had been yourself ; and you know who they are. If it wasn't far off in the north I'd go."

"Ah," she said, with a gasping, long-drawn breath—"If it must be done, that's the way, Dick. I'm bad at writing, and a letter would frighten 'em, as you say."

"I didn't say a letter would frighten them. Mother, I can write well enough. It's Lord Eskside—I recollect the name. Tell me where, and I'll write to-day."

"No," she said, "no ; a letter tells so little—and oh ! I don't want 'em to come here. There's things I can't tell you, boy—old things—things past and done with. You've always been a good son, the best of sons to me——"

"And I'll do anything now, mother dear," said poor Dick, moved almost to tears by the entreaty in her face, and putting his arm round her to support her ; "I'll do anything now to give you a bit of ease in your mind. You've been a good mother if I've been a good son, and never taught me but what was good and showed me an example. I'll do whatever you would like best, mother dear."

He said this, good fellow, to show that he found no fault with her if it was shame that

kept her from speaking to him more openly. But she who had no shame upon her, no burden of conscious wrong, did not catch this subtle meaning. She was not clear enough in her mind to catch hidden meanings at any time. She took him simply at his word.

"Dick," she said softly, entreating still, "he's better—he'll get well—why shouldn't he get well? he's young and strong, the same age as you are—a bit of an illness is nothing when you're young. He'll get well fast enough; and then," she said, with a sigh, "he'll go and tell his people himself. What is the use of troubling you and me?"

Dick shook his head. "They must be told, mother," he said. "I'll write; or if you like, I'll go."

She gave a long weary sigh. She was reluctant, he thought, to have any communication with those unknown people, Val's father, and perhaps his mother, some great lady who would have no pity for the woman thus strangely thrown in her son's path. This was quite natural, too, and Dick, in his tender sympathy with her, entered into the feeling. His tenderness and compassion made a poet of him; he

seemed to see every shade of emotion in her disturbed soul.

"Mother, dear," he said again, still more gently, "you don't want to have aught to do with them? I can understand. Tell me where it is and I'll go. The master will let me go easy. We're not busy yet. I'll see the doctor, and go off directly; for whether you like it or not, it's their right, and they ought to know."

"Well, well," she said, after a pause, "if it must be, it must be. I've never gone against you, Dick, and I won't now; and maybe my head's dazed a bit with all the watching. It makes you stupid like."

"You'll be ill yourself, mother, if you don't mind."

"And if I was!" she cried. "If they take him, what does it matter? and they're sure to take him. Dick, it's like taking the heart out of my bosom. But go, if you will go."

"I must go, mother," he said, sorrowfully. This passion was strange to him—hurt him even in spite of himself. Because Val was like his father! The depth of the passionate interest she had in him seemed so disproportionate to the cause.

But when Dick saw the doctor, he was more and more determined to go. The doctor told him that in another week the crisis of the fever might come—one week had passed without any change, and the sufferer was embarked upon the dark uncertain tideway of another, which might be prolonged into another still ; but this no one could tell. “ I thought your mother had let his friends know—she told me so,” he said. “ They ought to be made aware of the state he is in,—they ought to be here before the week is out, when the crisis may come.”

“ But you don’t think badly of him, doctor ?” said Dick, with tears in his eyes. The mother had never asked so much, the doctor reflected ; and he felt for the young man who felt so warmly, and was interested in the whole curious mysterious business, he could scarcely tell why.

“ Your mother is a capital nurse,” he said, assuming a confidence he scarcely felt, “ and please God, he’ll pull through.”

“ Oh, thank you, doctor !” cried honest Dick, drying his eyes, and feeling, as do all simple souls, that it was the doctor who had done it, and that this vague assurance was very sure. He went to see Valentine after, who, he thought, gave him a

kind of wan smile, and looked as if he knew him, which Dick interpreted, knowing nothing about it, to be a capital sign ; and then he extorted from his mother directions for his journey. Reluctantly she told him where to go.

“ Oh, Dick,” she said, “ you’ll do it, whether I will or not—and there’s things will come of it that you don’t think of, and that I don’t want to think of ; but don’t you name me, boy, nor let ’em know about me. Say your mother—I’m just your mother, that’s all. And if they come I’ll not see ’em, Dick. No, I’m not going away ; don’t look scared at me. I haven’t it in me now to go away.”

“ Take care of yourself, mother,” he said ; “ don’t watch too long, nor neglect your food. I’ll not be long gone ; and *I’ll* take care of you whoever comes ; you needn’t be afraid.”

She shook her head, and followed him with mournful eyes. She did not know what she feared, nor what any one could do to her ; but yet in her ignorance she was afraid. And Dick went away still more ignorant, determined to keep her secret, but feeling in his superior knowledge of the world that it was a secret which no one would care to penetrate. “ Gentlemen ”

seldom try, he knew, to find out a woman thus abandoned, or to burden themselves with her, or any others that might belong to her. He smiled even at the idea. "They"—and Dick did not even know who they were—would think of Val only, he felt sure, and inquire no further. He was still more completely set at rest when he discovered that it was Val's grandmother he was going to see—the old lady who had sent him a present when he was a boy, by Valentine's hands. Dick somehow had no notion that this old lady was in any way connected with himself, even assuming, as he did, that his own divinations were true. She was a stranger, and he went quite calmly into her presence, not doubting anything that might befall him there.

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

RICHARD ROSS left Lasswade as Dick Brown entered it, totally unconscious of him or his errand. They passed each other on the bridge,—the father in the carriage, with his servant on the box, and a hundred delicate comforts about him; the son trudging along the muddy road, somewhat tired from jolting all night in a third-class carriage, but refreshed by the “good wash” which, almost more than his breakfast, had set him up again to encounter strangers. He was well dressed, in something of the same mode as Val, whose coats he had worn when he was a lad, and whom he unconsciously copied; and though there was something about him which indicated his lower position, or rather an absence of something which externally marks “a gentleman,” his open countenance and candid straightforward look gave the merest stranger who looked at him

a confidence in Dick, and conferred upon him a distinction of his own. Richard Ross, however, did not so much as notice the young man as he drove to the railway. He was not anxious about Val in the sense in which his mother was anxious ; but his mind was strangely disturbed and jumbled—turned upside down, so to speak. All the common conditions of life had changed for him ;—his repose of twenty years was broken, and his thoughts sent back upon the early beginning of his career, when he was so different a man. To be driven back at forty-five to the thoughts and feelings of twenty-five, how strange it is !—and stranger to some men than to others. To those who have lived but little in this long stretch of existence the return costs less ; but Richard Ross had not changed by the action of years only—he was another man ; everything in him was altered. And yet he was going back, as it were, to twenty-five, to look at the passion and folly and infatuation of that period of his existence ; but with the interval so clearly marked, not only in himself, but in all the others concerned.

Richard was not old, nor did he feel old : in himself he was conscious, not of decay, but of



progress. He looked back upon himself at that early ago, not with envy, as so many men of the world do, but with a wondering contempt. What a fool he had been ! Was it possible that he could ever have been such a fool ? Or must it not rather have been some brother, some cousin, some other, not himself, who had been such an idiot ?—some visionary man, whose faults somehow had fallen upon *his* shoulders ? This was the feeling in his mind, though, of course, he knew very well that it was an absurd feeling. And then, with a curious wonder and bewildering sense of suppressed agitation, he remembered that he was going to see *her*. Should he know her after three-and-twenty years ?—he had recognised her picture, which was strange enough ;—and would she know him ? And must they meet, and what would they say to each other ? There had never been very much to say, for she was incapable of what he called conversation ; and, except words of fondness and attempts at instruction, it had been impossible for him, a cultivated and fastidious man, to have any real intercourse with the wild creature of the woods whom he never even succeeded in taming. What should he find to say to her now, or she to

him ? The inquiry thrilled him strangely, giving him that bewildering sense of unreality which mixes so deeply in all human emotion. His brain seemed to turn round when he thought of this possible interview. Was she a real being at all, or was he real who was thinking ? Had that past ever been ? Was it not an imagination, a dream ? Ah ! it does not even require such a long interval as twenty years to bring this strange giddiness on the soul. That which we have lost, did we ever have it ?—the happiness, the life, the other who made life and happiness ? I know some houses now, occupied by strange people, whose very names I can't tell you, where yet I feel my own old life must be in full possession of the familiar place, while this dim ghost of me outside asks, Did it ever exist at all ? Richard felt this all the more strongly that he was not an imaginative man by nature. He felt his head swim and the world go round with him, and would not believe that the young fool who had borne his name three-and-twenty years before, was or could have been *him*. But yet he was going to see *her*, the other dream, in whom there was not, nor ever had been, any reality. On the whole, instead of perplexing himself with such thoughts

it is better for a man to read in the railway, if he can manage it, even at the risk of hurting his eyes, which require to be *ménagés* at forty-five; or if that will not do, to close his eyes and doze, which is perhaps, where it is practicable, the best way of all.

He got to Oxford the next day in the afternoon—another pale, somewhat dreary afternoon of March, typical day of a reluctant spring, with dust in the streets, and east wind spreading a universal grey around, ruffling the river into pale lines of livid light and gloomy shade, and pinching all the green buds spitefully back to winter again. Heavy clouds were rolling over the heavens when he made his way down to the wharf. His old Oxford recollections and Val's indications guided him. He knew the boating wharf of old, though he had never himself been aquatic in his tastes. And there was the little house with its narrow strip of garden towards the river, in which a few sickly primroses were trying to flower. No one had thought of the garden since Val's accident, and already it had a neglected look. "Who lives there?" he asked of a bargeman who was lounging by. "It's Brown's, as is head man at Styles's," was the

answer. "Head man at Styles's! I thought a woman lived there," said Richard. Then he suddenly recollected himself. "I had forgotten the boy," he added, under his breath. How strange it was! and this was his son too—his son as well as Val! But, to tell the truth, for the moment he had forgotten the boys, the known and the unknown. He had forgotten that Val was lost, and that he had come here in search of him. He was only conscious, in a strange suppressed haze of excitement, that probably she was within these walls—she—the woman of whom he had said *maladetta*; of whom Val had said that she looked as if she had been a lady. This strange notion made him laugh within himself even now.

It was about five in the afternoon, still good daylight, though the day was a dim one. The maid, who was but a maid-of-all-work, and no better than her kind, had taken advantage of the entire absence of supervision, and was out somewhere, leaving the garden-gate and front-door both open. Richard went up to the door with a certain hesitation, almost diffidence, and knocked softly. He did not want to have any one come, and it was a relief to him when a suf-

ficient interval had elapsed without any response, to justify him, as he thought, in going into the house. Then he stepped across the threshold, casting a glance behind to see if any one outside observed him; and seeing no one, he went in—first to the little parlour, which had been “cleaned up,” fortunately, that morning. It was a strange little room, as I have already said, with tokens in it of instinctive good taste struggling against circumstances. Richard closed the door behind him, and looked round it with a curious irregularity in his heart’s beats. He sat down, somehow not feeling equal to anything more, and gazed at those little familiar evidences of the kind of being who had been living here. It was, in reality, Dick who had left his traces all about, but Richard Ross knew nothing about Dick, and had at the present moment very little curiosity as to that unknown and unrealised person. He thought only of *her*: somehow Val’s description, at which he had laughed within himself so often, and at which still he tried to laugh feebly, seemed less impossible here. A lady might have lived within these four walls, at the little window which looked out upon the river. The arrangements of the room—its books (which no one

read), its pretty carvings and nicknacks (for which Dick alone was responsible)—fitted into the conventional idea of a poor gentlewoman's tastes, which even Richard, though he ought to have known better, had received into his mind. The embroidered shawl which covered the little table caught his eye as it had caught his mother's—he, too, remembered it; and that undoubted sign of her made his heart beat loudly once more.

He seemed to be all alone in the solitary house—there was not a sound: he had come in and taken possession, and nobody offered to interfere with him. After a little time, however, he began to realise that the position was rather a strange one; and recovering himself from the curious spell under which he had fallen, he opened the door softly and listened. Then it seemed to him that he heard some faint stir up-stairs. Accordingly he went up the narrow winding staircase, feeling somehow that in this place he could go where he would, that it was not the house of a stranger. He went up, wondering at himself, half bold, half hesitating, and opened the first door he came to. It was the room in which Valentine lay sick—his boy whom he

sought. Richard opened the door softly. Everything was very still in it. The patient slept; the watcher, poor soul, in her exhaustion, perhaps was dozing by him, lulled by the profound quiet; or else her brain was confused by the long nursing, and was not easily roused except by the patient, whose lightest movement always awakened her attention. And the light was dim, the blind drawn down, every possibility of disturbance shut out. Richard stood like one spellbound, and looked at them. His heart gave a wild leap, and then, he thought, stood still. He recognised Val in a moment, and so perhaps had some anxiety set at rest; but indeed I doubt whether, in the strange excitement in which he found himself, anxiety for Val told for much. She sat by the bedside in a large old-fashioned chair high-backed and square-elbowed, which made a frame to her figure. Her eyes were closed, but the intent look in her face, which gave it an interest even to the mere passer-by, was there in a softened form, giving a pure and still gravity, almost noble, to its fine lines; the hair was smoothed off her forehead; the white kerchief, which was her usual head-dress, tied loosely about her head; her hands, glimmering white

in the partial darkness, crossed upon her lap. Richard stood still, not daring to breathe, yet catching his breath and hearing his heart beat in spite of himself, afraid to disturb her, yet wondering what she would say to him, how she would look at him when she was roused, as she must be. He was much and strangely agitated ; but the reader must not suppose that it was any wild renewal of old love, any passion, or even the agitation of longing and tenderness, which so moved him. He was curious beyond anything he could say—troubled by the sight of her, strangely eager to know what kind of being this was. She was another from the girl he had known, though the same. She of time past had been a wild thing out of the woods, not much above the birds or other woodland creatures. All her humanity, all her development of mind and heart, had come since then ; and of this human soul, this developed being, he knew nothing, absolutely nothing ; and a thirst came upon him to find out, the intensest curiosity to know, what manner of woman she was.

All at once she opened her eyes and saw him ; but did not start or cry, for, waking or sleeping, Valentine was her first object, and she would not



have disturbed him had all heaven and earth melted and given way round about her. She opened her eyes and saw a man looking at her. She raised her head, and knew who it was. The blood rushed back to her heart in a sudden flood, making it beat hard and loud against her side, taking away her breath; but she did nothing more than rise softly to her feet and look at him. Yes, it was he. She knew him, as he had known her, at once. She had expected him. Without any knowledge where he was, or how he could hear, she had yet felt sure that he must come. And therefore she was scarcely surprised; she had the advantage of him so far. She knew him, though to him she was an unknown creature—knew him ignorantly, not having been able to form any judgment of his character; yet had as much acquaintance with him as her mind was capable of; while he had no acquaintance with her. She rose up to meet him, and stood wistful, humble, yet with something which looked like pride in her erect figure, and that face which had changed so strangely since he knew it. They stood on either side of the bed upon which their son was lying, scrutinising each other in that strange pathetic gaze. Were there things

to be repented of, even in her dim soul ?—I cannot tell. She did not think of judging herself. What she felt was that he was here, that she was in his power, and all that was hers ; that she was not strong enough to resist him, whatever he might do ; that the known and actual had come to an end for her, and all the future was dark in his hands. A dim anguish of fear and impotence came over her. He might send her away from the boy ; he might change her life all at once as by the waving of a wand. She looked at him piteously, putting her hands together unawares ; but while she was thus startled into painful life, plunged into the anxious disquietude of ignorance, roused to fear and uncertainty, not knowing what was to be done with her, she was at the same time incapacitated from any evidence of emotion, silenced, kept still, though her heart beat so ; speechless, though the helpless cry of appeal was on her lips—because she would not wake Val who was sleeping, and, whatever she might be capable of otherwise, could not, would not, disturb the weary rest of the boy.

At length he waved his hand to her impatiently, calling her to follow him out of the room. He did not know what to say to her.

Words had gone from him too, though from other reasons; but he could not stand there, however bewildering were his feelings, looking at this woman, who was so familiar to him and so unknown. She followed him noiselessly, not resisting, and they stood together on the narrow landing outside, close to each other, her dress almost touching him, her quick breath crossing his. What were they to say to each other? She was not capable of embarrassment in the simplicity of her emotions. But Richard standing by her, man of the world as he was, was totally helpless in this emergency. His gaze faltered; he turned his eyes from her; he trembled, though only he himself was conscious of it. To be so close to her affected him with a hundred complicated feelings. What could he say? Faltering, his lips scarcely able to form the confused words, he asked faintly, "How long has he been ill? how long has he been here?"

"Ten days," she answered, briefly. She did not hesitate, nor cast down her eyes. She answered with a kind of despairing calm; for to be sure it was certain he would take the boy away, and she had nothing else in her mind. Her own standing in respect to him—the atti-

tude of his mind towards her—her position in the world as it depended on him—all these were nothing to her. She was thinking of the boy, of nothing else.

“He has been very ill; what is it? Have you a doctor for him?” said Richard, getting used to the suppressed sound of his own voice. He was speaking like a man in a dream, struggling against some necessity which forced him to say this. It was not what he wanted to say. Had he been able to manage himself, to do as he wished, he would have said something to her very different—something kind—something to show her that he was not sorry he had seen her again—that he was not angry, but came to her with friendly feelings. But he could not. The only words he could manage to get out were these bare business-like questions, which he might have put to a nurse—only that if she had been a mere nurse, a stranger who had been kind to his boy, Richard would have been full of gratitude and thanks. He felt all this, but he could not help it; and the more he wished to say, the less he said.

He felt this to the bottom of his heart; but she did not feel it all. She took the questions quite

naturally, and answered them with calm simplicity. "The doctor comes twice a-day. He'll be here soon. I cannot keep the name of it in my mind. Sitting up of nights makes me stupid like ; but when he comes, you'll hear."

Then there was a pause. She stood before him, with her hands clasped, waiting for what he was going to say. She had no thought of resisting or standing on her rights, for had she not given up the boy long ago?—and waited with keen but secret anguish for the sentence which she believed he must be about to pronounce. The door was open behind her. While she stood waiting for Richard's words, her ear was intent upon Val, ready to hear if he made the slightest movement. Between these two things which absorbed her, she was completely occupied. She had no leisure to think of herself.

But he who was alive to all the strange troubles of the position, at what a disadvantage he was ! His embarrassment and overwhelming self-consciousness were painful beyond description, while she was free from self altogether, and suffered nothing in comparison. While she stood so steadily, a tremulous quiver ran through

his every limb. He was as superior to her as it is possible to conceive, and yet he was helpless and speechless before her. At last he made out, faltering, the confused words, "Do you know who he is?"

"Yes, I know," she said, with a panting breath. A gleam of light came over her face. "I have known him ever since he was a boy. He's been Dick's friend. No lad had ever a better friend. They took a fancy to each other the first day. I heard his name—it's seven years since—and knew."

"And you told—Val——"

She gave a slight start, and looked at him reproachfully, appealingly, but made no other reply. This look disturbed Richard more and more. There was in it a higher meaning than any he seemed capable of. He felt that from some simple eminence of virtue, impossible to him to conceive, she looked down upon him, quietly indignant of, yet half pitying, his suspicions of her. And, in fact, though she was not capable of any sentiments so articulate, these, in a rudimentary confusion, were the feelings in her mind.

"I beg your pardon," he said, humbly.

“Then he knows nothing? And the other, the younger—he who is with you——”

How he faltered! man of the world, and high-bred gentleman as he was; he did not know how to put the inquiry into words.

“Oh,” she said, roused from her stillness of expectation, “don’t meddle with Dick! Oh, sir, leave my boy alone! You don’t know—no one knows but me—how good he is. He’s put up with all my wild ways. He’s been willing to give up all he likes best for me; but God’s given me strength, and I’ve mastered myself. I’ve stayed quiet, though it went near to kill me,” she said, clasping her hands tightly; “I wouldn’t shame him, and take his home from him. Oh, don’t meddle with Dick! He’s happy now.”

Her entreating look, her appeal to his generosity, her absolute detachment from all emotion except in connection with her children, worked upon Richard in the strangest way. They moved him as he had never thought to be moved. His heart swelled, and filled with a novel emotion. “Is this all you think of?” he said, with, in his turn, a strange tone of reproach in his voice—“only of the children! when we meet like this after so many—so many years!”

She raised her eyes to him, wondering. I think she scarcely understood what he could mean. Her mind was so deeply occupied with other thoughts, that the tide of feeling which encountered hers was driven back by the meeting. "I'm not clever," she said, in a very low voice. "I'm ignorant—not fit to talk to you."

"But you know me?" he said, driven to his wits' end. She looked up at him quickly, with a strange suffusion in her eyes, a momentary dilation. She did not mean it to be reproachful this time. Then she said quickly—"We'll trouble no one, Dick and me. He's well off, and doing well. If you will let the other stay till he's better—who could nurse him as I would?—and leave Dick alone. I'll trouble nobody, nobody!"

"Myra," said Richard, more moved than he could say. It was not love so much as a strange reluctance to be so powerless—a curious longing to get some sign of feeling from her. He could not bear the composure in her eyes.

She gave a low cry, and made a step backwards, withdrawing from him; and at that moment a faint sound from within the sick-room caught her ear. Her expression, which had



changed for the moment, came back again to that of the patient sick-nurse, the anxious watcher. "He's stirring," she said. "He wants me. I mustn't leave him. I've been too long away."

To describe the feelings of Richard Ross when she left him outside the door of the room in which his son lay ill is more than I am able for. Not since she had fled from him at first, three-and-twenty years ago, had there been such a tumult in his mind;—not the sharp tumult of passion and grief, but the strangest maze of embarrassment, pain, defeat, surprise—and yet for the moment relief. Passion was altogether out of his way nowadays—I don't know that he was capable of it; but all the secondary emotions were warm in him. He had been playing with the thought of this woman for a long time, saying *maladetta*, yet scarcely meaning it—wondering, half attracted in spite of himself, and beyond measure curious to know what changes time had wrought in her, and how far Valentine's unconscious judgment was true. During this long succession of thoughts, his semi-hatred of her as the curse of his life had strangely evaporated, he could not have told how. And from the mo-

ment when he had received that first sudden shock which was given him by the little photograph, down to the present time when she left him standing outside the door, Richard had been the subject of a mental process of the most complicated and mysterious kind. From that first simple introduction of the idea of her, not as a past curse, but as a living and known human being, his thoughts had gone through a long dramatic course, picturing her, realising her, following the unknown line of her existence—making acquaintance with her image, so to speak. She had never been quite absent from his mind since Valentine had reintroduced her to it. He had imagined (in spite of himself) how she would look, what she would say and do—had even pictured to himself how she would meet him, perhaps with terror, perhaps with penitence, with a developed sense of the grievous harm she had done him, and capacity at last to understand how much he had sacrificed for her. If she had grown into an intelligent being, with that look Valentine described, “as if she had once been a lady,”—which was so curious, so bewildering a travesty of all fact—this was how she must have learned to feel ; and, no doubt Richard thought

her first meeting with him would be trying for both, but most trying for her as the one most certain to betray emotion—the wrong-doer in whose awakened mind all feeling must be more strong. He had opened the very door of the room in which she sat with this expectation—nay certainty—in his mind. Now she had left him, and he stood bewildered, confounded, excited, not knowing what to think, and still less what to do. Was it possible that she had not a thought for him, this woman who had destroyed his life?—no feeling that she had destroyed it?—no desire for his forgiveness, no eagerness to make up, no tremulous impassioned anxiety as to what he would think of her? For all these feelings he had given her credit, and curiously, with an interest which attracted him in spite of himself, had speculated how she would show them. But now!

After a little pause, Richard Ross, Secretary of Legation at Florence, her Majesty's future representative to some crowned head, went quite humbly down the little creaking staircase. He knew how to deal with Prime Ministers, and would not have allowed himself to be put down by Prince Bismarck himself; but he was utterly

discomfited by Dick Brown's mother, and stole down-stairs with his heart beating, and the most unexampled commotion in his whole being. When he thought of it, he even laughed at himself feebly, so confounded was he. What was to be done now ? He could not steal away as he had come, with no result to his visit. Now that they had met, and looked each other in the face again, they could not part simply with nothing further said. Was it for him to make advances ? to propose some ground of meeting ? though he was the wronged person, and though she ought in reality to approach him on her knees. When he got down-stairs, he paused again to think what he would do. And it was only then that it occurred to him that his mission here was not to reconcile himself to *her*, but to inquire after Valentine. Strange ! He had seen Valentine lying ill—he had even asked questions about him—and yet his son's state, or his son's existence, had made no impression whatever on his mind. In the curious ferment and tumult of his feelings, it occurred to him to remember the half amusement, half pain, with which he had felt two days ago that his mother hustled him off, scarcely having patience to let him eat and rest,

in order that he might see after Val ; and here was his wife treating him in the same way—thrusting him aside, postponing him altogether ! There was a whimsical aggravation in this double slight which made him laugh even now ; and then a sudden heat flamed all over his frame, like a sudden blaze scorching him ; his wife ! He had used the words unconsciously, unawares—not *maladetta* !—not the woman who had been his curse. In the curious excitement of that thought, he went in once more to the little parlour, and sat down instinctively to get quiet and calm himself ; and then, catching at the first straw of reason which blew his way in this strange tempest of feeling, he decided that he must wait there, now that he was there, till the doctor came.

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

ONE nail strikes out another, the Italians say. It was not wonderful that Richard Ross should feel this, seeing that the subject which concerned his own individual life most closely was that which drove out of his mind all immediate recollection of the other which was the object of his journey. But that the strange and startling apparition of the new figure which suddenly confronted her should have driven the recollection of Valentine out of Lady Eskside's head, was much more wonderful—for her heart was rent with anxiety about Val; whereas Richard was only vaguely, lightly affected by that anxiety; and there was no such magic of old associations, old passions, curiosity, and that baffled sense of impotence which provokes the mind to put forth its whole powers, in her mind as in his. But for the moment Lady Esk-

side forgot her beloved boy, and her devouring anxiety; forgot everything but the shock and startling sensation produced upon her by this face which suddenly looked at her, meeting her gaze calmly, unaware of its own power. When she brought Dick Brown to a stop in his explanations by her eager, almost wild question, "Who are you?" the subject which up to that moment had been engrossing her whole mind departed wholly out of it. Poor Val, lying upon his mother's bed! He was wronged even by those who loved him best—he was forgotten, if only for a moment, in the strain and stress of affairs more urgent; but happily did not know it. Dick was very much embarrassed, good fellow, to find himself suddenly elevated into a place of such importance, and to be asked so passionately, so urgently, who he was. Nothing in the world more easy than to give an account of himself. He smiled, involuntarily, at the anxiety in Lady Eskside's face.

"It is very easy to tell you that, ma'am," he said. "I didn't send my name, thinking you wouldn't know. I'm Richard Brown, head man now at Mr Styles's, the boat-builder at

Oxford, and for three years at Goodman's, at Eton. That is all about me."

"What is it?" said the old lady. "No, I am not deaf—you need not speak loud; but say it again. Richard? Yes, yes; of course it could be nothing but Richard. And you came to tell me that? Is your mother living? is she still living? and where is she? Was it she that sent you here?"

"I came to tell you about Mr Ross——"

"Boy," said Lady Eskside, "don't trifle with me. This was what drove my darling away. Is the woman living, and do you know where she is? Your face tells a great deal," she went on, "but not all. Where is your mother? Did she send you? Is she near? Oh, for God's sake, if you have any pity, tell me! What with one trouble and another, I am near at an end of my strength."

"Mr Ross is ill, ma'am," said Dick, much bewildered, but holding fast to his mother's *consigne*, not to say anything about her. "He is lying ill at our—at my house."

"What could he be but ill," cried the old lady, drying her eyes, "after all that has come and gone? But don't think that I'll let you go



now. Richard, perhaps you are ignorant, perhaps you don't know how important it is—but oh, for God's sake, tell me? Have you got her? have you got her safe this time? Come near to me; you have a kindly face," my lady went on, looking closely at him with the tears in her eyes. "A face I knew as well as I know myself; but kind and young, like what he was before the world touched him. Sit down here; and oh, my bonnie man, have confidence in me!"

She laid her delicate old hand upon his arm; she bent towards him, her face all tremulous with emotion, tears in her eyes, her lips quivering, her voice pathetic and tender as the cooing of a dove. Dick looked at her in return with respectful sympathy, with natural kindness, but with a half smile of wonder. What was it she wanted of him? What could he respond to such an appeal?

"I don't know, ma'am, what I can do for you, what I can tell you," he said; "I'm but a working man, not educated to speak of. There is nothing particular about me that I should confide in any one; but if you'll tell me what it is you want, I've nothing to conceal neither," the young man said with a gentle pride, so innocent

and honest that it made his smile all the brighter. "You are welcome, ma'am, if you care for it, to know everything about me."

"I do care for it," she said, keeping her hand upon his arm. She had made him sit beside her on the little sofa, and her eyes were so intent upon his face, that he scarcely knew how to sustain the gaze. He paused a little to think what he could say first.

"I don't know what to tell you, ma'am," he said, with a laugh; "it's all in what I've said already. Except about Mr Ross—perhaps that is what you mean; I can't say, and you can't think what he's done for me. My life is more a story about him than anything about me," said Dick, with a generous glow coming over his face, "since the day I first met him on the river——"

"That was—how long ago?"

"He wasn't in the boats till the year after," said Dick, availing himself of the easiest mode of calculating. "It's about seven years since—we were both boys, so to speak. He took to me somehow, ma'am—out of his own head—by chance—so some folks says——"

Under other circumstances no story could

have been so interesting to Lady Eskside, but at present her mind was too much disturbed to follow it. She interrupted him hastily—"And your mother! what of her? You tell me nothing about her! Was she there as well as you?"

Dick felt as it is natural to feel when you are interrupted in a congenial story, and that your own story, the most interesting of all narratives. He repeated—"My mother!" in a tone of disappointment. How his mother could be more interesting to any one than Mr Ross and himself, and that tale of their meeting, which he had already told successfully more than once, Dick did not know.

"Yes, your mother! Tell me her name, and how she brought you up, and where she is living—for she is living, you said? Tell me! and after that," said Lady Eskside, in an unconsciously insinuating tone, "I shall be able to listen to you about my poor Val, and all that you have had to do with him. Ah! be sure that is what I would like best! but the other, the other is more important. Where is she? What does she call herself? How did she bring you up? Oh! don't lose time,

my good boy, but tell me this, for I must know ! ”

Dick became much confused and disturbed, remembering his mother's caution to him not to mention her. He could not understand why she should thus be dragged into question. But she had evidently expected it, which was very perplexing to him. He faltered a little in his reply.

“ My mother — is just my mother, ma'am. She lives with me ; she's nursing Mr Ross now.”

The old lady gave a cry, and grasped him by the arm. “ Has she told him ? ” she cried. “ Does Val know ? ”

“ Know what ? ” said Dick, in amaze. She gazed at him intently for a moment, and then all at once fell a-crying and wringing her hands.

“ Is my boy ill ? ” she said. “ What is the matter with him ? how soon can we go to him ? Will you take me there, Richard, as quick as we can go ? Your mother is nursing him—you are sure ? and you don't know anything she could have told him ? Oh, let us go ! there is not a moment to lose.”

She got up hastily to ring the bell, then sat

down again. "There will be no train—no train till to-night or to-morrow ; oh, these trains, that have always to be waited for ! In old days you could start in your post-chaise without waiting a minute. And, poor lad, you will want a rest," she added, turning to look at him, "and food. Oh, but if you knew the fever in my mind till I am there !"

"Don't be too anxious," said Dick, compassionately, understanding this better ; "the crisis cannot come for four days yet, and the doctor says my mother is an excellent nurse, and that he'll pull through."

Lady Eskside rose again in her restlessness and rang the bell. "Bring something for this gentleman to eat," she said, when Harding appeared ; "bring a tray to the dining-room ; and get me the paper about the trains ; and let none of the other fools of men come about me to stare and stare !" she cried, fretfully. "Serve us yourself. And bid your wife come here—I have something to say to her."

"To the dining-room, my lady ?"

"Didn't I say here !" cried Lady Eskside. "You're all alike, never understanding. Send Marg'ret here."

Mrs Harding must have been very close behind, for she followed almost instantly. She gave a little cry at sight of Dick. I fear this was not so independent a judgment as Lady Eskside supposed, for of course her husband had suggested the resemblance she was called upon to remark ; but, at the same time, she had no unbounded confidence in her husband's judgment, and was upon the whole as likely as not to have declared against him. Lady Eskside turned sharply round upon her. "What are you crying out about, Marg'ret ? I expected a woman like you to have more sense. What I wanted to tell you was, that I am going away for a day or two. Well ; why are you staring at a stranger so ?"

"Oh, my lady !" cried Mrs Harding, "it's no possible but what you see——"

"Ay, ay—I see, I see," cried Lady Eskside, moved to tears ; "well I see ! and if it please God," she added, devoutly, "I almost think the long trouble's over. Marg'ret, you'll not say anything ; but I have no doubt you know what it has been this many a year."

"Oh, my lady ! yes, my lady ! How could I be in the house and no know ?"

"It is just like you all!" cried Lady Esk-side, with another sudden change of sentiment; "prying into other folk's business, instead of being attentive to your own; just like you all! But keep your man quiet, Marg'ret Harding, and hold your tongue yourself. That's what I think," she went on, softly, "but nothing's clear."

Dick sat and listened to all this, wondering. He thought she was a very strange old lady to change her tone and manner so often; but there was enough of sympathetic feeling in him to show that, though he could not tell how she was moved, she was much moved and excited. He was sorry for her. She had so kind a look that it went to his heart. Was it all for Val's sake? and what did she mean about his mother? Somehow he could not connect his own old suspicions as to who his father was with this altogether new acquaintance. He got confused, and felt all power to think abandoning him. In everything she said, it was his mother who seemed to have the first place; and Dick felt that he knew all about his mother, though his father was a mystery to him. Of what importance could she be—a tramp, a vagrant, a woman whom he himself had only been able to with-

draw from the fields and roads with difficulty—what could she be to this stately old lady? Dick, for his part, was deeply confounded, and did not know what to think.

She came up to him with a tremulous smile when the housekeeper went away. “Richard,” she said, speaking to him as if (he thought) she had known him all his life—“if I am right in what I think, you and I will be great friends some day. Was it you that my boy wrote about, that he was so fond of when he was at Eton?—oh, how blind I have been!—that had a mother you were very good to? My man, was that you?”

“Yes, ma’am—my lady—I suppose it was me——”

“That worked so well, and raised yourself in the world? that he was going to see always, till some fool, some meddling fool that knew no better,” cried Lady Eskside, “wrote to my old lord to stop it? But I thank God I did not stop it!” said my lady, the tears running down her cheeks. “I thank the Lord I had confidence in my boy! Richard! it was you that all this happened about? You are sure it was you?”

“There could not be two of us,” he said, his



face lighted up with feeling; for Dick, good fellow, though he did not know why she was crying, felt something rise in his throat at the sight of the old lady's tears. "Yes, ma'am—I mean, my lady."

"Don't call me my lady, my bonnie man! call me—but never mind—we'll wait a while; we'll do nothing rash," cried Lady Eskside. "You're hungry and tired all this time, while I've been thinking of myself and of Val, and not of you. Come and have something to eat, Richard; and then you'll take me to my boy."

But Lady Eskside was two or three years over seventy. She was worn out with anxiety, and now with the sudden excitement of this visitor. She had taken neither food nor sleep, much as her years required all natural support, since Val had disappeared; and before her preparations could be made, she herself allowed that to attempt to travel by the night train would be foolish and unavailing. "I don't want to die before it's all settled," she said, smiling and crying. "We'll have to wait till to-morrow." And Dick, who had travelled all night, was very willing to wait. She sat by him and talked to him while he had his meal, and for an

hour or more after ; and though Dick was not stupid, he was a child in the hands of the clever old lady, who recovered all her spirit now that her anxiety was removed, and this wonderful power of setting everything right was put into her hands. Lady Eskside was but human, and, so far as she was aware, no one but herself had the faintest inkling of this blessed way of clearing up the troubles of the family, or knew anything of Dick Brown and his mother. She felt that she had found it out, that it would be her part to clear it all up, and the thought was sweet to her. And as for her anxiety, Dick made so light of Valentine's illness, which he had himself ceased to be alarmed about, that Lady Eskside felt almost happy to hear of the fever which supplied her with a reason for Val's silence without communicating any alarm to her mind. Very soon she knew everything about Dick,—more than he knew himself—his tramp-life, his wanderings with his mother, his longings for something better, for a home and settled dwelling-place. And Dick, without knowing, made such a picture of his mother as touched the old lady's heart. "She used to sit at the window and watch for the boat. That was the

first thing that reconciled her a bit," said Dick. "She used to watch and watch for Mr Ross's boat, and sit like a statue when we'd started him, to see him come back. She always took a deal of interest in Mr Ross."

"Did she ever tell you why?"

"Because he was so kind," said Dick. "I've thought often there was more in it than that; but what could a fellow say to his mother, ma'am? I wasn't one to worry her with questions. That's how she used to sit watching. Mother is strange often; but there never was any harm in her," said Dick, fervently—"never! The others would hold their tongues when she was by—I've thought of it often since; and when she saw my heart was set on settling down, she gave into it, all on my account—though what she liked was different. That is what I call a good woman!" he cried, encouraged by the attention and sympathy with which his story was received. Lady Eskside thus learnt more in an hour of the woman who had cost her so dear, than she could have done otherwise in years. She found out everything about her. She even got to feel for and pity the mother—ignorant, foolish, unwitting what

harm she was doing—who thus kept to her savage point of honour, and never betrayed herself nor claimed her son. Dick, unconscious, told everything. It was only on thinking it over after that he remembered again his mother's charge not to say anything of her. "Say only it's your mother." Well! he said to himself, he had said no more. It was as his mother that he had spoken of her, and as that alone. He knew her in no other character. He had spoken of her life, her habits, her goodness; but he had told nothing more. There was not, indeed, anything more to tell, had he wished to betray her.

In the afternoon, Lady Eskside was persuaded to go and rest—a repose which she wanted mightily—and Dick was left alone. It was then that he began to think that possibly he had been indiscreet in his revelations; and he was somewhat frightened, to tell the truth, when he found himself left in the great drawing-room alone. He did not know whether it would be right for him to wait there, where Lady Eskside left him, until she came back. He felt a little doubtful whether he might examine the great cabinets, and all the curious things he saw, and which

fired him with interest. He could not do them any harm, at last he reflected; and he did not think the kind old lady would object. So he got out his note-book, and made little drawings of various things that struck his fancy. The wonder being over for the moment, and the pressure of Lady Eskside's questions, Dick's mind gladly retired from it altogether, and returned to easier everyday matters. That this discovery, whatever it was, should make any difference in his life, did not seem to him at all a likely idea; nor did such a notion seriously enter his mind. And no thought of the possible transference of his own lowly and active life to such surroundings as those which were now about him, ever occurred to Dick. He would have been extremely amused by the idea. But he made a note in his book—a rough little drawing, yet quite enough to be a guide to him—of sundry little “details”—arrangements of brackets and shelves, which he thought might be adapted even to his little place on a small scale. He had his eyes always about him, ready to note anything of the kind; and though he smiled to himself at the idea of copying in his tiny parlour what he saw in this great room,

yet he made his drawings all the same, with his rough workman's pencil. The drawings were very rough, but he knew how to work from them, and in his mind's eye already saw a homely imitation of the objects he admired figuring upon his low walls. He even thought it would amuse Val, when he got better, to see in the boatman's parlour a humble copy of the brackets in Rosscraig.

And after this, as one of the windows was open, he strayed out, with some perturbation lest he should be taking too much upon him, and wandered through the shrubberies, and out into the woods. It was a soft spring afternoon, the sun near his setting, the trees showing a faint greenness, the sound of the Esk filling the air. The river was full and strong, swelled by the spring rains, and by the melting of all the early frosts. It made a continuous murmur, filling the whole soft universe around with an all-pervading sound. Dick had almost forgotten what the woods were like in the early spring ; and the charm of the stillness and the woodland rustle, the slanting lines of light, the bright gleams of green, the tender depths of shadow, stole into his heart. He had a still, profound,

undemonstrative enjoyment of nature, loving her without being able to put his love into words ; and the beauty of those irregular banks, all broken with light and shade, topped with trees which threw up their tall columns towards the sky, waiting till the blessing of new life should come upon them—delighted the young man, who for years had known no finer scenery than the unexciting precincts of the Thames. Dear Thames, kind river, forgive the words!—ungrateful words to come from the lips of one who owes thee untold pleasures ; but soft meadows and weeping willows, and all the gentle lights and shadows of the level stream, looked tame beside the foaming, tumbling river, rushing with shouts among its rocks, singing over its pebbles, leaping and hurrying onward through all those bold braes that hemmed it in, and played perpetual chase and escape with the brown torrent. The trees on Eskside were not the grand broad placid trees to which Dick was used. Red firs, with the sun on their great russet pillars ; white birches, poising daintily on every fairy knowe ; pale ash-trees, long-limbed and bare—mixed with the few oaks and beeches, and gave a different character to the scene ; and

here and there a bold bit of brown rock, a slip of red earth, the stony course of a burn which went rattling in hot haste to join the Esk, crossing the path and toppling down in dozens of tiny waterfalls—all these were like nothing he had ever seen before. He strayed on a little further and a little further, by bypaths of which Val knew every curve and corner, under trees, every one of which, could they have spoken, would have asked for news of their young lord. Sometimes it occurred to him, with a sense of additional pleasure, that all this would one day belong to his young patron. Would Val ever ask him to come here, he wondered? then “Lord bless me!” said Dick to himself, “why should he? He’ll always be kind and good as long as he lives; but why should he ask the like of me?” and he laughed at his own absurdity. But what with these thoughts, and what with no thought at all, mere pleasure, which perhaps carries farthest, he went on, much farther than he knew, as far as the linn and the two great beeches which had played so great a part in Val’s life. Just before he reached that point he was stopped by a sudden sound which startled him, which had a distinct tone of humanity in



it, and did not spring from the fresh and free nature about. It was the sound of a sob. Dick stood still and looked about him, with recollections of his own childhood rising fresh into his mind, and a tender thought of finding some poor little tired wanderer under some tree, crying for weariness. But he could see nothing, and presently went on again, persuading himself that his ears must have deceived him. He went on, himself rousing intermittent echoes, for his step was sometimes inaudible on the mossy turf, and sometimes sent thrills of sound all through the wood, as his foot crashed on a fallen branch, or struck the pebbles aside in a little shower.

When he got to the linn he paused for some time on the edge of the river, struck by the beauty of the place; and only when he was passing on, perceived behind him, all at once, somebody sitting at the foot of one of the trees—a little figure muffled in a blue cloak, and leaning against the bole of one of the big beeches. Dick made an unconscious exclamation—"I beg your pardon!"—and went hastily on, half frightened lest he should have disturbed some one who had a better right to be there than he

had. But this incident broke the spell of his wandering, and recalled him to the thought that he was far from Rossraig, and that it would be safer to turn back as he had come, than to risk losing his way. Perhaps a little curiosity about the solitary figure under the tree had something to do with this prudent thought ; but his curiosity was lessened by a second glance he had stolen through the trees, which showed him that it was a lady who sat there. Had it been a tramp-woman, Dick might have shown his sympathy ; but upon a lady, even one in trouble, he could not intrude ; and yet he could not help being interested. Could it be from her that the sob had come ? and why should she be crying here, all alone, like an enchanted princess ? He knew little about enchanted princesses, but he had a tender heart, and the sob had troubled him. He went back again, passing slowly, trying to make out, without staring—which was not consistent with Dick's idea of “manners”—who it was, and what she was doing under the shadow of the tree. The soft grass glade between these two giants of the wood was lighted up by a slant ray of the sun which slid all the way down the high bank on the other side of Esk, to pour that

oblique line of glory under the great sweeping boughs over the greensward. She was seated out of the sunshine, but with her face turned towards the light, and it seemed to Dick that it was a face he had seen before. I do not think the fact that it was a young face, and a fair one, touched him so much as that it was very pale and mournful, justifying his idea that the sob must somehow have belonged to it. How he would have liked to linger, to ask what was the matter ! He would have done so, had she not been a lady ; but Dick knew his place. His surprise was great, however, when, as soon as his back was turned, he heard a stir, a sound of footsteps, a faint call, which seemed addressed to him. He turned round quickly. The girl, whoever she was, had risen from her seat. She had come out of the shade into the sunshine, and was standing between the trees, with the light upon her, catching a glittering edge of hair, and giving a hem of brightness to one side of her figure, and to the outlines of the blue cloak. "I beg your pardon ; did you call me ?" said Dick, shy but eager. Perhaps she had lost her way. Perhaps she wanted help of one kind or another. Then the little woodland lady beckoned to him

timidly. I think, if it had not been for the anxiety and longing that swelled her heart well-nigh to bursting, Violet would never have had the courage thus to appeal to a stranger in the wood.

## CHAPTER XXXV.

SHE advanced a step to meet him, timid, yet with that confidence which social superiority gives : for Dick, I am bound to confess, though I love him, was not one of those wonderful beings who bear the exterior of a fine gentleman even in a workman's clothes. He was not vulgar in any respect, being perfectly free from every kind of pretension, and with all the essence of fine manners—that politeness of the heart which neither birth nor education by themselves can give; but though, as I have said, his dress was to a certain degree copied from Valentine's—who possessed the *je ne sais quoi* in perfection—and was quite well made and unobtrusive, yet I am obliged to allow that Dick had not that mysterious something which makes a gentleman. You could have found no fault with his appearance, and to look at his candid countenance was to

trust him ; but yet he had not the *je ne sais quoi*, and Violet knew that, conventionally speaking, she was addressing one who was “not a gentleman ;” this fact gave her a degree of freedom in calling him which she would scarcely have felt with a stranger of her own class. But more than that, Violet had recognised Dick. It was some years since she had seen him, but she remembered him. Not all at once, it is true. When he appeared first, before he saw her, she had felt as he did, that she had seen his face before ; but ere he passed again, she had made out where and how it was that she had seen him ; for it must be recollected that Violet’s heart was full to overflowing with thoughts of Val, of whom this stranger, so suddenly and strangely appearing, was a kind of shadow in her mind. The whole scene, in which she had seen this stranger, came before her as by a flash of light, after five minutes’ pondering within herself—for from the first glance she had felt that he was somehow associated with Valentine. What could bring him here, this boatman from the Thames ? Her heart was breaking for news of her young lover, so dismally parted from her, whom she must never see again (she thought) ; but only to hear

his name, to know where he was, would be something. She would not have betrayed herself to "a gentleman," to one of Val's friends and equals; but of "Mr Brown"—she remembered even his name by good fortune—she might make her inquiries freely. So, urged by the anguish in her poor little breast, Vi took this bold step. She had been sitting thus for hours crying all alone, and thinking to herself that this horrible blank was to go on for ever, that she would nevermore hear of him even—and I have not the heart to blame her for appealing thus to the first possibility of help. She made a step forward and looked at him with a pitiful little smile. "Perhaps you do not remember," she said, "but I think I am sure it is you. I never forget people whom I have once seen. Did not you row us once, on the Thames, at Eton—my father and——"

"Oh yes, ma'am, to be sure!" cried Dick. "I knew that I had seen you before." He was a little confused, after his experience with Lady Eskside, how he ought to address a lady, but after reflection decided that "ma'am" must always be right; for had he not heard the Queen herself addressed by the finest of fine ladies as "Ma'am"?

“Yes ; and I remember you,” said Vi. Then she made a pause, and with a wistful glance at him, and a sudden flush which went as quickly as it came, added—“I am Mr Ross’s cousin.”

“I recollect now,” cried Dick. “He was so set on it that you should see everything. I think he was a bit better when I left.”

“Better !” cried Violet, clasping her hands together ; “was he——” She was going to say, was he ill ? and then reflected that, perhaps, it was best not to betray to a stranger how little she knew of him. So she stood looking up in his face, with great eyes dilated. Her eyes had been pathetic and full of entreaty even when poor Vi was at her happiest. Now there is no telling how beseeching those pretty eyes were, with the tears stealing into them, making them bigger, softer, more liquid and tender still. This look quite made an end of poor Dick, who felt disposed to cry too for company, and was aware of some strange, unusual movements in his own good heart.

“Don’t you fret,” he said soothingly ; “I brought the old lady the news this morning. He had an accident, and his illness was sudden. But it had nothing to do with the accident,” he



added. "Don't be frightened, ma'am. It's some fever, but not the worst kind; and the doctor told me himself that he'd pull through."

"Oh, Mr Brown!" cried poor Vi. She dropped down upon a fallen tree, and began to cry, so that he could scarcely look at her for pity.

"Indeed you must not be frightened," said Dick. "I am not anxious a bit, after what the doctor told me. Neither is the old lady up there at the Castle—Lady Eskside. She is going with me to-morrow morning to help to nurse him. Mother has him in hand," Dick added with a little pride, "and he's very safe with her. Don't fret like this—now don't! when I tell you the doctor says he'll pull through!"

"Oh Val, Val, my Val!" cried poor little Violet. It was not because she was frightened; for at her age—unless experience has taught otherwise—getting better seems so necessary, so inevitable a conclusion to being ill. She was not afraid of his life; but her heart was rent with pity, with tenderness, with that poignant touching remorse, to which the innocent are liable. All that had gone before, all that Valentine had suffered, seemed to come back to her. It was not her fault, but it was "our" fault.

She seemed to herself to be involved in the cause of it, though she would have died sooner than harm him. Her lips began to quiver, the tears rained through the fingers with which she tried to hide her piteous streaming eyes. "Oh Val, Val, my Val!" she cried. It was "our" fault; her father had done it, and even good Sandy had had his share; and herself, who had twined her foolish little life with his, so that even parting with her had been another complication in Valentine's woes. She seemed to see him looking up at her in the moonlight, bidding her good-bye. Oh, why did he think of her? why did he take that trouble for her? She scarcely heard Dick's anxious attempts at consolation. She was not thinking of the future, in which, no doubt—how could she doubt it?—Valentine would get better: but of the past and of all that made him ill. Her tears, her abandonment to that sorrow, her attempts to command herself, went to Dick's heart. He stood looking at her, wondering wistfully for the first time in his life over the differences in men's lots. If he (Dick) were to fall ill, his mother, no doubt, would be grieved; but Dick knew that it would create no commotion in the world; would not

“upset” any one as Val’s illness did. Naturally, the good fellow felt, Mr Ross was of much more importance than he was, or could ever be ; but still——

“ Oh, how foolish you must think me ! ” cried Violet, drying her eyes. “ It is not that I am frightened. It is because I know all that made him ill. Oh, Mr Brown, tell me about it—tell me everything ! He is my cousin, and he has always been like my—brother. He used to bring me here when I was a child. You can’t think how everything here is full of him—and then all at once never to hear a word ! ” Between every broken sentence the tears fell in little bright showers from Violet’s eyes.

Dick sat down on the same fallen tree, but at a respectful distance, and told her all he knew—which was not everything, for his mother had not entered into details, and he knew little about the incident on the river, and her share in it. Violet listened, never taking her eyes from his face, which was hard upon Dick, yet not undelightful to him. He had gone through a great many experiences that morning. But even Lady Eskside’s strange emotion, her curiosity about himself, and agitated manner, had not the same

effect as this still more unexpected and strange encounter. He sat, at first rather awkwardly, upon the edge of his end of the tree, with his face turned towards her, but not always bold enough to look at her. The slant of the sun-beam, which was gradually dying off the scene, fell in the middle between them like a rail of gold, separating them from each other. Across this heavenly line of separation her eyes shone like stars, often bewildering Dick, though he kept pretty straight in his narrative, taking as little account as possible of the occasional giddiness that came over him, and the dazzling sensation in his eyes. Violet, interrupting him now and then by a brief question, sometimes crying softly under her breath, gave her entire attention to every word ; and Esk ran on through all, with a murmur as of a third person keeping them company ; and the wood contributed those numberless soft sounds which make up the silence of nature, enveloping them in an atmosphere of her own. Dick was not much given to poetry, but he felt like something in a fairy tale. It was an experience altogether new and strange ; for hitherto there had been no enchantments in his life. How different it was to her and to

him ! To the young man, the first thrill of romance, the first touch of magic—the beginning of all sweet delusions, follies, and dreams ; to the girl, an imperfect, faltering narrative, filled out by imagination, a poor, blurred picture—better, far better, indeed, than nothing, and giving her for the moment a kind of miserable happiness, but in itself nothing. It is frightful to think at what a disadvantage people meet each other in this world. Dick's life, which had all been honest prose up to this moment, became on the spot, poetry ; but, poor fellow, he was nothing but prose, poor prose to Vi, to whom these woods were full of all the lyric melodies of young life. She listened to him without thinking of him, drinking in every word and not ungrateful, any more than she was ungrateful to the fallen tree, or the beech boughs that sheltered her. Nay, she had a warmer feeling, a sense of grateful friendship, to Dick.

“Mr Brown,” she said, when his tale was done, “I am very, very thankful to you for telling me. I should never have known but for you. For I ought to say that my people and Val's people—I mean my cousin's—are not quite—quite good friends. I must not say whose fault it is,” said

Vi, with a suppressed sob ; “and I don’t see Lady Eskside now—so without you I should not have known. Mr Brown ! would you mind writing—a little note—just two lines—to say how he is when you get back ?”

“Mind !” said Dick. “If you will let me——”

“And you can tell him when he gets well,” cried the girl, her voice sinking very low, her eyes leaving Dick’s face, and straying into the glow of sunshine (as he thought) between the two great trees—“you can tell him that you met me here ; and that I was thinking of him, and was glad—glad to hear of him——” To show her gladness, Violet let drop two great tears which for some time had been brimming over her eyelids. “It is dreadful to be parted from a friend and to hear no word ; but now that I know, it will not be so hard. Mr Brown, you will be sure to send just two lines, two words, to tell me——”

Here her voice faltered, and lost itself in a flutter of suppressed sound—sobs painfully restrained, which yet would burst forth. She did her very best, poor child, to master them, and turning to Dick with a pathetic smile, whispered

as well as she could—"I can't tell you how it all is. It is not only for Val being ill. It is everything—everything that is wrong! Papa, too—but I can't tell you; only tell him that you met Violet at the linn."

"I will tell him everything you have said. I will write, if you like, every day," cried poor Dick, his heart wrung with sympathy—and with envy as well.

"Would that be too much?" she asked, with an entreating look. "Oh, if it would not be too much! And, Mr Brown, perhaps it will be best to send it to mamma. I cannot have any secrets, though I may be unhappy. If you will give me a piece of paper, I will write the address, and thank you—oh, how I will thank you!—all my life."

Dick, who felt miserable himself, he could scarcely tell why, got out his note-book, with all the rough little drawings in it of the brackets at Rossraig. He had not known, when he put them down, how much more was to befall him in this one brief afternoon. She wrote the address with a little hand which trembled.

"My hand is so unsteady," she said. "I am spoiling your book. I must write it over again."

Oh, I beg your pardon ; my hand never used to shake. Tell Val—but no, no. It is better that you should not tell him anything more.”

“Whatever you bid me I will tell him. I will do anything, everything you choose to say,” said Dick, in his fervour. She gave a surprised wistful look at him, and shook her head.

“I must think for both of us,” she said ; “and Val is very hasty, very rash. No, you must not say anything more. Tell him I am quite well if he asks, and not unhappy—not very unhappy—only anxious to know ; and when he is well,” she said, with a reluctant little sigh, “you need not mind writing any more. That will be enough. It is a terrible thing when there are quarrels in families, Mr Brown.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Dick, who knew nothing about families, nor about quarrels, but followed with a curious solemnity the infantine angelical wisdom and gravity of her face.

“A terrible thing when people try to hurt each other who ought to love each other ; and some of us must always pay for it,” said poor Violet, in deep seriousness — “always, always some one must suffer ; when it might be so different ! If you are going back to Rossraig, you



should go before the sun sets, for it is far, when you don't know the way."

"And you?" said Dick, rising in obedience to this dismissal, yet longing to linger, to prolong the conversation, and not willing to allow that this strange episode in his life had come to an end.

"My way is not the same as yours," she said, holding out her hand with gentle grandeur, like a little princess, sweet and friendly, but stooping out of a loftier region, "and I know every step. Good-bye, and thank you with all my heart. You must keep this path straight up past the firs. I am very, very glad I was here."

"Good-bye, Miss Violet," said Dick. It gave him a little pleasure to say her name, which was so pretty and sweet; and he was too loyal and too respectful to linger after this farewell, but walked away as a man goes out of a royal presence, not venturing to stay after the last gracious word has been said. He could not bear to go, but would not remain even a moment against her will. When he had gone a little way he ventured to turn back and look—but nothing was visible except the trees. She had disappeared, and the sunshine had disappeared; it

seemed to Dick's awakened fancy as if both must have gone together. The last golden arrow of light was gliding from the opposite bank of the river, and the glade between the bushes lay dim in the greyness of the evening. What a change it made ! He went on with a sigh. Violet had gone back to the foot of the tree, and was waiting there till he should be out of sight ; and Dick divined that this was the case, and that she wanted no more of him. Well ! why should she want any more of him ? She was a lady, quite out of Dick's way, and she had been very sweet to him—as gracious as a queen. Between this impersonation of sweet youth, and the other figure, old Lady Eskside, with her dignity and agitated kindness, Dick was wonderfully dazzled. If all ladies were like these, what a strange sort of enchantment it must be to spend one's life in such society. Dick had never known any woman but his mother, whom he loved, and upon whose will he had often been dependent, but to whom he was always in some degree forbearing and indulgent, puzzled by her caprices, and full of that tender patience towards her which has in its very nature something of superiority ; and to find himself suddenly in the society of these two

ladies, one after the other, both taking him into their confidence, betraying their feelings to him, receiving, as it were, favours at his hand, had the most curious effect upon his mind.

Dick had never felt so melancholy in his life as when Violet thus sent him away ; and yet his head was full of a delicious intoxication, a sense of something elevated, ethereal, above the world and all its common ways. Should he ever see her again, he wondered ? would she speak to him as she had done now, and ask his help, and trust to his sympathy ? Poor Dick had not the remotest idea that these new sensations in his mind, this mixture of delight and of melancholy, this stirring up of all emotions, which made his long walk through the woods feel like a swallow-flight to him, had anything to do with the vulgar frenzy he had heard of, which silly persons called falling in love. He had always felt very superior and rather contemptuous of this weakness, which young men of his class feel, no doubt, in its more delicate form, like others, but which is seldom spoken of among them in any but that coarse way which revolts all gentle natures. So he was totally unwarned and unarmed against any insidious

beginnings of sentiment, and would have resented indignantly the idea that his tender sympathy with this little lady, who had opened her heart to him, had anything whatever in it of the character of love. How could it have?—when the very foundation of this strange sweet revelation to him of an utterly new kind of intercourse and companionship, was the love, or something that he supposed must be love, between Mr Ross, his patron, and this little princess of the woods? What a lucky fellow Mr Ross was, Dick thought, with the tenderest, friendliest version of envy that ever entered a man's bosom! and then it occurred to him, with a little sigh, to think that the lots of men in this world were very different; but he was not, he hoped, so wretched a fellow as to grudge his best friend any of the good things that were in his share. Thus he went back to Rosscraig with his mind entirely filled with a new subject—a subject which made him less sensitive even than he was before to any new light upon his own position. He looked at Violet's writing in his note-book with very bewildering feelings when he got at night to the luxurious room where he was to sleep. She had written the

address very unsteadily, then crossed it out, and repeated it with great care and precision—Mrs Pringle, Moray Place, Edinburgh. Though it slightly chilled him to think that this was her mother's name, not her own, yet the sense of having this little bit of her in his breast-pocket was very delightful and very strange. He sat and looked at it for a long time. On the page just before it were these notes he had made of the brackets in the great drawing-room. These were the tangible evidences of this strange mission of his, and sudden introduction into a life so different from his own. It just crossed his mind to wonder whether these scratches on the paper would be all, whether he might look them up years hence to convince himself that it was not a dream. And then poor Dick gave a great sigh, so full and large, expanding his deep bosom, that it almost blew out his candles ; whereupon he gave a laugh, poor fellow, and said his prayers, and got to bed.

As for Lady Eskside, she showed more weakness that particular evening than had been visible, I think, all her life before. She could not sleep, but kept Mrs Harding by her bedside, talking, giving her mysterious but yet

intelligible confidences. "You'll set to work, Marg'ret, as soon as I'm gone, to have all the new wing put in order, the carpets put down, and the curtains put up, and everything ready for habitation. I cannot quite say who may be coming, but it is best to be ready. My poor old lord's new wing, that gave him so much trouble ! It will be strange to see it lived in after so many years !"

"Indeed, and it will that, my lady," said Mrs Harding, discreet and cautious.

"It will that ! I don't suppose that you take any interest," said Lady Eskside, "beyond just the furniture, and so forth ?—though you've lived under our roof and ate our bread these thirty years !"

Mrs Harding was a prudent woman, and knew that too much interest was even more dangerous than too little. "The furniture is a great thought," she said demurely, "to a person in my position, my lady. If you'll mind that I'm responsible for everything ; and I canna forget it's all new, and that there is aye the risk that the moths may have got into the curtains. I've had more thought about these curtains," said the housekeeper, with a sigh, "than the Queen hersel' takes about the state."

“You and your moths!” said my lady, with sharp scorn. “Oh, Marg’ret Harding, it’s little you know about it! If there was any way of keeping the canker and the care out of folks’ hearts! And what is it to you that I’m standing on the verge of, I don’t know what—that I’ve got the thread in my hand that’s failed us so long—that maybe after all, after all, my old lord may get his way, and everything be smooth, plain, and straight for them that come after us? What’s this to you? I am a foolish old woman to say a word. Oh, if my Mary were but here!”

“My lady, it’s a great deal to me, and I’m as anxious as I can be; but if I were to take it upon me to speak, what would I get by it?” said Mrs Harding, driven to self-defence. “The like of us, we have to know everything, and never speak.”

“Marg’ret, my woman, I cannot be wrong this time—it’s not possible that I can be wrong this time,” said Lady Eskside. “You were very much struck yourself when you saw the young—when you saw my visitor. I could see it in your face—and your husband too. He’s not a clever man, but he’s been a long time about the house.”

“He’s clever enough, my lady,” said the housekeeper. “Neither my lord nor you would do with your owre clever men, and I canna be fashed with them mysel’. Now, my man, if he’s no that gleg, he’s steady ; and I’m aye to the fore,” said Mrs Harding, calmly. This was a compensation of nature which was not to be overlooked.

“You see, you knew his father so well,” said Lady Eskside, with an oracular dimness which even Mrs Harding’s skill could scarcely interpret ; and then she added softly, “God bless them ! God bless them both !”

“My lady,” said the housekeeper, puzzled, “you’ll never be fit to travel in the morning, if you don’t get a good sleep.”

“That’s true, that’s true ; but yet you might say, God bless them. The Angel that redeemed us from all evil, bless the lads,” murmured the old lady, under her breath. “Good-night. You may go away, you hard-hearted woman ; I’ll try to sleep.”



## CHAPTER XXXVI.

LORD ESKSIDE was seated in a little dingy sitting-room in Jermyn Street. Once upon a time, long years ago, the Esksides had possessed a town-house in a region which is no longer habitable by lords and ladies; but as they had ceased for years to come for even that six weeks in London which consoles country families with a phantasmagoric glimpse of "the world," the town-house had long passed out of their hands. Lord Eskside had spent this dreary week in rooms which overlooked the dreary blank wall of St James's, with its few trees, and the old gravestones inside—not a cheerful sight for an old man whose last hopes seemed to be dying from him. He had employed detectives, had advertised with immense precaution in the newspapers, and himself had wandered about the town, night and day, seek-

ing his boy ; while all the time, the few people whom he met when he appeared at rare intervals in such streets as are frequented by anybody worth speaking of, paid him compliments on his grandson's success, and hoped that Val, when he appeared in the House of Commons, would show himself worthy of his race. "I expect him to do us credit," the old lord said, working his shaggy eyebrows in such a way that his acquaintances thought he had some nervous complaint, and shook their heads, and wondered that "in his state of health" he should be in town alone. What bitter pangs were in his heart when he said these words ! The boy had done them credit all his life up to this moment. If it was not the loftiest kind of reputation which Val had acquired, it was yet a kind highly estimated in the world, and which young men prized ; and no stain had ever touched that bright young reputation, no shadow of shame ever lighted upon it. And now ! These congratulations, which in other circumstances would have been so sweet to him, were gall and bitterness. What if Val had disappeared like his mother, with the same indifference to the claims of life and duty which that undisciplined, unedu-

cated woman had shown? What if, crushed by the revelations so suddenly made to him, he were now—instead of taking the manly way, facing the scandal and living it out—to give in, and fail, and leave his place to be occupied by others? The thought of that election declared void for which he had struggled so stoutly, and of some one else coming in upon Val's ruin, triumphing in his downfall, was sharp as a poisoned sword in the old man's heart. Lady Eskside thought chiefly of the boy himself, and of what he might do in his despair; but the public downfall which seemed imminent, added pangs even more bitter to her husband's sufferings. His adversary had done all that an adversary might; but no adversary could harm Lord Eskside and break his heart as his boy could. The old lord was very strong upon race. It was one of the objects of his fullest faith. He believed not only in the efficacy of being well-born, but extended that privilege far beyond the usual limits allowed to it. He had faith in the race of a ploughman as well as in that of his own noble house. But the blood in the veins of his boy had come from a race of wanderers—a species, indeed, not a race at all—

made up by intermixtures of which neither law nor honour took note; and how could he tell that the honest ichor of the Rosses would predominate over the influence of that turbid mixture? Already it was evident enough that the vagabond strain had not lost its power. He had feared it all Val's life, and sternly repressed it from his boyhood up; but repression had now ceased to be possible, and here was the evil in full force.

Lord Eskside had a very distinct ideal of life, and one of his theories was that no man could be a man who was not capable of setting his face hard against difficulty and fighting it out. To flee was a thing impossible to him; but Valentine had fled, and what but his vagrant blood could be to blame? It did not occur to the old lord that his own son, in whom there was no vagrant blood, had fled more completely than poor Val—turning his back upon his country, and hiding his shame in unknown regions and unknown duties. Richard's desertion had wounded his father to the quick in its time; but Val had obliterated Richard, and now he scarcely recollected that previous flight. It never occurred to him to think that Richard's

example had put it into the boy's mind to abandon his natural place, and flee before the sudden mortification and downfall. With strange pain, and anxiety deeper than words, he set everything down to the unfortunate mother. Her wild blood—the blood of a creature without reason, incapable of that supreme human faculty of endurance, which was to Lord Eskside one of the highest of qualities—was at the bottom of it all. If he could but find the boy in time to exert his old influence over him, to induce him to make a stand against the coward principle in his mind, to bring him back to his duty! Lord Eskside thought of Val as an old soldier might think of a descendant who had turned his back upon an enemy. Shame, and love eager to conceal the shame—sharp personal mortification and the sting of wounded pride, battling with tenderness unspeakable, and anxious longing at any cost, at all hazards, to wipe out this stain and inspire the unfortunate to redeem himself: these were the feelings in his mind. The sharpest ingredient in such a cup of bitterness is, that the parent well knows he cannot work out redemption for his boy. No other but the boy himself can do that. Prayers, and

tears, and atonements, and concealments, and all the piteous expedients of human love and misery, cannot do it. No man can redeem his brother. The coward must himself prove that he has overcome his cowardice ; the man who has failed must himself turn back the tide of fortune and win. And I do not know anything more pathetic in nature than the brave old hero trying hard to put his own heart of gold into the leaden bosom of some degenerate boy ; or the pure strong woman labouring to inspire with her own white fervent soul some lump of clay that has been given to her—God knows how—for a daughter. This was how the old lord felt. If he could but put himself, his old steadfast heart, his obdurate courage, his dogged strength of purpose, into the boy ! If there was but any way to do it !—transfusion of spirit like that fanciful medical notion of transfusion of blood. Lord Eskside would have given his old veins to be drained—his aged frame to be hacked as any physician pleased—would have had his very heart taken out of his breast had that been possible—to give the best of it to Val ; but could not, heaven help us !—could only sit and think what impotent words to say, what argu-

ments to use, when he should find him, to make the boy stand and endure like a man.

He was sitting thus, his head leaning on his hand, his shaggy eyebrows so bent over his eyes that you scarcely could see them glimmer in the caverns below, though there was a painful suffusion in them which glistened when the light caught it. A claret-jug was on the table and a single glass. He had dined late, after being out all day, and was worn out by the sickness of hope deferred, and the heaviness of disappointment. There was a little fire smouldering in the grate, but he had thrown the window open with an irritable impatience of the close small shut-up room. The distant sounds of the streets still came in, though the full tide of traffic was over. There was still a roll and murmur of distant carriages and voices, the hum of that sea which calls itself London. The old lord paid no attention. He was going over ideas which he had pondered again and again, anxiously, but with a certain languor and hopelessness in his heart. If he heard the carriage stop below, the sound of the opening door, he took no notice. What was it to him? Carriages stopped continually all through the evening. People were always

coming and going. What could it matter to him—a stranger, alone ?

He sat facing the door ; it was a habit he had fallen into since he came here—not with any expectation, but only in case—for, to be sure, some visitor might come, some one with news might come, though he did not look for anything. Even the sound of steps and voices coming up-stairs did not excite him, it was so usual. All at once, however, he roused himself. The door was thrown wide open, without any preliminary, and Lady Eskside walked straight in, her old eyes shining, her figure dilating with triumph, like a figure in a procession. The sight of her startled her husband beyond expression, yet not so much as did the other figure behind her. “ You, Catherine, you ? and you’ve got him ! ” he cried ; for there was a certain general resemblance in height and form between Dick and Val. “ I’ve got him ! ” said Lady Eskside, standing aside with that extraordinary air of triumph, to show to her husband the figure of a timid young man, respectful and hesitating, who looked at him with blue eyes, half deprecating, half apologetic. Lord Eskside’s heart, which had jumped high, sank down in his breast. He gave but one look at the stranger



whom, at first, he had taken for Valentine. "Good Lord ! do you mean to drive me mad ? My lady ! is this what you bring me for Val ?" he cried ; and turned his back upon the new-comer with feverish irritability, feeling the disappointment go to his very heart.

"Oh, my dear, forgive me !" cried Lady Esk-side ; "I was not thinking of Val for the moment. Look at him, look at him ! look at the boy again !"

"You were not thinking of Val ? In the name of heaven, who else was there to think of ?" said her husband. He was almost too angry to speak—and so sick with his disappointment, that he could have done something cruel to show it, had the means been in his way.

"Forgive me !" said my lady, putting her hand upon his arm ; "but there's news of Val. I have brought you news of him. He's ill—in his bed with fever ; oh ! when I think of it, I am half frantic to find how long it takes, with all their bonnie railways ! But he's safe. It had been more than he could bear. My poor boy !—he's been ill since the day he left us. What ails you ? what ails you, my old man ?"

“Nothing,” he said, fumbling, with his hands clasped, his shaggy eyebrows concealing any gleam of the light underneath, his lips quivering—“nothing.” It took him a minute to recover himself, to get over the sudden stilling of the storm within him, and the sudden calm that came after so much trouble. The change seemed to stop his breath, but not painfully, and rolled off loads as of Atlas himself—more than the world—from his shoulders. “Wait a moment,” said Lord Eskside, his eyebrows gradually widening; “what did you say it was? I did not catch it clearly; ill, in his bed?”

“But nothing to be frightened about—nothing to alarm us——”

“I am not alarmed, I am not alarmed!” said the old lord. To tell the truth, he was giddy with the sudden cessation of pain. “There, Catherine! it’s you I ought to think of, after such a journey,” he added, quickly coming to himself. “Sit down and rest; no doubt you’re very tired. Ill—in his bed? Then it’s all accounted for; and God be thanked!” said Lord Eskside. He said this under his breath, and drew a chair close to the smouldering fire, and put his old wife into it, grasping her by both the

arms for a moment, which was his nearest approach to an embrace.

“But you have not given a look or a thought to—him I brought with me,” said the old lady, grasping him in her turn with a forcible yet tremulous hold.

“Him you’ve brought with you?” Lord Eskside turned round with a scowl from under his shaggy eyebrows, which meant no harm, but was one of his devices to conceal emotion. He saw a fair-haired timid young man standing irresolute near the door, evidently very uneasy to find himself there, and not knowing what to do. He had Lady Eskside’s shawl on his arm, and a helpless, apologetic, deprecating look on his face. The old lord did not know what to make of him. Was it a new servant, he asked himself for a moment? But the stranger did not look like a servant. “Here is somebody waiting,” he said, in as quiet a tone as possible, for he did not want to show the impatience he felt.

“Is that all you say?” cried my lady, in keen tones of disappointment. “Oh, look at him—look at him again!”

“Sit down,” said the old lord, abruptly. “It is clear Lady Eskside means you to stay, though

she is too tired to introduce you. I ask your pardon for not knowing your name. My lady, as you and I have much to say to each other, and the night is far on, could not this business wait ? ”

“ Oh,” cried Lady Eskside with a groan, “ is that all—is that all you say ? ”

“ My lady,” said Dick, emboldened to the use of this title by hearing it used by no less a personage than Lord Eskside himself, “ I beg your pardon ; but isn’t it best for me to go ? I will come back for you in the morning before the train starts. I would rather go, if you don’t mind.” Dick had never felt himself so entirely out of his element, so painfully *de trop*, in his life. He was not used to this feeling, and it wounded him mightily—for he, too, had some pride of his own. And he had not come seeking any favour, but rather conferring one, taking a great deal of trouble voluntarily, of his own will, for what was no advantage to him. And then Dick had been made much of these two days—he had found himself elevated into a vague region of mystery, where he met with nothing but kind interested looks, phrases full of meaning which he could not penetrate, but which all

tended to make him feel himself of importance. He seemed now for the first time to come down to common life after this curious episode, and the shock was rude. He did not like it; he felt less inclined than usual to put up with anything that was disagreeable. He felt angry even, though he did not wish to show it. What was this old lord to him that he should linger about like a servant, waiting for a word?

“Oh, hush, hush!” said the old lady; “look at him again! You don’t think I would come all this way for nothing—me that have not travelled for years. Look at him—look at him again.”

“Do you call Valentine nothing? or have you gone out of your wits?” said the old lord, pettishly. “I think the young man is very sensible. Let him come back to-morrow. We have plenty to think of and plenty to talk of to-night.”

Lady Eskside was so deeply disappointed that her courage failed her; she was very tired, and so much had happened to take away her strength. The tears came into her eyes, and it was all she could do to keep herself from mere feeble crying in her weakness. “Sit down, Richard,” she said. “Oh, my dear, my dear, this is not like you!

Can you see nothing in him to tell the tale ? I have it all in my hands. Listen to me : I know where she is ; I am going to find her : I can make everything clear. It's salvation for us all—for Val, God bless him ! and for this one——”

“ For what one ? ” cried Lord Eskside hoarsely under his breath.

“ Oh ! ” cried Lady Eskside, almost with violence, thrusting her husband away from her, “ can you not see ? must I summer it and winter it to you—and can you not see ? Richard, my man,” she added, rising up suddenly, and holding out both her hands to Dick, “ you're full of sense, and wiser than I am. Don't stay here to be stared at, my dear, but go to your bed, and get a good night's rest. The woman told me there was a room for you. See that you have everything comfortable ; and good night ! We'll go down to my boy in the morning, you and me ; and God bless you, my good lad ! You'll be a comfort to all of us, father and mother, and your grandparents, though they may not have the sense to see. Good night, Richard, my man—good night ! ”

“ What does all this mean, my lady ? ” said

Lord Eskside. He had watched her proceedings with growing excitement, impatience, and an uncomfortable sense of something behind which he did not understand. "You're not a foolish woman to torment me with nonsense at such a moment. What does it mean?"

"If you had ever looked at the boy, you would have seen. It is Richard himself come back," cried the old lady: "Richard, not what he is now, as old a man as you and me, and tashed and spotted with the world; but my son as he was, when he was the joy of our hearts, before this terrible marriage, before anything had happened, when he was just too good, too kind, too stainless—or so at least you said; for me, I never can see, and never will see," cried Lady Eskside, indignantly, "that it is not a man's crown and glory, as well as a woman's, to be pure."

"My lady! my lady!" said the old lord. He was walking about the small room in his agitation; his under lip thrust out, his eyebrows in motion, his hands deep in his pockets. "What do you mean?" he cried. "Have you any foundation, or is it all another wild fancy about a likeness? A likeness!—as if in anything so serious you could trust to that."

“Do you mean to tell me you did not see it?” she said.

“Oh, see it! My lady,” said the old lord, ungenerously, with a snort of contempt, “you saw a likeness in Val when he came, a dark boy, with eyes like black diamonds, and curly brown hair, to Richard. You said he was his father’s image.” The old man ended with an abrupt, short laugh. “Catherine, for heaven’s sake, no more fancies! Have you any foundation? and the lad not even a gentleman,” he added under his breath.

“If you go by the clothes and the outside,” cried the old lady, contemptuous in her turn, “how could he be a gentleman? That poor creature’s son—nothing but a tramp—a tramp! till the fine nature in him came out, and he stopped his wandering and made a home for his mother. Was that like a gentleman or not? He’s told me everything, poor boy,” she went on, her tone melting and softening, “without knowing it—every particular; and I am going to find her to clear it all up. When Val gets well, there shall be no more mystery. We’ll take his mother home in the eye of day. She must be a changed woman—a changed woman! He’s told me everything in his innocence—how



she would sit and watch Val in his boat, but never said a word. God bless her! for she's been faithful to what light she had."

"What is all this you are saying?" said Lord Eskside. He was utterly subdued. He drew a chair close to hers and sat down, humbly putting his hand on her arm. "Catherine, you would not speak to me so if there was not something in it," he said.

The old pair sat up together far into the night. She told him everything she had found out, or thought she had found out; and he told her what he had been doing, and something of the things he had been thinking—not all, for my lady had never had those fears of Val's courage and strength which had undermined the old lord's confidence. But when she told him, weeping and smiling, of the alliance between the two boys, so unwitting of their close relationship, and of the mother's speechless adoration at a distance of the child she had given up, Lord Eskside put his hand over his face, and his old wife, holding his other hand, felt the quiver of emotion run through him, and laid her head upon his shoulder, and wept there; sweet tears! as when they were young and happiness sought that

expression, having exhausted all others. "My dear, we'll have to die and leave them soon," she said, sobbing, in his ear.

"Ay, Catherine! but we'll go together, you and me," said the old lord, pressing the hand that had held his for fifty years; and they kissed each other with tremulous lips; for was not the old love, that outlasted both sorrow and joy, more sacred, more tender, than any new?

Dick presented himself next morning in time for the train; but he was not quite like himself. He had been put on the defensive, which is not good even for the sweetest nature. Lady Eskside had bewildered him, he felt, with mysterious speeches which he could not understand—making him, in spite of himself, feel something and somebody, he could not tell why; and by so doing had put him in a false position, and subjected him to unjust slight and remark. He had not wanted to thrust himself, a stranger, into the interview between my lord and my lady. She had made him follow her against his will, and Dick felt aggrieved. It was not his doing. "Why did she drag me in where I was not wanted?" he said to himself. He was too faithful and loyal not to keep his

appointment with her, though the idea of leaving a note and hurrying away to his work did cross his mind. His work, after all, was the thing that was most important. *That* would not deceive him, as the ladies most likely would, old and young, who had established a claim upon Dick's services, he knew not how. What were ladies to him? He must go back to his work. It was with this sentiment clouding his face that he presented himself next morning, having breakfasted half-sulkily by himself. It is hard for the uninitiated to tell which is virtuous melancholy and which is sulkiness, when an early access of that disorder comes on; Dick felt very sad, and did not suspect himself of being sulky; he knocked very formally at the door of Lord Eskside's little sitting-room. The old lord himself, however, came forward to meet him, with a changed countenance. He held out his hand, and looked him in the face with an eager interest, which startled Dick. "Come in, come in," said Lord Eskside; "my lady is getting ready. We are all going together." The old man held his hand fast, though Dick was somewhat reluctant. "I was startled last night, and could not understand

you—or rather I could not understand *her*. But you must not bear me any malice,” he said, with a strange sort of agitated smile, which was bewildering to the young stranger.

“I don’t bear any malice,” said Dick, brightening up ; “it would not become me ; and to you that are—that belong to Mr Ross.”

“Yes, I belong to Mr Ross—or Mr Ross to me, it doesn’t much matter which,” said Lord Eskside. “You’ll understand better about that by - and - by ; but, Richard, my lady’s old, you know, though she has spirit for twenty men. We must take care of her—you and me.”

“Surely,” said Dick, bewildered ; and then my lady herself appeared, and took a hand of both, and looked at them, her bright old eyes shining. “I can even see another likeness in him,” she said, looking first at Dick and then at Lord Eskside ; and the old lord bent his shaggy eyebrows with a suppressed snort, and shook his head, giving her a look of warning. “Time enough,” he said—“time enough when we are there.” Dick went in the same carriage with them, and was not allowed to leave them, though his own idea was that he ought to have

travelled with Harding, who had accompanied Lady Eskside; and they talked over him in a strain full of strange allusions, which made him feel that he did not know what was going to happen—speaking of “her” and “them,” and giving glances at Dick which were utterly bewildering to him. “Here is a packet Richard left for me, though I have never had the heart to look at it,” Lord Eskside said—“the certificate of their birth and baptism.” “And that reminds me,” said my lady, “where is Richard? did he go to you? did you see him? I would not wonder but he is passing his time in London, thinking little of our anxiety. God send that he may take this news as he ought.”

Richard! there was then another Richard, Dick thought. He had been roused, as was natural, by the sound of his own name, but soon perceived, with double bewilderment, that it was not to him, but some other Richard, that the conversation referred.

“You are doing him injustice,” said Lord Eskside; “he came yesterday, but I did not see him. I was out wandering about like an old fool. He left the packet and a note for me, and said he was going to Oxford. To be sure, it

was to Oxford he said ; so we'll see him, and all can be cleared up, as you say, at once."

"To Oxford !" cried Lady Eskside, a sudden pucker coming into her forehead. "I mind now—that was what he said to me too. Now, what could *he* be wanting at Oxford ?" said the old lady with an impatient look. She said no more during the journey, but sat looking out from the window with that line of annoyance in her forehead. It felt to her somehow unjustifiable, unnecessary, that Richard should be there, in the way of finding out for himself what she had found out for him. The thought annoyed her. Just as she had got everything into her hands ! It was not pleasant to feel that the merest chance, the most trivial incident, a meeting in the streets, a word said, might forestall her. My lady was not pleased with this suggestion. "Talk of your railways," she said—"stop, stopping, every moment, and worrying you to death with waiting. A post-chaise would be there sooner !" cried Lady Eskside.

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

DICK became in a manner the head of the expedition when the party reached Oxford ; his foot was on his native heath ; he knew where to take the two old people, both of whom became more and more agitated in their different ways, as they approached to the end of their journey. He put them into a cab ; and getting on the box himself, had them driven to the river-side. Lady Esk-side grasped her old lord's hand, as they sat there together, jolting through the streets, going to this strangest incident of their lives. She was trembling, though full of resolute strength. The emergency was too much for her nerves, but not for her brave old heart which beat high with generous courage, yet with a sense of danger not to be despised or overlooked. How was she to meet and master this untamed creature of the wilds ? how secure her that she might not escape

again ? and how make the revelation to her son who had got to hate his wife, and to Valentine who knew nothing of his mother ? Lady Eskside, with a mixture of pride and terror, felt that it was all in her own hands. She must do everything. The thought made her tremble ; but it gave her a certain elation which the reader will understand, but which I cannot describe—which was not vanity nor self-importance—but yet a distinct personal pleasure and satisfaction in being thus able to set everything right for her children. I don't doubt that she had some idea that only her own penetrating eye could have made sure of Dick's identity, and only her close questioning could have elicited from him so many certain proofs ; and it seemed so just, so right, such a heavenly recompense for what she had suffered, that to her hands and no other should be given the power of setting all right. Lord Eskside was less excited. He was thinking more of the boy, less of the circumstances in which he was about to find him, and the thrill in his old frame was almost entirely that of natural anxiety to know how Val was. Dick on the box was not without his tremor too. He did not know what his mother would think of this visit



—if it would terrify her, if she would think he had been unfaithful to the charge she had laid upon him not to speak of her. He stopped the cab when they reached the river-side; and, scarcely knowing what he was about, handed Lady Eskside out. “I’ll go round by the back and open the door: that’s the house,” he said, hoarsely; and left them standing by the edge of the grey Thames, which, still somewhat swollen with spring rains, ran full and swift, sweeping round the eyot with all its willows faintly green, upon which, though they did not know it, poor Val had stranded. The sun was shining brightly, but still the river was grey; and Lady Eskside shivered and trembled with that chill of anxiety and excitement which is more penetrating than cold. “This is where Val brought me,” said the old lady, as they walked tremulously to the door. “Yes, yes, I mind it all—and there was a shawl like one of mine upon a table. Yes, yes, yes,” she said to herself, almost inarticulate—“my own shawl! Oh, how was it I was so foolish, and did not see at once that it must be *her*; and she had fled out of the place not to see me? It all comes back! She must have known it was me. It’s nothing, nothing, my dear! I’m trembling, it’s

true—how can I help it ! But all the time I am steady, steady as a rock ; you need not be feared for me.”

“ I wonder if he is in one of these rooms,” said the old lord, looking wistfully at the upper windows. They opened the garden gate, not without difficulty, for they were both very tremulous, and went in to the little garden where there was a pale glow of primroses. There they stood for perhaps a moment looking towards the house, waiting for Dick to open to them, breathless, feeling the great crisis to be near. Lady Eskside clung still to her old lord’s arm. He was not a pillar of strength, and shook, too, in his old age and agitation ; but there was strength as well as comfort in the mere touch—the sense of standing by each other in those hardest moments, as in all others. As they stood thus waiting, the door opened, and some one came out, walking towards them. He strolled out with one hand in his pocket, with the air of a man issuing forth from his own house. It was not Dick coming to open to them, to admit them. Lady Eskside dropped her husband’s arm, and gave a strange cry—a cry of astonishment and confused dismay, half querulous, half violent. Hot tears came rushing

to her eyes in the keen disappointment, mingled with wonder, which penetrated her mind. She clasped her hands together almost with a movement of anger—"Richard, *Richard!*" she cried.

• He stood for a moment silent, looking at them, confused too. "My father, and my mother," he said to himself under his breath. Then he tried to rally his powers, and put on a smile, and look composed and self-possessed, which he was not; but instead of succeeding in this attempt, grew hot and red, though he was old enough to have been done with such vanities. "This is a very unexpected meeting," he said. "Mother, excuse me if I am startled. Nothing was further from my thoughts than to see you here." Then he stopped short, and made a gulp of agitation and resumed again. "You have heard that Valentine is here? He is just the same; we must wait for the crisis. He is taken good care of——"

"Richard!" said his mother—"oh none of your pretending to me—for God's sake tell us the truth! Do you *know?*—or is it by chance you have come here?"

"It will be better to come into the house, my lady," said Lord Eskside.

I scarcely think she heard what he was saying. She put her hand upon her son's arm, grasping him almost harshly. She was too much excited to be able to contain herself. She had forgotten Val, whom the old lord was longing for. "Do you know, or do you not know?" she cried, her voice growing hoarse. Dick, who had come to the door a minute later than Richard, stood upon the threshold looking at them with a wondering countenance. But no one saw or noticed Dick. He saw the old people absorbed with this new personage, whose back was turned to him, and whom he had never seen before. The mystery was thickening, for here now was another in it, and more and more it grew incomprehensible to Dick. His was not one of the spirits that love mystery. He was open as the day, straightforward, downright. His heart sickened at this maze, at all those difficulties, at the new people who had thus come into his life. He stood looking at them painfully with a confusion in all his thoughts which utterly disconcerted and disturbed him. Then he turned abruptly on his heel and went away. Where? To his work; that at least never disappointed nor confused him. No strangers came into it to tangle the

threads, to turn it all into chaos. He had heard how Valentine was, and that the crisis had not yet come ; and he was half indignant, half sad, in his sense of a disturbance which was wholly unaccountable and unjustifiable. The house was his—Dick's—it did not belong to the stranger who had preceded him to the door, and was standing there now in colloquy with the old couple, who evidently had forgotten Dick. What right had they to take him up and cast him down—to take possession of his house, which had cost him dear, which was his, and not theirs, as if he were nothing in it ? Dick strode away, more hurt, angry, and “put out,” than he had ever been in his life. He threw off his Sunday coat (none the better for these railway journeys), and, hastily putting on his working-jacket, hurried off to the rafts. There a man could always find something to occupy him—there was honest work, uncomplicated by any bewilderments. He went and thrust himself into it, almost forgetting that he was head-man in his anxiety to dislodge all these disturbing questions from his mind, and to feel himself in reality what he was.

“I think,” said Richard, not without excitement himself, but trying hard not to show his

rapid changes of colour, his breathless heat and agitation, "that my father gives good advice, and that you ought to come into the house, where at least we can talk with quiet and decency. There is no reason why you shouldn't come in," he said, with nervous vehemence, pushing open the door behind him ; "or the Queen, for that matter, if she were here. The mistress of it is as spotless as any one of you. That much I may say."

Lady Eskside did not say another word. She grasped her old lord's arm again, and suffered herself to be led into the little parlour, which she had seen before on another occasion, little thinking whose house it was. Her eye, I need not say, was caught at once by the little shawl on the table. She pointed at it hastily to her husband, who stared, totally unaware what it was to which his attention was directed. They put her into an old carved chair, which was one of poor Dick's latest acquisitions before all this wonderful commotion began. Richard, scarcely knowing what he was doing, led the way, introduced them into the strange little room, as a man does when he is in his own house. He had got to feel as if it were his own house. Already he had passed many hours there, feeling himself

no intruder. He received his mother and placed her in Dick's easy-chair as he might have received her in the Palazzo Graziani ; and the old lady, with her keen eyes, caught at this, though he was as unconscious of it as a man could be.

"You are at home here," she said to him, with keen suspicion—"it's no strange place to you, Richard, though it's strange, strange, to my old lord and me. What does it mean, man?—what does it mean? Have you known all the time? Have you been keeping it secret to drive us wild? What is it?—what is it you mean?"

"Where is the boy?" said Lord Eskside. "I do not enter into this question between your mother and you. You will satisfy us both, doubtless, about the mystery,—which, as you all well know, is a thing I abhor. Richard," said the old man, with a break in his voice, "I want to see the boy."

"Listen first, sir," said Richard, indignant ; "how my mother has found out, I don't know ; but she is right. Chance—or Providence, if you like the word better—has thrown Val into his—mother's hands. I guessed it when I saw you at Rossraig, and I came here at once and found it was so——"

“ You guessed it ? God forgive you, Richard ! You’ve known, then, all the time ? you’ve exposed us and Val to abuse and insult, and maybe killed the lad and broken my old lord’s heart. Oh, God forgive you, Richard ! is this the way you’ve done your duty to us and your boy ? ”

Lady Eskside wrung her hands. Her old face flushed and grew pale ; hot tears filled her eyes. Something of personal disappointment was in the pang with which she felt this supposed deception. Women, I fear, are more apt to think of deception than men. Lady Eskside, in the sharpness of her disappointment, rashly jumped to the conclusion that Richard’s knowledge was not an affair of yesterday ; that there was something behind more than had been told to her ; that perhaps, for anything she could tell, he had been visiting this woman, who was his lawful wife, as if the tie between them had been of quite a different character—or perhaps, even, who knows, was trying to palm upon them as his wife some one who did not possess any right to that title. In suspicion, as in other things, it is the first step that costs the most. Lord Eskside did not go so far as his wife did, but the thought began to penetrate his mind too, that if Richard had



known this, even for a day, without disclosing it, he had exposed them to cruel and needless pain.

“Catherine,” said the old lord, “we need not quarrel to make matters worse. If he recognises his wife and his other son at last, and it is true that they are here, let us give our attention to make sure of that, and prevent trouble in the future. It is not a question of feeling, but of law and justice. Yes, no doubt, feeling will come in; but you cannot change your son, my lady, any more than he can change his father and mother, which, perhaps, he would have little objection to do. We must put up with each other, such as we are.”

“You do me injustice, sir,” cried Richard; “both you and my mother. There has been no deception in the matter. You shall hear how it happened afterwards; but in the mean time it is true that she is here, mother. I met her at Val’s bedside two days ago for the first time, without warning. I believe if I had given her warning she would have escaped again—but for Val. I am not made of much account between you,” said Richard, with a painful smile. “I have little occasion to be vain. You, my mother,

and her, my—wife ; what you think of is not me, but Val.”

“ Oh Richard ! you would aye have been first with me if you would have let me,” said Lady Eskside, as ready to forgive as she had been to censure, her heart melting at this reproach, which was true. As for the old lord, he was not so easily moved either to blame or to pardon. He got up and walked about the room while Richard, still flushed with excitement and a certain indignation, told them the story of the photograph, and his recognition of his wife’s face so strangely brought before him by his son. Richard gave his own version of the story, as was natural. He allowed them to perceive the violence of the shock this discovery had given him, without saying very much on the subject ; and described how, though incapable of anything else in the excitement of the moment, he had put force upon himself to make his wife’s residence known to his lawyer, and to have a watch kept upon her movements. What he said was perfectly true, with just that gloss which we all put upon our own proceedings, showing them in their best aspect ; and Lady Eskside received it as gospel, taking her son’s hand into her own,

following every movement of his lips with moist eyes, entering with tender and remorseful sympathy into those hidden sentiments in his mind which she had doubted the existence of, and which, up to this moment, he had never permitted her to see. Her husband, however, walked about the room while the tale went on, listening intent, without losing a word, but not so sympathetically — staring hard at Dick's homely ornamentations, his bits of carving, his books, all the signs of individuality which were in the place. I don't know that he remarked their merits, though he walked from one to another, with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, and stared almost fiercely at the carving, with eyes wellnigh hidden under his shaggy brows. He did not say anything while Lady Eskside, weeping and smiling, made her peace with her son. When she cried, "Oh yes, my dear, my dear, I understand!" he only worked his expressive eyebrows, giving no articulate evidence of emotion. "Val is upstairs, I suppose? I am going to see him," was all he said in the pause after Richard's story concluded. Lord Eskside climbed up the narrow wooden staircase with a shrug of his shoulders. He was not satis-

fied with his son's story, as his wife had been. He opened one door after another before he found the room in which Val was lying. To see the boy stretched there on the bed, with vacant eyes, half dosing, half waking, but quite unconscious of his visitor, went to the old lord's heart far more than Richard's story had done. "If he had spoken out like a man, this might have been spared," he said to himself ; and bent over Val's bed to hide the momentary contortion of his features, which brought the water to his eyes. "My poor lad !" he said, with hidden anguish, scarcely noticing for the first moment the nurse on the other side of the bed. She rose with a sudden dilation of terror in her eyes. She had never seen Lord Eskside, and did not know who he was ; but felt by instinct that he had been brought hither by the terrible wave of novel events which was about to sweep over her head, and that he had come to take away from her her boy.

Lord Eskside looked at her across the bed where Val was lying. He made her a low bow, with that courtly politeness which now and then the homely old lord brought forth, like an old patent of nobility. But it was difficult for him to know what to say to her—and she gave him

no assistance, standing there with a look of panic which disturbed the still, abstracted dignity of her ordinary aspect. "I am afraid I have startled you," he said, his voice softening. "Don't be alarmed. I am your—husband's father. I am sorry, very sorry, that we never met before."

She made no answer, but only a slight tremulous movement intended for a curtsy; then some sense of the necessities of her position, struggling with her fright, she said faintly, "He is just the same—on Saturday he'll be better, please God."

"On Saturday he'll be better! God bless you, my dear! You seem sure? How can you be sure?" cried the old lord, with his eyelids all puckered together to hide the moisture within.

She put up her hand with a warning gesture. "Hush," she said; "it makes him restless when he hears a voice"—then a curious, exquisite twilight seemed to melt over her face as if some last reflections of a waning light had caught her, illuminating her for the moment with the tenderest subdued radiance—"except mine," she added in tones so low as to be almost inaudible. The old lord was deeply touched. What with

his boy's condition, which was worse than he expected, and this voice of great, subdued, and restrained feeling—emotion that had no object but to conceal itself—all his prejudices floated away. He was not in the least conscious of being affected by the beauty which was concealed, too, like the emotion—indeed he would have denied that she had any beauty ; but the suppression of both and ignoring of them by their possessor had a great effect upon him ; for there was nothing in the world more noble in the eyes of the old Scots lord than this power of self-restraint. He went round to her softly, walking with elaborate precaution, and took her hand for a moment ; “ God bless you ! ” he said ; then, with another look at Val, he left the room. He himself, even with all the self-control he had, might have broken down and betrayed the passionate love and anxiety in him had he waited longer there.

Lady Eskside was seated in the parlour alone when he entered ; she was leaning back in Dick's great chair, with her handkerchief to her eyes. “ He has gone to get the doctor, that we may know everything exactly,” she said. “ He ” had changed to her. She had taken back her own son, her very child, into her heart, (had he not

the best right?) and it was Richard who was "he," not any one else. She was so tender, so happy, so deeply moved by this revolution, that she could scarcely speak to her husband, who, she felt instinctively, had not been subjected to the same wonderful change.

"I have just seen him—and his mother," said Lord Eskside.

"Seen *him*—the boy? Oh my poor Val!" cried the old lady, weeping; and then she raised her hands and turned to her husband with something which was half an apology and half a reproach. "I feel as if I had got my Richard back—our own boy—and I don't seem able to think of anything else—not even Val."

Lord Eskside took another turn round the little parlour. "I don't want to hurt your feelings, my lady," he said; "but if Richard had had the sense to write to you or me when he wrote to that fine London solicitor of his, all this might have been spared. Sandy Pringle's miserable letter, and all that stramash about the election, and my poor Val's fever—maybe his life——"

"His life! his life!" she said, starting up in alarm from her chair.

“Who can say? It’s in God’s hands, not ours. His mother says he’ll be better on Saturday,” Lord Eskside said, turning away.

Meanwhile Dick had thrown himself with a certain passion into his work, feeling a curious reluctance which he had never experienced before to receive the orders of the customers, and to run hither and thither launching boats into the water, drawing them up again, dealing out oars and cushions as he had done for years. If he could have pushed out on the stream himself as Val had done, if he could have rowed a race for life or death with some rival oar, that would have calmed him more than anything. Gentlemen like Val, Lord Eskside’s heir, future possessor of all those lovely woods, and of the grey old house full of beautiful things, which was so fresh in Dick’s memory, could afford to calm themselves down in that way. But Dick, who was only a working man, could not afford it. To him his work was everything, and to that alone, when all his nerves were tingling, could he resort to bring him down again from any fanciful strain of emotion. He ought to be glad to have it to do, Dick felt; for had he been idle, it seemed to him that the beating of his



heart would have driven him wild. Now, let it swell as it would, he had enough to do to keep him occupied, and no time to think, heaven be praised ! It was, as it happened fortunately, a very busy day. Dick forgot his dinner-hour—forgot everything but the necessity for exertion to keep him from himself. Sometimes he ordered his subordinates about almost fiercely, speaking to them as he had never been heard to speak before. Sometimes, not thinking, he would rush himself to do their work, while they stood by astonished, with a manner so unusual that no one knew what to make of him. Was it possible that the fever was “catching,” and that Dick too was going to have it ?

But it was a very busy day, and there was plenty of work for everybody, which is a thing that stops speculation. In the afternoon Lord Eskside, straying about the place, found himself on the rafts. He had not intended to go there, nor did he know when he got there what he wanted. The old lord was very restless, anxious, and unhappy. He could do nothing indoors—not even keep still and out of the way, which is the first duty of man in a house where sickness is ; and the unfamiliar place did not tempt him

to walk as he might have done at home. He had done what he could to occupy himself after the brief interview with the doctor, who could say nothing more than had already been said, that no change could come until Saturday, when, for good or evil, the crisis might be looked for. After this Lord Eskside went to the hotel where Richard was living, and engaged rooms, and did what he could for the comfort of his wife, who had come here in her old age without any attendant. But when this slender business was accomplished, he had nothing further to do. He could not keep indoors in Dick's little parlour, which they had taken possession of, none of them reflecting that there was another proprietor whose leave had not been asked or given ; nor could he linger at the outer door, where Harding hung about in attendance. The old lord had no heart to say anything to Harding ; he went to the rafts at last in simple restlessness, having, I almost think, forgotten all about Dick. I suppose it diverted him for the moment from his own heavy thoughts and painful tension of suspense, to see the movement in this busy place—the coming and going—the boats run out into the stream with a pleasant

rustle—the slim outriggers now and then carried back all wet and dripping to the boathouses, as one party after another came in. The stir of indifferent cheerful life, going on carelessly all the same under the eyes of a spectator paralysed by anxiety and distress, has a curious bewildering effect upon the mind. He had been there for some minutes before he even noticed Dick's presence at all.

He perceived him at last with a thrill of surprise. Dick had transmogrified himself; in his working dress he looked more “a gentleman” than he had done in his Sunday coat. He had a straw hat instead of the black one, a blue flannel coat, and noiseless white boating shoes. The excitement against which he was struggling gave a double animation to his aspect, and made him hold himself more erect than usual, with all the energy of wounded pride. Lord Eskside felt that it must be some consciousness of his true position that gave to Dick's youthful figure that air of superiority which certainly he had not noticed in him before; but it was in reality a contrary influence, the determination to show that he held his own natural position unaffected by all the mysterious

hints he had listened to, and found in his work a blessed refuge from the mystery which he did not understand, but was impatient of, and despised. Dick passed Lord Eskside over and over again, in his manifold occupations, touching his hat as he did so, but taking no further notice of his travelling companion. The old lord, on his side, made no demonstration of interest ; but he took up a position on the edge of the wharf, and followed the young fellow with his eyes. Dick had pushed back his hat, showing his fair locks and open face ; he was never still for a moment, darting hither and thither with lithe light frame, and feet that scarcely seemed to touch the boards. How workmanlike he was, in his element, knowing exactly what to do, and how to direct the others who looked to him ! and yet, Lord Eskside thought, so unlike any one else, so free in his step, so bold in his tranquil confidence, so much above the level of the others. He sat down on a bench close by, and knitting his heavy brows, sat intent upon that one figure, watching him more and more closely. There were a great many boating men about, for it was just the opening of the season, and some of them were impatient, and none were especially

disposed to respect the feelings even of the head man at Styles's. "Here, you, Brown," said one young man in flannel; "Brown, I say! Can't the fellow hear? Are we to wait all day?" "Look alive, can't you?" shouted a second; "he's not half the handy fellow he was." "Spoilt by the undergrads," said another; "he's the pet of all the Eton men." "Brown, Brown! By Jove! I'll speak to Styles if this goes on. You, Dick! can't you hear?"

I don't know if Dick felt any annoyance at their impatient outcries, or resented such an address in Lord Eskside's presence. But he came to the call, as was his duty, his cheeks a little flushed, but ready to do whatever was wanted of him. "Here, Brown," said the boating man, carelessly; but he never ended his order. For, before another word could be said, Lord Eskside, glooming, with knitted brows, came hurriedly up to Dick, and put his arm through his. "This is no occupation for you," said the old lord. "It is time that this was over;" and before the eyes of the astonished lookers-on, he led him away, too much astonished for the moment to resist. "Who is the old fellow?" asked the boating men; and when

(for rank will out, like murder) it was whispered who "Brown's friend" was, a sudden awe fell upon the rafts. A lord! and he had put his arm familiarly into Dick Brown's, and carried him off, declaring this to be no work for him! What could it mean? The effect produced by Val's accident was nothing to the ferment which rose, up and down the river-side, when it was known that a lord—an old lord—not one of your wild undergrads—had walked off Styles's raft, in broad daylight, arm-in-arm with Dick Brown.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

VIOLET went back to Edinburgh the day after her meeting in the woods with Dick. Her heart was so full of what she had heard, that it was all she could do to keep the particulars from old Jean, who was her guardian and companion when, in her trouble, poor child, she managed to escape for a day or two to the Hewan. By a strong effort she kept from talking over the details with her homely old friend ; but she could not keep from her the fact that Val was ill. I need not say that Jean knew well enough that there was “something wrong” between the two families—a thing she had been aware of, with the curious instinct which all our servants possess—almost before they knew it themselves. And by this time, of course, Jean knew all that popular opinion said about Mr Pringle’s supposed guilt in respect to the elec-

tion; and she was aware that there had been painful scenes in the house, and that neither his wife, nor his sons, nor his daughter “held with” the unlucky culprit, who, since the election had gone about with drooping head “as if he was gaun to be hanged,” old Jean said. Jean was very much shocked and distressed when she heard of Val’s illness. “I thought there was something out o’ the ordinary,” she said; “him away when there was yon grand dinner, and a strange look about the house a’thegether. Ye may aye ken when the family’s in trouble by the look o’ the house. Poor callant! there’s naething like trouble of mind for bringing on thae fevers; you may take my word, Miss Violet, it’s something about that weary election. Eh, what creatures men are! Can they no fecht fair, and take their neives to ane anither, instead of casting up auld ill stories? They say that’s women’s way; for my part, I’m of the opinion, that if women are ill with their tongues, men are waur.”

“But fevers are not brought on by trouble of mind,” said Violet, endeavouring to argue against her own inmost convictions. “Fevers are brought on by—oh, by very different things,



by bad air, and—— you may read it all in the papers—— Oh, I hope, I hope it is not that, Jean !”

“If you put your faith in the papers,” said Jean, contemptuously, “that say one thing the day, and another the morn, just as it suits them ! Oh ay, they’ll tell you an honest midden is waur than an ill story, that creeps into the heart and saps the strength. I’m fond o’ the fresh air mysel. We’re used to it here up at the Hewan, and it’s like meat and drink ; but if some ill-wisher was to rake up a nasty story about my auld man that’s in heaven, or my John, what do you think would harm me maist, Miss Vi’let—that, or a’ the ill smells in Lasswade ? and I’ll no say but what that corner by the smiddy is like to knock you down—though Marion Miller’s bairns, so far as I can see, are no a prin the waur.”

Violet did not venture upon any reply, for, indeed, it seemed to her innocent soul that mental causes were far more likely to make one ill than those vulgar evils upon which the newspapers insisted. For her own part, she felt very sure, as old Jean did, that Val’s illness arose from the misery and excitement of the

election, and not from any lesser cause. I suppose this was quite foolish, and that the poor young member for Eskshire must have gone into some cottage, or passed by some drain in the course of his canvassing, which was the real occasion of his fever. My ignorance is too great on such subjects to warrant me in venturing the supposition that the other part of him, that mental part so much discredited and put out of court in the present day—the one thing about us which nobody can quite account for—had anything to do with it. But Violet and old Jean, both of them as ignorant as myself though more courageous—and both convinced in their different ways that this special development of protoplasm called by ignorant persons their mind, is the most important part of us—unhesitatingly ignored the drain, which no doubt did the mischief, and set down Val's fever to his misery with all the evident precision of cause and effect. Violet could not say any more to the old woman whose remarks she neither dared to be sympathetic with or irritated by, since either demonstration would have betrayed her father, who had done it all. So she hurried home next morning, attended by her maid,

breathless till she reached the mother, the natural receiver of all her complaints and troubles. Mrs Pringle saw there was something to tell from the first glance at Violet's countenance, in which all her emotions writ themselves easily to the accustomed eye. She sent her up-stairs to "take off her things," and followed her, hoping that old Lady Eskside might perhaps have met the child somewhere, and melted towards her, the only imaginable way in which any renewal of friendship could be possible. When she heard what it was, however, Mrs Pringle shook her head. "My dear," she said, "you are letting your feelings run away with you. Men don't get ill and take fevers from excitement except in novels. No doubt there must be something wrong about Rosscraig; these old houses are never quite to be depended upon. God knows that letter has done you and me harm enough, more harm than it could do to Valentine—but we have taken no fever. I am very sorry for him, poor fellow; but he's young, and has a good constitution—no doubt he'll pull through; and my Vi must not cry like this for a man that is nothing to her," the good mother said, proudly—putting her hand-

kerchief and her hand, which was still softer, across Violet's streaming eyes to stop her tears.

"Oh, mamma, how can I help it?" sobbed poor Vi.

"My darling, you must help it. I am not saying it will be easy. Me myself, with children of my own that take up my mind, I find myself thinking of that poor boy when I have plenty other things to think of. Ah, Violet, you kiss me for that! but, my dear, ask yourself—after what has come and gone—how could it ever, ever be?"

"No one wants it to be!" said Violet, with one of her vehement impulses of maiden pride, raising her head from her mother's shoulder with a hot angry flush covering her face; "but one does not cease—to take an interest—in one's—friend, because of any quarrel. I am friends with him for ever, whatever happens. No one can say anything against that. And we are cousins, whatever happens. I told Mr Brown so."

Mrs Pringle shook her head over the friendship and cousinship which continued to take so warm "an interest" in Val; but she was wise and made no further remark. "I wonder who

this Mr Brown may be ?” was all she said, and instantly set her wits to work to find something for Violet to do. In a house where there were so many boys this was not difficult; and it cannot be questioned that at this crisis of her young existence the Hewan would have been a much less safe residence for Violet than Moray Place.

The next two days were each made memorable by a note from Dick. These missives were couched almost in the same words, and Violet, reading them over and over again, could extract nothing from them more than met the eye. Dick, in a very careful handwriting, too neat perhaps, and legible, wrote as follows:—

“MADAM, Mr Ross is just the same. This is not to be wondered at, as I told Miss Violet that there could be no change till Saturday. With your permission I will write again to-morrow.—Your obedient servant,

“RICHARD BROWN.”

Even Mrs Pringle could find nothing to remark upon in this brief epistle. “I wonder how he knows your name?” was all she said,

and Violet did not feel it necessary to enter into any particulars on this point. The second bulletin was just like the first. Mrs Pringle had this note in her pocket in the evening after dinner when her husband came up to her with an excited look, and thrust the little local Eskside paper, the 'Castleton Herald,' into her hand. "Look at this!" he said, pointing out a paragraph to her with a hand that trembled. How glad she was then that the news conveyed no shock to her, and that Violet knew with certainty the state of the matter which the newspaper unfolded so mysteriously! "We regret to learn," said the 'Herald,' "that the new member for the county, Mr Ross, whose election so very lately occupied our pages, lies dangerously ill in England of fever—we suppose of that typhoid type which has lately made so much havoc in the world, and threatened still greater havoc than it has made. We have no information as to how the disease was contracted, but in the mean time Lasswade and the neighbourhood have been thrown into alarm and gloom by the sudden departure of such members of the noble family of Eskside as were still remaining at Rosscraig. We trust before

our next week's issue to be able to give a better account of Mr Ross's state."

"I knew Val was ill," said Mrs Pringle, composedly; "Violet heard of it at Eskside." She could not refrain from a stroke of vengeance as she handed the paper back to him. "I hope you are satisfied with your handiwork now," she said.

"My handiwork?"

"Just yours," said Mrs Pringle—"just yours, Alexander; and if the boy should die—which as good as him have done—what will your feelings be?"

"My feelings!" said Mr Pringle; "what have I to do with it?—did I give him his fever? Of course it must have been bad air or some blood-poisoning—or something. These are the only ways in which fever communicates itself;" but as he spoke (for he was not a bad man) his lips quivered, and there was a tremor in his voice.

"It is easy to say that—very easy to say it—and it may be true; but if you take the heart and strength out of a man, and leave him no power to throw off the ill thing when it comes? Alexander," said Mrs Pringle, solemnly, "I will

never hold up my head again in this world if anything happens to Val !”

“ You speak like a fool—or a woman ! It comes to much the same thing,” cried her husband ; and he went away down-stairs and shut himself into his library quivering with the hot sudden rage which belongs to his conscience-stricken state. How miserable he was, trying to study a case in which he had to speak next day, and able to understand nothing except that Valentine Ross was ill, perhaps dying, and through his means ! He had never meant that. He had meant to have his revenge for an imaginary wrong, and many little imaginary slights, and perhaps to make his young supplanter lose his election ; but that he might put Val’s life in danger or injure him seriously had never entered into Mr Pringle’s thoughts. He tried to persuade himself that it was no concern of his, pursuing in an undercurrent, as his eyes went over his law-papers, all the arguments about sanitary dangers he had ever read. “ What a fool I am to think *that* could have had anything to do with it !” he cried, throwing away his papers when he could bear it no longer, and beginning to pace up and down his room. What a burn-



ing restless pain he had at his heart ! He cast about him vaguely in a kind of blank hopelessness what he could do, or if he could do anything. This he had never meant. He would not (he said to himself) have hurt Val or any one, for all the Eskside estates ten times over ; and if anything happened to the boy he could never hold up his head again, as his wife said.

Mr Pringle had been wretched enough since that miserable election day. He had been conscious that even his own friends looked coldly upon him, suspecting him of something which went too far for ordinary political animosity or the fair fighting of honourable contest ; and feeling that his own very family, and even the wife of his bosom, were against him, though Mrs Pringle, after her first very full and indignant expression of her opinion, had said no more on the subject. Still he had not her moral support, a backing which had scarcely ever failed him before ; and he had the sense of having broken all the ties of friendship with the Eskside family—old ties which, though he did not love the Rosses, it was painful altogether to break. He had thrown away those ties, and made his adversaries bitter and his friends suspicious. So little was

Mr Pringle a bad man, that he had pursued these thoughts for a long time in his secret heart without recollecting that, should Valentine die, he would be reinstalled in his position as heir-presumptive. When this suddenly flashed upon him, he threw himself in his chair and covered his face with his hands. In that case it would be murder, mere murder ! it would be as if he had killed the boy for the sake of his inheritance. This startled him beyond anything I can say. Perhaps the profoundest and most impassioned of all the prayers that were said that night for Val's recovery rose in a sudden anguish of remorse and surprised guilt from the heart of Val's enemy. He shook like a man struck with palsy ; his nerves contracted ; the veins stood out on his forehead. He had never meant to harm the boy—never, never, God knows !—except in some momentary way, by a little shame, a little disappointment, which could have made no real difference in so happy and prosperous a life. The pain of this thought gripped him as with the crushing grasp of a giant. What could he do, he said to himself, writhing in his chair—what could he do to make amends ? If he could but have believed in pilgrimages, how gladly would he

have set out bare-footed to any shrine, if that would have bought back the young life that was in danger ! Heaven help him ! of all the people concerned there was no one so entirely to be pitied as poor Mr Pringle, lying there prostrate in his chair without any strength left in him, bodily or mental, or any one to back him up, saying to himself that perhaps it might be that he had murdered Val. He seemed to see before his eyes the bold handsome boy, the fine young fellow all joyous and triumphant in the glory of his youth ; and was it his hand—a man with children of his own whom he loved—that had stricken Valentine down ?

Next day—next “lawful day,” as we say in Scotland, for a Sunday intervened—Mr Pringle broke down in his case before the courts, and looked so distracted and miserable that the very Lords of Session took notice of it. “Sandy Pringle is breaking up early,” Lord Birkhill said to Lord Caldergrange ; “he never had any constitution to speak of.” “Perhaps it is family affection and anxiety about young Ross of Esk-side,” said Lord Caldergrange to Lord Birkhill ; and these two learned authorities, both old enough to have been Sandy Pringle’s father, chuckled

and took snuff together over his family affection and his early breakdown. The news from the 'Castleton Herald' about Val's illness was copied that morning into all the Edinburgh papers. Mr Pringle himself, being of the Liberal party, saw only the 'Scotsman,' where it was simply repeated ; but when he was leaving the Parliament House, his son Sandy came to him with the 'Courant,' which, as everybody knows, is the Conservative paper,—the one in which a *communiqué* from the Eskside party would naturally appear. "Have you seen this, sir?" said Sandy, not, his father thought, without a glimmer of vindictive satisfaction. They were all against him, wife and children, friends and circumstances. But the paragraph in the 'Courant' was one of a very startling description, and had already woke up the half of Edinburgh—everybody who knew or professed to know anything of the Eskside family—to wonder and interest. The 'Courant' gave first the paragraph from the 'Herald,' then added another of its own. "We are glad to be able to add that more favourable news has been received this morning of Mr Ross's condition. The crisis of the fever is now past, and all the symptoms, we understand, are hopeful." Then

came the further information, which took away everybody's breath. "We are authorised to state," said the 'Courant,' "that Mr Ross, whose severe illness at such an interesting juncture of his life has called forth so much public interest and sympathy, was fortunately at the house of his mother, the Hon. Mrs Richard Ross, in Oxford, when the first symptoms of fever made their appearance, and accordingly had from the first every medical attention, as well as the most devoted nursing which affection could give."

The paper fell out of Mr Pringle's hand when he had read this. Sandy grasped him by the arm, thinking he would have fallen too. "For heaven's sake," cried Sandy, in a fierce whisper, "don't make an exhibition of yourself *here*!" Mr Pringle did not answer a word, not even to the apologies with which, when they were safe out of the crowded precincts of the Parliament House, his son followed these hasty unfilial words. He went home to Moray Place in a condition of mind impossible to describe, feeling himself like a man caught in a snare. The Hon. Mrs Richard Ross, his mother! Had he really read those words in black and white? Were they no fiction, but true? His heart was re-

lieved a little, for Val was better ; but how could he ever extricate himself from the labyrinth he had got into ? He had defied the Rosses to produce this mother, and her appearance seemed to Mr Pringle to close up every place of repentance for him, and to put him so terribly in the wrong that he could never face his friends again, or the public which knew him to be the author of that fatal letter to the electors of Eskshire. Surely no sin ever had such condign and instantaneous punishment. He was not a murderer, that was a thing to be thankful for ; but he could be proved a liar—a maker of cruel, unfounded statements—a reporter of scandals ! He shut himself up in his library, making some pretence of work to be done. As for Sandy, he did not go in at all, being angry and unhappy about the whole business. That Valentine's mother should be found, and his rights, which Sandy had never doubted, fully established, he was heartily glad of. Mrs Pringle's wise training had saved Sandy from even a shadow of that folly of expectation which had so painfully affected his father ; but Sandy was indignant beyond description, hurt in his pride, and mortified to the heart, that his father should have put himself in such a mean

position. I do not think there was any tingling recollection in him of the blow Val had given him. If he had borne malice, it would have vanished utterly at the first mention of Val's illness ; but he did not bear any malice. He bore another burden, however, more heavy—the burden of shame for his father's unwarrantable assault, which, out of respect for his father, he could not openly disown, but must share the disgrace of, though he loathed the offence. I think Sandy may be excused if he felt himself too cross, too wretched in his false position, to face the rest of the household, and convey to them this startling news.

They had, however, their news too, scarcely less startling. It was the Monday after the Saturday on which Val had passed the crisis of his fever, and Sunday had been very trying to these two women in its entire cessation of news, as Sunday so often is in cases of anxiety. When Dick's letter at last came, there was something in it which they scarcely noticed in their first agitation of joy, but which, by dint of much reading, came out very strongly at last to their puzzled perceptions. There was an indescribable indefinite change in their correspondent's style.

But the reader shall judge for himself what this was.

“DEAR MADAM,—I am happy to be able to tell you that the crisis is over, and Valentine is decidedly better. Perhaps you are aware that all the family are here. He has recognised us all, and, though weak, will soon regain his strength, the doctor thinks. Other things have happened, of a very wonderful kind, which I can scarcely write about ; but I hope it may now be possible that I may one day see you, and explain everything to Miss Violet which she may wish to know. I do not like to run the risk of agitating Valentine by telling him that I am writing, but, if you will permit me, I will write again ; and I hope you will always be so very kind as to think of me, whatever may be the change in circumstances, as yours and Miss Violet’s obedient servant,

“RICHARD.”

“What does it mean ?” said Mrs Pringle. “I am afraid the young man is taking too much upon himself. To sign himself just ‘Richard’ to you and me, is a piece of presumption, Vi ; and



to call Lord Eskside's grandson 'Valentine!' I am not bigoted about rank, as you know; but this is too much."

Violet was confounded too. "Perhaps in nursing he has got familiar without knowing it," she said. "Oh, mamma, you could not think he was presumptuous if you had seen Mr Brown."

"That is all very well, my dear," said Mrs Pringle. "I believe he is a good young man; but perhaps it was a little rash to take him into your confidence. I think I heard your papa come in. Go and see if he is in the library. It might be a comfort to him to know that Val is better. Go; and if you see an opportunity, tell him. Say I have had a letter;—that is all that it is needful to say."

Violet, though reluctant, obeyed; and Mrs Pringle read Dick's letter again, not knowing what to make of it. What did he mean by signing himself "Richard"? and calling Val by his Christian name? Her conclusion was, that this boatman, in whom Violet had so rashly put confidence, was presuming upon the girl's openness and innocence. Mrs Pringle thanked heaven that her child "had the sense" to ask him

to write to her mother, who was quite safe, and quite able to manage any presuming person. She could not make up her mind about this, feeling an uneasy consciousness in the letter of something unexplained, something more than met the eye, to which, however, she had no clue ; but she resolved, at least, that this young man should have no further encouragement ; that she would herself write to him, thanking him for his communication, and politely dropping him, as a woman of Mrs Pringle's age and condition knows how to do. Perhaps it had been imprudent of Violet to refer to him at all ; but happily it was an imprudence of which no further harm need come.

Meanwhile Violet went down-stairs to the library, somewhat tremulous, and half afraid of the morose tones and look into which of late her father had fallen. When she went in, he snatched up some of his papers, and pretended to be studying them very closely ; the 'Courant' lay at his side upon the writing-table ; but it was the law-papers, and not the 'Courant,' which Mr Pringle pretended to read. Violet made a shy circle round the table, not knowing if she might venture to speak. Her courage failed her, until she

suddenly remarked, underneath the shadow of the hand which supported his head, that her father was watching her, and that his face was very grey and pallid in the noonday light. This gave her resolution enough to conquer her timidity. She went up to him, and put her hand softly on his shoulder.

"Papa," she said, "I came to tell you that Valentine is better to-day. Mamma has just had a letter——"

"I know he is better," said Mr Pringle, with a sigh ; and then he pointed out to her the notice in the paper. "He is better ; but there is more behind—more than we know."

Vi read the paragraph wondering. It did not affect her except with surprise. "His mother?" she said ; "I never knew——" and then she be-thought herself suddenly of all that had passed, and of that fatal attack upon Valentine which had (no doubt) brought on his fever, and which threatened to separate him from her for ever. "Oh, papa!" she cried suddenly, with a flash from her eyes which seemed to scorch the culprit like a gleam of angry yet harmless lightning ; then she added, looking at him fixedly, with indignant firmness : "But you are glad of this ?

glad he is better? glad his mother is found, and that everything will go well?"

Mr Pringle paused a moment looking at her. He was afraid to contradict her. He answered hurriedly, half servilely: "Yes, yes—I'm glad;" then, with a groan—"Vi, I am made a fool of. I am proved a poor, mean, paltry liar; that was never what I meant to be. Perhaps I said more than was right; but it was for justice, Vi—yes, it was for justice, though you may not believe what I say."

If you consider all that Violet had suffered, you will perceive how hard it was for her all at once to look upon this question impartially, to believe what her father said. She turned away her head from him in natural resentment. Then her tender heart was touched by the tones of wretchedness in his voice.

"Yes," he said, getting up from his chair, "you may think it was all ill feeling—and so many think; but it was for justice too. And now, apparently, things are turning out as I never expected. I did not believe in this woman, and God knows whether it may not be a cheat still. But if this is true that they are bold enough to put in the newspaper, then," said Mr

Pringle, with a groan, "I'm in the wrong, my dear—I am in the wrong, and I don't know what to do."

He sank down again, leaning his head on the table, and hiding his face in his hands. Vi's heart melted altogether. She put her soft arm round his neck, and bent down her head upon his. She did not feel the bitterness of being in the wrong. It seemed to her innocent soul that there was so easy a way to shake off that burden. She clasped her father round the neck and whispered consolation. "Papa, dear! you have nothing to do but to say this to them. Oh, what makes you think you don't know what to do? Say you were wrong, and that you are sorry! One is so certain that this must be the right thing."

He shook her away not unkindly but with a little impatience. "You don't know—you are too young to know," he said.

"Papa? can there be any doubt?" said Violet, in the majesty of her innocence. "When one has done wrong, one undoes it, one confesses that it was wicked. What else? Is it not the first lesson one learns in life?" said the girl, serene in perfect certainty, and sadly superior

to her age, in what she considered her experience of that existence of which she already knew the sorrows. She stood over him as grave and sweet as an angel, and spoke with entire and childlike confidence in her abstract code. "We all may be wrong," said Violet, "the best of us ; but when we find it out we must say so, and ask pardon of God and of those whom we have wronged, papa. Is there any other way ?"

## CHAPTER XXXIX.

OF all the persons involved at this crisis, I think the most to be sympathised with was honest Dick, who wrote the letter over which Mrs Pringle pondered out of such a maze and confusion of feeling as seldom arises without personal guilt in any mind. From his very first glimpse of the new personage introduced into his little world—the stranger who had suddenly appeared to him when he went to open his own door to Lady Eskside, standing between him and her, anticipating and forestalling him—a glimmering instinctive knowledge who this stranger was had flashed into Dick's mind. Already the reader is aware he had thought it probable that Valentine's father was also his own father, and had endeavoured to account to himself for his mother's strange behaviour on this score. I cannot quite describe the feelings with which Dick,

with his tramp-traditions, regarded such a supposed father. What could "the gentleman," who had been his mother's lover, be to him? Nothing, or less than nothing—not "the author of his being," as our pious grandfathers used to say; but something much more like an enemy, a being half malignant, half insulting, with whom he had nothing to do, and towards whom his feelings, if not those of mere indifference, would be feelings of repulsion and instinctive dislike. He felt no shame on his mother's account or his own; but for the other who had left that mother and himself to take their chance in the woods or on the streets, he was ashamed of his connection with him, and felt mortified and humbled by the mere suggestion of his existence. So long as he kept out of the way, Dick could refrain from thinking of this unknown parent; but the moment he appeared, he woke a hundred lively emotions in the bosom of his son. Dislike, annoyance, a sense of pride injured, and secret humiliation came to him at the first glance of Richard Ross. This was his feeling before any hint of the real state of affairs had reached him. The old lord had not made the disclosure that first day, but waited until the crisis of Valen-



tine's fever was over. Then he called to Dick to go out with him, and there, on the bank of that river which had witnessed all the changes in his fortune, this last and most extraordinary change was revealed to the bewildered young man. Dick's mind was already excited by the painful interval of suspense which had occurred ; and when this revelation was made to him, the confusion in his thoughts was indescribable. That he was Valentine's brother—not secretly and guiltily, but in the eye of day—that the great house which he had looked upon with so much awe and admiration was his home—that all the accessories and all the realities of wealth and rank were his, actually his—relatives, connections, leisure, money, luxury,—was more than he could understand. He did not believe it at first. He thought the old lord had gone mad, that he had been seized with some sudden frenzy, that he had altogether misconceived the relationship between his son, the gentleman whom Dick disliked and suspected of being his father, and the poor lad who never had known what a father was. “I think I know what you mean. I had got to suppose he was my father for some time,” said Dick, bluntly, “but not in

that way. You are mistaken, sir; surely you are mistaken."

"How could I be mistaken? are there more ways of being your father than one?" said the old lord, half amused by the lad's incredulity. Dick shook his head; he was better informed than Lord Eskside, who was so much his senior. He knew things which it was impossible the other could know—but how was he to say them? It did not occur to him even now that there was any relationship between the father of Richard Ross and himself, even though he was prepared to believe that he himself was Richard Ross's son.

"I don't understand you, any more than you understand me," said Lord Eskside, "and I don't wonder that you're confounded; but, nevertheless, what I have told you is true. I am your grandfather, Dick. Ah, that takes you by surprise? Now, why, I would like to know? since you believe my son is your father, though 'not in that way'——"

"My lord," said Dick, "I beg your pardon; but there's ways of being a man's son without being anything to his relations, and that's what I am thinking of. In my class we understand

that such things are — though perhaps they oughtn't to be."

"But, you gomeral, you belong to my class, and not to your own!" said the old lord, feeling, with a mixture of pain and amusement and impatience, his own ignorance before the superior and melancholy knowledge of life possessed by this boy. "What must I say to convince you? You are Valentine's twin brother; do you not see what that means? and can you suppose that anything in the world but a boy's mother would nurse Val as that woman is doing?—besides, he's her living picture," said Lord Eskside, abruptly, and not without a grudge. He said it to convince this boy, who was a genuine Ross, without dispute or doubt; but even now it gave him a pang to acknowledge that his Val was like the tramp-mother, and not like the noble race of which his father came.

Dick stopped short, and put out his hand blindly as if to save himself from falling. This was a new view of the subject altogether. He could understand the relationship through the father; but—his mother! Valentine! What did it all mean? He caught his breath, and something like a sob came from his breast. "I

can't understand it—I can't understand it !” he cried, feeling choked as well as blinded ; air failing him, sight failing him, and the whole steady earth turning round and round. When he recovered himself a little he turned to Lord Eskside, who was watching him closely from under his shaggy eyebrows. “ Don't say anything more, sir,” he cried with an effort which was almost piteous. “ Let me try to make it out—I can't all at once.”

“ Go home, my lad,” said the old lord, kindly patting him on the shoulder, “ and think it out at your leisure.”

“ Thank you, sir—thank you,” cried Dick ; and he turned back without another word, and hurried to his little bedroom, which was next door to the one in which Valentine lay. Ought he to have been overwhelmed with delight and joy ? Instead of being a nobody, Dick Brown, Styles's head-man, he was Richard Ross, Lord Eskside's grandson, a person of importance, the son of a future baron ; superior to all his old surroundings, even to most of his old patrons. But Dick was not glad at first, not even when he had fully realised this wonderful news, and allowed to himself that, Lord Eskside having

told it, it must be true. He had found a family, a name, a position in the world ; but he seemed to have lost himself. He sat down on his bed in the small room which he had himself furnished with a hundred little graces and conveniences, and of which a week ago he had been proud, and covered his face with his hands. But for his manhood, he could have sobbed over this extraordinary break and stop in his life ; and at the first he was no more able to reconcile himself to being Dick Brown no longer, than Mr Richard Ross would have been able to reconcile himself to descending into the place of Styles's head-man ! The change was as great one way as another ; indeed I think the higher might have been better able to come down than the lower, who did not understand how he was to mount up, and in whose modest, simple soul there rose on the moment impulses of pride he had never been conscious of possessing. Here, in his natural sphere, he was respected, thought well of, and everybody was aware how well he fulfilled his duties, bearing himself like a man, whatever he had to do. But this new world was all dark to him, a place in which he would have no guidance of experience, in which he would be judged

according to another standard, and looked down upon. I do not mean to paint Dick as a perfect being, and this sense of natural pride, this personal humiliation in his social rise, gave him a pang which was at least as respectable as other pangs of pride. He did not know how long he sat there pondering blankly, forecasting with sombre thoughts an unknown future. He had lost himself, whom he knew, and he could not tell how the new self whom he did not know would be able to harmonise his life. He was still sitting there, with his hands over his eyes, when a faint sound in the room roused him, and, looking up, he saw his mother, who had entered softly, and now stood looking at him. He returned her look seriously for a moment before he spoke.

“Mother, is this true?”

“Yes,” she said, clasping her hands as if she would have wrung them. “Yes, boy, yes; it’s true. I gave up the one, because I thought he had a right to one; and I kept you, Dick. I was your mother that bore you, and sure I had a right to you.”

“Just a word more, mother,” said Dick, softly, “not to vex you: the little chap that died—was it *him*?—the one that you said died?”

“He died to me,” she cried—“to me and to you. I never, never thought to set eyes on him again. I gave him up, free. Dick, that night on the river, when you helped him with his boat——”

“Yes, mother?”

“I should ha’ gone away then. I should have taken you off, my boy, and never let you know him; but it got into my head like wine,” she cried; “the sight of him, Dick, so handsome and so kind! and to think he was my lad, mine, all the same as you. And he’d look at me in such a way, wondering like, as nobody but him ever looked—as if he wanted to ask, who are you? who are you?—what are you to me? Many and many a day I’ve caught his eye; and nobody but me knew why the lad looked like that—him least of all—only me. It got into my head, Dick, watching him. I couldn’t go. And then to see you two together that were never meant to be together all your lives!”

“You mean, mother, that were born never to be separate?” said Dick.

“Yes, lad, yes; that is what I mean,” she cried, dropping into a chair, and covering her face with her apron. For a moment there was that in Dick’s heart which kept him from speak-

ing, from trying to comfort her. The best of us now and then must think of ourselves. Dick was too much confused in mind to blame his mother, but it gleamed across him, among so many other thoughts—if it was to be that he was not Dick Brown, how much better it would have been that he had never been Dick Brown ; this is a confused sentence, but it was thus that the thought passed through his mind. The loss of himself, and even of “the little chap that died,” pained him—and this loss was for no reason, it seemed—for how much better would it have been had he always known the truth ! This kept him for a moment from saying anything to her—but only for a moment ; then he rose and went to his mother, laying his hand on her shoulder—

“It’s all very confusing, mother,” he said ; “but it’s best you did not go away. “I’ve got most of my happiness in life from knowing—him. The pity is you ever did go away, mother dear ; but never mind ; anyhow, though all the rest is changed, there’s nothing changed between you and me.”

“Oh, my lad !” she cried, “they’ll take you from me—they’ll take you both from me, Dick.”

“They can’t do that,” he said with a smile,



soothing her; "you forget we're *men*, mother. Take heart. So he's the little chap that died? I always thought there was something about him different from all the other gentlemen," said Dick, melting. "'The first time I set eyes on him, I fancied him—and he me," he added, after a little pause, the moisture creeping to his eyes; which was more strange; for what was I that he should take notice of me? The first time he saw you, mother, he was so struck he could scarcely speak; and said, Why didn't I tell him you were a lady——"

"Me!" she cried, looking up; "me — a lady——"

"That was what he said — he knew 'better than the like of us," said Dick. Then, after a pause, the good fellow added, with self-abnegation like that of old Lord Eskside, for he did not like to acknowledge this any more than his grandfather did; "and they say he's your living picture, mother—and it's true."

"Oh, Dick! oh, my boy, my Val, that I've carried in my arms and nursed at my breast! — but he'll never know his mother. Come, Dick, come, as long as we've the strength. We'll go away, lad, you and me——"

"Where, mother?"

“ Out, out, anywhere—to the road. It’s there I belong, and not in houses. Before they take you both from me—Dick, Dick, come !—we’ll go away, you and me.”

She started up as she spoke and caught at his arm—but, giddy and weak with long watching and the fatigue, which in her excitement she had not felt, dropped heavily against him, and would have fallen had he not caught her. “ It’s nothing ; it’s a dizziness,” she murmured. “ I’ll rest a moment, and then we’ll go.”

Dick laid her tenderly upon his bed. “ You’re overdone, mother dear,” he said ; “ and this house is mine whatever happens, and you’re the queen in it, to do what you please. When you’re rested, we’ll think what to do. Besides, *he* may want us yet,” he added, forcing a smile ; “ he is not out of the wood yet that we should run away from him. Mother, though he’s my—brother, as you all say, I don’t seem to know his name.”

The mother, lying down on her son’s bed, with Dick’s kind face bending over her, gave way to a soft outburst of tears. “ He is Val,” she said. “ Dick and Val—Dick and Val. Oh, how often I’ve said them over !—and one to him and one

to me. That was just ; I always knew that was just ! ” she cried.

It seemed to Dick when he went out of the room, leaving her behind him to rest, that years had passed over him since he took refuge there. Already this strange disclosure was an old thing of which there could be no doubt. Already he was as certain that he was no longer Dick Brown of Styles’s, as he was of his existence—and would have been sharply surprised, I think, had any one called him by that name : and as a consequence of this certainty he had ceased to consider the change in himself. Something else more interesting, more alarming, lay before him—a new world, a family of which he knew nothing, a father whom he disliked to think of. Even Val, whom he knew, would be changed to him. He had felt for him as a brother before he knew ; would he be a brother now ? or would the very bond of duty, the right Dick had to his affection, quench that warm sweet fountain of boyish kindness which had risen so spontaneously, and brightened the young wanderer’s life ? Then there was his mother to think of among all these strange unknown people. He had understood very imperfectly the story Lord Eskside had

told him ; and now he came to think of it, why was it that she, so young as she must have been, had fled from her husband ? What reason could she have had for it, unless her husband treated her unkindly ? This idea roused all the temper (there was not much) in Dick's honest nature. No one should treat her unkindly now, or look down upon her, or scorn her lowliness ! With a swelling heart Dick made this vow to himself. He would have to defend her, to protect her honour, and credit, and independence ; and then, on the other hand, he would have to stand against herself, her wild impulse of flight, her impatience of control. Already he felt that, though it was but an hour or two since he had been Dick Brown, he could never be Dick Brown again ; and though he would not have his mother crossed or troubled, still she must not, if he could help it, fly and turn everything into chaos any more.

Care thus rose upon Dick on every side as he overcast his new life ; but it had to be faced, and he did so with steady valour. He went softly to the door of the sick-room and looked in to see if anything was wanted. Val, very weak and spent, but conscious, and noting what went

on with eager curiosity, saw him, and, smiling faintly, beckoned to him with his hand. Lady Eskside was seated in the place so long occupied by his other nurse, bending fondly over her boy. She said, "Come in," but with a half-jealous, half-fretful tone. She thought it was the mother, and the old lady *was* jealous, though she would not have willingly betrayed it, longing just for one hour to have her boy to herself. Val held out his thin hand, and said, "Brown, old fellow ! how pleasant it is to see you again !" "I am glad you are better," said Dick, feeling cold and hard as the nether millstone. It was not Val who had changed, but himself. Then he went out of the room with a sensation of meanness and misery, and going downstairs, wrote that letter in which, for the first time, he called his brother by his name. In the midst of this a sudden softening came to him. He put down his pen, and his dry eyes grew moist, and an infinite sweetness stole into his heart. Now he should see *her* again, speak to her perhaps, be a friend of hers. He finished his letter hastily, but how could he sign it ? What name had he but his Christian name ? He could not put a false name to her ; so he ended

his letter hastily, and went out to post it, as he always did, himself. And then another thing happened to him, a new step in his career.

In the little dark passage at the foot of the stairs, he met Richard face to face : they had scarcely met before, but they could not pass each other now that they knew each other, and each knew that the other knew. It was a strange meeting to be the first between a father and son, but yet there was a kind of advantage in getting it over, which Richard was quick to perceive. In his heart he was little less embarrassed than his son was ; but he was a man of the world, and knew how to behave in an emergency with that ease of speech, which looks half miraculous to the inexperienced. He held out his hand to his son at first without saying anything, and poor Dick felt in spite of himself the strangest thrill of unexpected feeling when he put out with hesitation his hard workman's hand into that white and soft yet vigorous clasp. Then Richard spoke :

“ My father has told you what we are to each other,” he said. “ My boy, I do not blame your mother ; but it is not my fault that I see you now for the first time. But I know you a little—

through Val, your brother : who found you by instinct, I suppose, after we had all searched for you in vain."

Dick's countenance was all aglow with the conflict of feeling in him ; his voice laboured in his throat with words that would not come. The contrast between his own difficulty of speech and the ease of the other unmanned him altogether. "I—I have known—him—a long time," was all he could stammer forth.

"Thank heaven for that !" said Richard, with a gleam of real pleasure ; and with another pressure of his hand he let his new son go. Dick went out to post his letter strangely excited but subdued. What it was to be a gentleman, he thought ! and this was his father, *his* father ! A new pride unknown to him before came into existence within him, a glimmer which lighted up that dim landscape. After all, the new world, though it was so strangely mysterious and uncertain, was it not more splendid, more beautiful to the imagination, than the old world could ever have been ?

Val made slow but sure progress towards recovery, and the family lived a strange life in attendance upon him, occupying Dick's little

parlour all day, and returning to the hotel for the night. The intercourse between them was of a peculiar character. Dick, watching intently, jealous for his mother, soon perceived that she was of much more importance to the others than he thought possible, and had his fears appeased. He watched her almost as if she had been his young sister, and Richard Ross her lover, eager to note if they met, and when and how ; but, as it happened, they scarcely met at all, she keeping to the sick-room above, he to the parlour below. As for Dick himself he became Val's slave, lifting him when he was first moved, helping him continually, indispensable to his invalid existence. He called for "Brown" when he woke in the morning, and ordered him about with an affectionate imperiousness which was at once provoking and delightful to Dick. But Val was much more mysterious in the looks with which he regarded "Brown's mother." He did not talk to her much, but watched her movements about the room with a half-reverential admiration. "She will wear herself out. She is too good to me ; you ought to make her go and rest," he said to Dick ; but he was uneasy when she left him, and impatient of any other



nursing. He half-frightened half-shocked Lady Eskside by his admiration of her. "How handsome she is, grandmama!" he whispered in the old lady's ear. "How she carries herself! Where could Brown's mother get such a way of walking? I think she must have been a princess." "Hush, my darling, hush!" said my lady. "Nonsense! I am all right; I don't mean to hush any more," said Val. "I think she is handsomer than any one I ever saw." This Lady Eskside put up with, magnanimously making up her mind that nature spoke in the boy's foolish words; but it was hard upon her when her old lord began to blow trumpets in honour of Dick, who took walks with him when he could be spared from Valentine, and whom in his enthusiasm he would almost compare advantageously with Val! It was true, that it was she herself who had first pressed Dick's claims upon him; but with Val just getting better, and doubly dear from that fact, who could venture to compare him with any one? She liked Dick—but Lord Eskside was "just infatuated" about him, my lady thought. "He reminds me of my father," said the old lord. Now this father was the tenth lord—him of the

dark locks, by means of whom she had always attempted to account for Valentine's brown curls, and whose portrait her son Richard disrespectfully called a Raeburn. She gave a little gulp of self-control when she heard these words. "Make no comparisons!" she cried, "or you'll make me like the new boy less, because I love the old one more. To me there will never be any one in the world like my Val." Lord Esk-side shrugged his old shoulders, and went out for another walk with Dick.

At last the day arrived when Valentine was pronounced well enough to have the great disclosure made to him. For two or three days in succession he had been brought down-stairs and had enjoyed the sight of the old world he knew so well, the river and the trees seen from the window, and the change—with all the delight of convalescence. And wonderfully sweet, and imperious, and seductive he was to them all, in that moment while still he did not know, holding his *levée* like a sovereign, not enduring any absence. On that important morning when the secret was to be disclosed to him, he noted with his usual imperious friendliness the absence of "Brown's mother" from the group that gathered

round him, and sent Dick off for her at once. "Unless she is resting she must come. Ask her to come; why should she be left out?" said Val, in his ignorance; which made the others look at each other with wondering eyes. She came in at Dick's call, and seated herself behind backs. She had put off her nursing dress, and wore the black gown and white net kerchief on her fine head, which added so much to the impressive character of her beauty. Amid all these well-born people there was no face in itself so striking and noble. The Rosses were all quite ordinary, except Val, who had taken his dark beauty from her. She, poor ignorant creature, made up of impulses, without a shadow of wisdom or even good sense about her, looked like a dethroned queen among them: which shows, after all, how little looks matter—an argument which would be very powerful if it were not so utterly vain.

"Val," said Lord Eskside, who was the spokesman, as became his position, "I hope you are getting back your strength fast. The doctor tells us we may now make a disclosure to you which is very important. I do not know how you will take it, my boy; but it is so great, and

of so much consequence, that I cannot keep it from you longer. Val——”

“Is it something about Violet?” said Valentine, the little colour there was paling out of his face.

“About—whom?”

“About Violet,” he repeated, with a stronger voice. “Listen, sir; let me speak first;” and with the sudden flush of delicate yet deep colour which showed his weakness, Val raised his head from the sofa, and swung his feeble limbs, which looked so preternaturally long, to the ground. “I have not said anything about her while I have been ill, but it is not because I forgot. Grandfather, Violet and I made up our minds to marry each other before that confounded election. If her father did write that letter, it’s not her fault; and I can’t go on, sir, now I’ve come to myself, not another day, without letting you know that nothing, nothing in the world can make me change to Vi!”

There was a pause of astonishment so great that no one knew what to say: this sudden introduction of a subject altogether new and unsuspected bewildered the others, whose minds were all intent on one thing. Val was as one-

idea'd as they were; but his idea was not their idea; and the shock of the encounter jarred upon them, so curiously sudden and out of place it seemed. Lady Eskside, who sat close by him, and to whom this was no revelation, was more jarred even than the rest. She put her fine old ivory hand on his arm, with an impatient grasp. "This is not the question—this is not the question," she said.

Val looked round upon them all, and saw something in their looks which startled him too. He put back his legs upon the sofa, and the flush gradually went off his cheek. "Well," he said, "well; whatever it is I am ready to hear it—so long as I make sure that you've heard me first."

"Valentine," said his father, "at your age some such piece of foolishness always comes first; but this time you have got to see the obverse of the medal—the other end of all this enthusiasm. It is my story, not your own, that you have to think of. Kind friends of course have told you——"

"Richard," said Lord Eskside, "this is not the way to enter upon a subject so important. Let me speak. He knows my way best."

Richard turned away with a short laugh—not of amusement indeed, but full of that irritated sense of incongruity which gives to anger a kind of fierce amusement of its own. Lord Eskside cleared his throat—he preferred to have the matter in his own hands.

“Friends have told you little,” he said ; “but an enemy, Val, the enemy whose daughter you have just told us you want to marry—but that’s neither here nor there—let you know the story. Your father there, Richard Ross, my son, married when he was young and foolish like you. It was not an equal marriage, and the—lady—took some false notion into her head, I know not what, and left him—taking her two babies with her, as you have heard. These two babies,” said the old lord, once more clearing his throat, “were your brother and you—so much as this you know.”

Here he stopped to take breath ; he was gradually growing excited and breathless in spite of himself.

“We could not find you, though we did our best. We spared no trouble, either before you were brought home or after. Now, my boy, think a little. It is a very strange position.

You have a brother somewhere in the world—the same flesh and blood, but not like you ; a mother——” He instinctively glanced at the woman who sat behind backs, like a marble statue, immovable. The crisis became too painful to them all. There was a stir of excitement when Lord Eskside came to this pause. His wife put her hand on his, grasping it almost angrily in the heat of suspense. Richard Ross began to pace about the room with restless passion.

“Go on, oh, go on !” cried my lady, with a querulous quiver in her voice. I am not sure that the old lord, though so much excited himself, had not a certain pleasure in thus holding them all hanging on his breath.

“In good time — in good time,” he said. “Valentine, it may be a shock to you to find out these relations ; it cannot be but a great surprise. You are not prepared for it — your mind is full of other things——”

“For God’s sake, sir,” cried Richard, “do not drive us all mad ! Valentine, make up your mind for what you have to hear. Your mother is found——”

“And your brother,” cried Lady Eskside,

rushing in unconsciously as the excitement grew to a crisis. "Your brother, too ! Oh, my boy, bear up !"

Dick had been standing by, listening with I know not what fire in his heart : he could bear it no longer. The shock and suspense, which were as great to him as to Valentine, had not been broken in his case by any precautions ; and it hurt his pride bitterly, on his mother's account as well as his own, that the knowledge of them should be supposed such a terrible blow to Val. He stepped forth into the middle of the room (his own room, in which they made so little of him), his honest face glowing, his fair, good-humoured brows bent, almost for the first time in his life,—

"Look here," he said, hoarsely ; "there is more than him to be thought of. If it's hard upon him, he's a man, and he'll bear it like a man. Mr Ross, look here. I'm Dick Brown, sir, your humble servant ; I'm the lad you made a man of, from the time we were boys till now. You've done for me as the Bible says one brother should do for another," said Dick, the tears suddenly starting into his eyes, and softening his voice, "without knowing ; and now they say



we're brothers in earnest. Perhaps you'll think it's poor news; as for me, I don't mind which it is—your brother or your servant," said Dick, his eyes shining, holding out both his hands; "one way or other, I couldn't think more of you than I do now."

Valentine had been lying motionless on his sofa, looking from one to another with large and wondering eyes. It is needless to say that amid so many different narrators he had already divined, even before Dick spoke, the solution of this mystery; and it had given him sufficient shock to drive the blood back wildly to his heart. But he had time to *prendre son parti*, and he was too much of a man not to bear it like a man, as Dick said. When his new brother held out his hands, a sudden suffusion of colour came to Val's face, and a smile almost of infantile sweetness and weakness. He took Dick's hands and pulled himself up by them, grasping them with an eager pressure; then changing, in his weakness, took Dick's arm, upon which he leant so heavily that the young man's whole heart was moved. Familiar tenderness, old brotherhood, and that depth of absolute trust which no untried affection can possess, were all

involved in the heavy pressure with which Val leant on Dick's arm ; but he did not say anything to him. His eyes went past Dick to the other side of the room, whither he walked feebly, leaning on his brother's arm. When they came in front of their mother the two young men stopped. With her old abstracted gaze modified by an indescribable mixture of terror and longing, she turned to them, pushing back her chair unconsciously, almost retreating as they approached. Val could not speak all at once. He looked at her eagerly, tenderly. "Is it true?" he said ; "are you my—mother?" The words were spoken slowly one by one, and seemed to tingle through the air *staccato*, like notes of music. All the others turned towards this central scene. Lady Eskside sat leaning forward in her chair, crying to herself, her streaming eyes fixed upon them. The old lord walked to the window, and, turning his back, looked out fiercely from under his shaggy eyebrows. Dick, supporting his brother on his arm, stood very erect and firm, while Val wavered and swayed about in his weakness. One great tear ran slowly down Dick's cheek. They were

all spectators of what was about to happen between these two.

The mother stood out as long as she could, holding herself back, labouring to restrain herself. Then all at once her powers failed her. She started to her feet with a great cry, and throwing her arms round them both, pressed them together in a passionate embrace, kissing first one and then the other, wildly. "My two lads!" she cried; "my two babies! my children—my own children! Only for once,—only for this one time!"

"Mother!" cried Val, faintly, dropping on the floor in his weakness, and drawing her into her seat. And there he lay for another moment, his head upon her breast, his arms round her. Her face was like the face of a saint in ecstasy. She pressed his dark curls against her bosom and kissed them, lifting the heavy locks up one by one—her eyes brimming with great tears which did not fall—saying again and again, under her breath, "For once—only for this once!" while Dick stood over them, sobbing, guarding them, as it seemed, from all other contact. I do not know how many seconds of vulgar time this

lasted. It was, and it was over. Suddenly she raised Valentine from her lap, and loosened his arms. "Dick, put him back upon the sofa ; he's overdone," she said, putting him into his brother's charge. She stood perfectly still, her hands clasped in nervous self-restraint, looking after the two for a moment ; watching till her patient was laid at ease upon his couch. Then she turned suddenly, subdued and still, to Richard, who had been looking on like the rest—"Now I'm ready," she said, very low. "I'll go where you please. There is one for you and one for me. I will never go back of my word to do you a wrong. It's good of you to let me kiss my lad once, only once ! And now I'll trouble him and you no more."

"Myra !" said Richard, coming forward to her. She had risen up, and stood like a stately wild creature, ready for flight. He took her hand in spite of her resistance, and I cannot describe the strange emotion, sympathy, almost tenderness, and hot provocation in Richard's face. He was more touched at heart than he had been for years, and he was more angry and provoked at the same time. "Myra," he said, "can you think of nothing but your children ?

Have you forgotten that you are my wife, and that I have some claim upon you too?"

She stood silent, holding back: then lifting her eyes looked at him pathetically. I think a faint sense of duty had begun to dawn in her mind; and her look was pathetic, because she knew of no response to make to him. She had no desire to humiliate her husband by her indifference—such a thought was far beyond her; but there was no reply to him in her mind. Perhaps he perceived this, and made a sudden effort to save his pride by appearing to ignore her silence. He drew her hand suddenly and impatiently within his arm, and led her forward to his mother's side.—"Myra," he said quickly, "it is of the first importance for your children—for Val and Dick whom you love—and especially for Val, the eldest, that you should remain with us, and go away no more."

Lady Eskside rose to receive her; they had met by Val's bedside many times before, but the old lady had feared to say anything to alarm the worn-out watcher. She rose now, looking at her with wistful anxiety, holding out her hands. My lady's eyes were still full of tears, and her fair old face tremulous with emotion and sym-

pathy. She took into her own the wanderer's reluctant hands — "Oh," she said, anxiously, "listen to what Richard says to you, my dear ! You will get to know us by-and-by, and find out that we are your friends—my old lord and me ; but your boys you love with all your heart already. Myra, listen ! It is of the greatest importance to your children that you should stay with us and never leave us more—and, above all, for the eldest—above all, my dear, for Val."

She gave one half-frightened glance round as if to see whether there was any escape for her. Then she said, very low—"I will do whatever you please—but it is Dick who is the eldest, not Val."

"What !" they all cried, pressing round her—all but Val, who lay still on his sofa, and Dick, who stood over him ; the two young men did not even notice what was going on. But Lord Eskside came from the window in one stride, and Richard grasped her arm in sudden terror : "What is that ?—what is that she says ?" cried the old lord.

"God bless *my* lads !" she said, gaining possession of herself, looking at the two with

a smile on her face. She was calm, as utter ignorance, utter foolishness could be ; then she added, with a soft sigh, of something that looked like happiness in her ignorant composure—"But it is Dick who is the eldest, and not Val."

## CHAPTER XL.

It was the beginning of May when the party went home, and everything was green on Eskside. Were I to describe all that happened before they left Oxford, so strange a family group as they were—the old Lady Eskside with the tramp-woman, the high-bred Secretary of Legation, along with Styles's head man—and how they managed to exist together, the lion with the lamb—I should require a volume. But this would weary the reader, who can easily imagine for himself that any happiness which might be produced by this reunion of the divided family was counterbalanced by many circumstances which were not happy. The grandparents, I think, would have been really happy in the removal of all mystery from their family story, the complete establishment of the rights and heirship of their beloved Val, and the win-



ning qualities of Dick, but for the sudden chaos into which they were re-plunged by the mother's calm declaration of Dick's seniority. Its effect upon them was indescribable. Richard, with his diplomatic instincts, seeing that his sons had not paid any attention to, or even heard, this extraordinary statement, hushed it up with an impetuous and peremptory promptitude which took even his father and mother by surprise, and silenced them. "Not another word," he whispered to them; "not a word! the boys have heard nothing; for the present let nothing more be said;" and the old couple, in the suddenness of this strange juncture, let themselves be overruled, and left the guidance in his hands. As for the mother herself, she attached no weight to the circumstance. She was too ignorant to know, and too much abstracted in her mind to think, that it made any difference which was the eldest. She had not kept Dick for that reason, nor had she left Val at Rossraig with any intention of avenging herself upon the family by thus substituting the youngest for the just heir, which was the first thought that crossed Lady Eskside's mind. No; she had been guided by mere chance, as we say, snatch-

ing up the one boy instead of the other in her despair, for the most trivial reason, as the reader may recollect. And even now it did not occur to her that what she had said was of any consequence, though she saw it affected the others in some incomprehensible way. Her mind had no capacity for entering upon such a question. She was far more deeply moved by the chance that Valentine might be tired out—more solicitous to know whether it was time for his beef-tea. Richard kept his parents quiet until Val had gone to bed, and Dick to sit by him and read to him, when the three had an anxious consultation ; and the packet of papers which Richard had brought from Italy, and which up to this moment had remained unopened, was examined, and found to confirm, with frightful accuracy, the statements of the mother. There it was incontestable, Dick was set down as the eldest, notwithstanding the impression upon Richard's mind which, on Val's first appearance, had led to the mistake.

This confirmation subdued them all into a kind of despair. Lord and Lady Eskside, both at different times, had received Dick into their affections, as they thought, and acknowledged,

with a certain pride, his natural worthiness. But when it appeared possible that this new and unknown boy (though they liked him) might put himself in the place of their Valentine—the child of their old age, the light of their eyes—their hearts sank within them. All their satisfaction and enthusiasm was chilled, nay, frozen; they sat and looked at each other blankly, their gladness turned into dire disappointment and heaviness. Then it was that Richard urged upon them the necessity of silence. “Let us take time to think,” he said; “time is everything. Val, it is clear, can bear no further excitement; it might be fatal to him; nor can it be good for the other boy. He is an honest, kind fellow; but how can we tell if his head is strong enough to bear such a change of fortune? Let him get used to the part of younger brother first. For heaven’s sake, let us hold our tongues, and say nothing more about it now.”

Lord Eskside shook his head; but my lady seconded her son, alarmed at the idea he had skilfully brought forward of danger to Val. “Yes, he is a good honest fellow,” they both said, but with an involuntary grudge against Dick, as if it could be his fault; and the papers

were put up carefully in Lord Eskside's despatch-box, and the news still more closely locked in the bosoms of the three who knew the secret. But it is astonishing how their knowledge of this took all heart out of their conscientious effort to adapt themselves to the new state of things. Valentine, whatever his internal difficulties were, accepted the position much more easily. His illness softened it to him, and had already produced that familiar intercourse with his mother and brother, which the mere discovery that they were his mother and brother could not have brought about; and the happiness of convalescence which glorified all the circumstances about him, made it still more easy. He lived a life of delightful idleness, feeling nothing but benevolence and kindness for every created thing, how much more for his tender nurses and companions?—getting well, eating and sleeping, and loving idle talk, and to have all his people about him. He was so much a child in this, that even his father, whom Val had never been familiar with, came in for a share of his sociable affectionate desire to be always surrounded by the group of those who belonged to him. He called for everybody,

with that regal power which is never possessed in such perfection as by an invalid, to whom all who love him are bound by a hundred ties of gratitude and admiration for having been so good and so clever as to get well. He could not bear a look too serious, a clouded face, and was himself as cheerful as the day, enjoying everything. Dick, I need not say, had told him of that meeting with Violet, and of his letters to her, and by this means Val had got up a spring of private delight for himself—carrying on a limited but charming correspondence, which, indeed, was all on one side, but which still gave him infinite pleasure. “Keep up the Brown delusion, Dick,” he said, with infinite relish of the fun, “till we go home; and then we’ll tell her. What a joke, to be sure, that you should ever have been Brown!” And indeed this was already the aspect the past had taken to both the young men; and it was the strangest absurd thing, scarcely comprehensible, how they could ever have believed it. The two had no share in the perturbation of their elders. Good Dick was, as he had said, more the servant of that young demigod and hero than if he had not been his brother. He did everything for him—

read to him, talked to him, brought him the news, and lived over again every day of their intercourse since that day when they first "took a liking to each other." How strange it all seemed — how extraordinary, and yet how natural — in face of this broad and obvious explanation, which made everything plain !

I need not say that it was also the idea of Richard Ross to put into the Edinburgh paper that cunning intimation that the young member for Eskshire had been taken ill at the house of his mother, the Hon. Mrs Richard Ross, at Oxford. Scarcely a soul who read that intimation ever thought of anything but the luxurious and dignified dwelling which an Hon. Mrs Ross would ordinarily inhabit ; and the people who knew Oxford tried hard to recollect whether they had ever met her, and where her house was. The county in general was much perplexed and much affected by this notice. It seemed impossible to believe that there was any specious falsehood in so matter-of-fact a paragraph. "The old stories must all be false," one said to another ; "Richard's wife has been living separate from her husband, that is all." "But no one ever heard who she was," the

doubting ones said; though even the greatest sceptic added, "I will ask my son if he has ever met her in society." Thus Richard's diplomacy had full success. He followed it up by other delicate touches, bulletins of Valentine's recovery, and tantalising hints such as only local gossip can permit, and which were reserved for the pages of the 'Castleton Herald'—of the happy domestic *rapprochements* which the Editor was delighted to hear Mr Ross's illness, otherwise so regrettable, was likely to bring about. All this made a great commotion in the district. You may think it was beneath the dignity of a man of Richard Ross's pretensions to descend to such means of breaking to the public a great family event, which might otherwise have been differently interpreted; but your great man, and especially your *diplomate* and courtier, is always the one most disposed to make use of flunkeyism and the popular love of gossip. It is a sign, perhaps, of the cynical disregard of this elevated class of mortals for ordinary people; anyhow, they rarely hesitate to avail themselves of means which would wound the pride of many less exalted persons. Life, like dreams (to which, heaven knows, it bears in all matters so close

a resemblance), goes by contraries. What the poor and simple scorn, the rich and wise employ.

The Eskshire people, however, were destined to yet another sensation more startling than this. It was in the nature of a recantation, and few recantations have excited more local interest. I will not attempt to describe all the motives and influences which were supposed to have brought it about—for the reader is better informed, and knows that it was brought about very simply, as perhaps some of his own good deeds are, by the intervention and pertinacity of a slim girl with a soft voice and a pair of pleading eyes. Nobody on Eskside knew that Violet, at the point of the sword as it were, had extracted an apology from her father. It appeared on the walls in the shape of a placard, about the middle of April, and was sent by post to all the influential persons in the district. Lasswade was white with it, every bit of fence possessing the paper. It was addressed, like another notable letter, to the Electors of Eskshire ; but it was much shorter than the former one. What it said was as follows :—



“GENTLEMEN,—It will be within the recollection of all of you that, a few months ago, I thought it my duty to address to you a letter concerning the standing and pretensions of Mr Valentine Ross, now Conservative member for this county. It seemed right that you should take into consideration what then appeared to me the very doubtful proofs of Mr Ross’s identity. I am strongly opposed to him and his family in politics ; and I confess I thought it my duty to indicate to you in the distinctest manner how poorly supported by fact were his claims to your confidence. I am a Whig, and Mr Ross is a Tory, and I do not pretend to be above the ordinary tactics of electioneering, which have been pushed to further lengths than were possible to me, by men of much higher worldly pretensions than myself. But whether as Whig or as Tory, I hope it will always be an Englishman’s highest boast to be an honest man ; and circumstances have convinced me that it is my duty to convey to my brother electors an Apology for statements which I formerly made to them under the influence of a mistake, and which I now find are less certain than I then thought them. It is no disgrace to any man to

have fallen into a mistake, if, when he discovers it, he takes pains to undo any mischief it may have produced.

“With this preface I will simply say, that though it is quite true, as I stated, that Mr Valentine Ross appeared at his grandfather’s house in a very strange and suspicious way, the inference I drew from that is, I have reason to believe, incorrect. It does not become me to enter into the private history of a family so well known in this county ; but I believe steps will shortly be taken to remove all possibility of doubt upon the subject ; and I can only say that I for one am now convinced that our new member has the fullest right to the name he bears. These important facts have only come to my knowledge within the last fortnight ; and I consider it my duty, putting aside all false pride, which so often hinders a man from acknowledging a mistake publicly made, at once to communicate this discovery to the electors of Eskshire. I am as far from agreeing with Mr Ross and his family politically as I ever was ; but I cannot continue to do a social injury to any man after I have found out that my impression was a mistaken one. If I have conveyed a

prejudice against Mr Valentine Ross to the mind of any brother elector, I can only add that I am unfeignedly sorry for it.

“AN ESKSIDE ELECTOR.”

This was the first thing that met the eyes of the travelling party when—duly heralded by the Castleton paper, which in its last issue had announced the approaching return of “Lord and Lady Eskside, the Hon. Richard and Mrs Ross, Mr Valentine Ross, M.P. for Eskshire, and Mr Richard Ross the younger”—they arrived at Lasswade. The old lord himself was the first to read it when they got out at the little railway station on the new branch line, which, as everybody knows, is still a mile or two distant from the village. There were two carriages waiting—the great barouche, which was Lady Eskside’s favourite, and a vehicle of the genus dog-cart for “the boys;” and the usual little commotion which always attends an arrival left a few minutes to spare while the carriage drew up. Lord Eskside came and took his old wife by the arm, and led her to the place where this address, blazoned in great letters, “To the Electors of Eskshire,” held a prominent position. “Is it something new?” she asked

with a sickness at her heart ; “ oh, don’t let Val see it ! ” When she had read it, however, the old pair looked at each other and laughed with tremulous enjoyment. I am afraid it did not occur to them to look at this as a high-minded atonement, or to see any generosity in the confession. “ Sandy Pringle is worsted at last,” the old lord said, with a gleam of light from under his eyebrows. But the exhilaration of unquestionable victory filled their hearts, and made them forget for the moment the other drawbacks which attended their return.

With this sense of having beaten their adversary strong in their minds, they no longer hesitated to drive home through Lasswade, which they had not intended to do ; where they had a most flattering reception. What with the curiosity excited by this probable *éclaircissement* of a romantic story, and the eagerness of everybody to see Richard Ross’s wife, and the new excitement produced by that placard on the walls—which most people, I fear, received as Lord Eskside received it—every one was agog. It was not a formal entrance with triumphal arches, &c., for this is not a kind of demonstration very congenial to the natural independence of the

Lowland Scotch mind, which is much disposed to be friendly towards its great neighbours, but very little disposed to feudal notions of the respect due to a superior. Willie Maitland, it is true, had once thought of suggesting something of the sort, but he had fortunately forborne ; and accordingly, though there was an absence of flags and decorations, a very warm spontaneous welcome was given to the travellers. They stopped at the door of the Bull, and the carriage was instantly surrounded by a genial crowd, attracted, it is true, quite as much by a desire for information, as by a wish to do honour to Lord Eskside's family ; and there, sure enough, by my lady's side sat the unknown Mrs Ross, looking out with large eyes, in which a certain terror and wonder combated the look of abstraction which was habitual to them. She had been here before—how well she remembered how ! not in the chief street, honoured of everybody, but dragging through the muddy roads, dull and despairing, with her two crying children. The cold wild March night of her recollection was not more unlike the soft sunshine of this May-day, than was her own position now and then. Was she more happy ? She did not ask herself the ques-

tion. Only people in a more or less artificial state of self-consciousness do ever ask themselves if they are happy or not ; the uninstructed soul takes life as it comes. But her aspect impressed the people of Lasswade. They concluded that she was "not very happy with her husband ;" and as Richard was not popular in the county he despised, this rather prepossessed the popular mind in her favour ; but that this woman had ever been the "beggar - wife" of the popular legend, the county ever after refused to believe.

The Dowager-Duchess had driven into Lasswade, of course "by accident," on that afternoon, and so had Sir John and his lady ; and it is astonishing how many other carriages of lesser potentates the Eskside party met on their way home. It was a fine day to be sure ; everybody was out ; and every separate detachment of anxious neighbours had its own remarks to make. "The second son looks a fine lad," the good people said ; for indeed Dick had beamed with grateful smiles upon every one who had a welcome for Val. And thus the family, at last united, with glad welcome of all their neighbours, and retractation of their enemy's slanders, made their way home. "You see we've brought Sandy Pringle to his marrow-bones, my lord !" cried

Willie Maitland the factor, my lord's right-hand man, as they drove away from the door of the Bull. "Ay, ay, the auld sneckdrawer!" said Lord Eskside in his glee. This was all Mr Pringle made by his apology. Val, I am happy to say, was otherwise disposed—he took it generously, touched by the confession, not triumphing in it, as extorted from his assailant ; and his explanation of the placard, which he too had read eagerly to his brother and confidant, was made in a very different tone. "I knew old Pringle was a good fellow," said Val ; "he was forced to it by his party ; but the moment he hears the truth he comes forward and owns it like a man. Our fathers and mothers think differently from us, Dick, old fellow. They think because old Pringle is out of it so long as you and I are to the fore, that therefore he must be our enemy. I always knew it was nothing of the sort, but only a party move," said Valentine, flourishing his whip with that delicious sense of generous superior wisdom which dwells in the bosom of youth ; and then he added, softly, "After this, surely they can't make any more row about Violet and me."

"I should think not," said Dick, with a sigh ; the sight of those Eskside woods, where he had

seen her, came back to his mind with a strange thrill. What a moment of enchantment that had been ! He had never hoped it would come back again. How could he wish it to come back, when only by injury to Val it could ever bring any happiness to him ? And, to be sure, he had only seen Violet twice, never long enough to—— “What a lucky fellow you are !” was what he said.

“Am I not ?” cried Val, in his frank happiness ; “I should think this was the very last stone rolled out of my way.”

There had been a great commotion in Ross-craig, preparing everything for the family party ; the new wing had been opened, the carpets put down, the curtains up, and everything arranged according to Lady Eskside’s orders. The new wing had all kinds of conveniences in it—sitting-rooms for the young couple for whom it was prepared, nurseries for the children, everything that could help to make it agreeable to a son’s family under the same roof with his father and mother. But as it happened now, both Richard and Valentine preferred to keep their old rooms ; and the new wing was given up to Dick and his mother, to whom it appeared a wilderness of grandeur,



confusing and blank in its extent and wealth. It had windows which looked down upon the wooded bank of the Esk, and windows which looked to the great door and court-yard, and a suite of rooms through which you could wander from one side to another, for it ran all the breadth of the house. I am not sure that these two, transported into that luxurious place, did not feel the change more painfully and strangely than its natural occupants would have done had they been suddenly dismissed to Styles's riverside cottage. The mother felt it most of all. She sat in her own rooms almost all the day, patiently receiving the visits of her sons and of Lady Eskside, but never seeking them in the other portions of the house—brightening to see Val, but saying little even to him. She was chilled and stifled by all these fine surroundings. Often she would rise and fling the windows open, or pull at the curtains instinctively, as if to pull them down. "I can't breathe," she would sometimes say to Dick, with a plaintive tone in her voice. Her life, such as it was, was gone from her. She was quite submissive, doing all that was asked of her, attempting no resistance. I cannot explain the entire cessation now of the

struggle which she had kept up so long, any more than she could. Fate was too strong for her, and her strength was waning ; but when she yielded, she yielded altogether, unreasoning and unreasonably, as she had struggled—her mind was not capable of compromise, or of making the best of a position. When she gave in she dropped her arms entirely, and with her arms her strength.

And strangely enough, Val, the sight of whom had kept her alive, lost his power now over his mother, and Dick, who was her own, became all in all to her. She was happy only when her familiar companion was by her, and could not be persuaded to go out except with Dick. Sometimes when they wandered into the woods a gleam of something like pleasure would come upon her face. There was one knoll which they found out by chance in the very heart of the trees, a little bank which, when they discovered it first, was covered with late primroses. The trees were very thick round, and the sun came late, and penetrated but a short time through the heavy boughs ; and this, I suppose, kept them later in blooming than their rustic neighbours. It is long, long since I have seen these

flowers ; and perhaps it is the misty glory of that morning-time of childhood that makes me feel there never were any such primroses before or after in this commonplace world—so large, so spotless, so full of sweetness, instinct with a lovely life of their own, friends rather than flowers. Their long stalks thrilled with a youthful force of existence, their green cool leaves overlapped each other, glistening with heavenly dew, their celestial petals were not like pale gold or soft velvet, which are the first vulgar images one thinks of, but like themselves only—primroses, the very essence of spring and fragrance and everlasting youth. When I shut my eyes I can see them still, lifting up their lovely heads out of their leaves, looking you and heaven in the face with all the candour of innocence, though it is, oh, so many years since they and I saw each other ! When Dick and his mother, wandering through the woods, came to this bank, it seemed to touch her heart as nothing had done. She sat down on the grass and gazed at the flowers in a transport. “If we were as we used to be,” she said, “oh, Dick, my lad, how you would have run to the cart for a basket ! It seems no more than waste to gather them now. .

What would we do with them ? there's grander flowers in all the rooms ; they'd be like you and me, Dick, out of our place. Flowers were always what I liked. I never was one for saying much," she went on, reflectively, "but a basket of primroses, that speaks for itself."

"How you go back upon the old days, mother!" said Dick, regretfully, and perhaps with a slight reproach.

"Yes, lad ; I liked them best. It's heavy on me to be shut up in houses. I was never used to it," she said, with a sigh.

"But you can put up with it, mother?—you *will* put up with it?—for the sake of Val—and me."

A gleam came from her eyes—a sparkle of tenderness and light. "I'll do what's best," she said—"whatever is best:" then with a sudden rush of tears, "You may let me think of the old days, Dick ; for my strength's changed, and my mind's changed, and I never can go back to them—never no more—even if I would."

"But, mother," said Dick, "it used to keep you happy to see Val only on the river, once a-day or twice a-day, in his boat. I did not know why it was then ; but I saw it ; and now you've got him altogether——"

“ Ah, it’s different, it’s different ! ” she cried ; “ can’t you see, lad ? Then he was none o’ mine—he was his father’s ; it was more than I could have hoped for to see him like that—it kept me alive. Now he’ll come to me when I like, Dick ; and kind he looks and kind he speaks, God bless him ! He’d do himself an injury to please me ; but ah, it’s different ! If I could take them to the market in a basket, and sell a bunch here and a bunch there, that’s what I would like,” she went on with a sudden change of tone, drawing the flowers through her thin hands.

It was with a kind of despair that Dick took her home. She was getting thin visibly, he thought. She would sit at the window for hours together, gazing, seeing nothing. For the first few days she suffered herself to be taken to the family meals, but this evidently agitated her beyond endurance, and had to be given up. What was to be done ? Not one of them could tell, or indeed form an idea ; the only thing that could be trusted in was time, which might possibly bring back a subdued harmony to those chords which at present were all ajar ; but for the moment there seemed little hope even of that. All the restlessness of old came back to her. When

the active habits of her life at Oxford became unnecessary, the self-restraint she had learnt there failed her also. She took to talking (when she did talk) of nothing but the tramp-life, which seemed to have suddenly come into prominence in her mind. Now and then she dozed in the long afternoons, and Dick heard her murmuring in her sleep about the long road, and how far it was, and the lad that was tired. Poor Dick's satisfaction in his new circumstances was suddenly subdued by this. It did not occur to him that she was ill ; he thought it was one of the old fits coming on, in which he had always felt the dreadful risk there was that she might go secretly away from him, and never be heard of more. To be sure, he comforted himself by thinking these fits had always gone off again, and so perhaps would this one now.

Thus the family life recommenced under its changed circumstances. I doubt whether any one in the great house was happy. The old people had a secret in their keeping, which destroyed their peace, and which must produce further troubles still ; and Dick had his mother, whose state alarmed him : and Richard Ross was in a position very difficult for a man to bear,

totally ignored by his wife, yet feeling a curious secret attraction towards her, and a half-whimsical half-tragical wonder whether they were ever to be drawn closer, or if all was over between them. Valentine, the happiest of the party, was not without his troubles too, for he had written to Violet, and received no reply, and at the Hewan there was no intelligence to be obtained of her. Thus they had all enough to do to carry on the possibilities of living ; and the great happiness and good fortune which had come to them, scarcely looked for the moment like good fortune at all.

## CHAPTER XLI.

A SHORT time after their return, Valentine made up his youthful mind that he could bear his share of these uncertainties no longer. He had been to the Hewan again and again ; now he set off to Moray Place itself, saying nothing to his relations, except to Dick, who winced, but kept his counsel. But all the ardent young lover made by his persistence was an interview with Mrs Pringle, who received him stiffly, and declined to answer any inquiries about Violet, who was absent from home. "I do not suppose your family would be pleased if they knew ; and my family would be still less pleased, that Violet should be held cheap," said Mrs Pringle. "If you will believe me, Valentine, I think it is much better that there should be no more about it ;" and all Val's remonstrances and pleadings were of no avail. He came back miserable and



dejected, and strayed out to the woods, in which there is always some consolation for a heart-broken lover. Val went as far as the linn, that he might see the place at least where he had been so happy. Was it possible, after all he had gone through, that his love and his happiness were to end like a dream, and every link to be snapt between him and Vi? When he approached that spot which was so full of associations, he too heard sounds, as Dick had done, which told of some human intrusion into this realm of woodland and waters. It was not a sob this time that Val heard. It was a sound of low voices—women's voices—talking in a half-whisper, as if they feared to be discovered. Drawing near, trembling, like a thief, he saw under the big beech-branches a corner of a blue dress, showing from behind one of them. This made his heart beat; but the blue gown might not be Vi's blue gown; and anyhow there were two of them, as the voices testified, so that caution was needful. Another step, however, relieved him of his doubts. In front of him, on the green bank on the river-side, sat Mary Percival, with her face turned towards some one unseen, to whom she was talking. "My dear,

he has had plenty of time to write to you, and he has not done so. If you will believe me, Vi, I think it is a great deal better there should be no more about it." These were, though Mary did not know it, the self-same words under which Val was suffering. The repetition of them drove him beyond himself. He gave a shout of indignant protestation, and rushing between the two astonished ladies, caught her of the blue dress rudely, suddenly, in his arms.

But do not think Violet was half so much surprised as middle-aged Mary was, to whom this interruption was quite unlooked for. She did not know even that "the family" had arrived at Rossraig—Lady Eskside, amid all this tumult of events, having become remiss in her correspondence, and Val's letters to Violet having been, if not suppressed, yet detained at Moray Place during the girl's absence. Even if the family had returned, Mary felt there were a hundred chances to one that Val would not be there precisely at the right moment to meet her and her companion. In Mary's own case things had never happened just at the right moment ; and therefore she had acquiesced with little difficulty in Violet's prayer that she might be allowed

“one look” at the linn. Violet had been sent to Mary to be taken care of—to be kept out of danger; and this, I am ashamed to say, was how Miss Percival, who had a strong vein of romance in her, notwithstanding all her good sense, fulfilled her trust. She saw her folly now when it was too late.

“Valentine!” she cried, “how dare you—how dare you do *that*—when her parents do not know?”

“Her parents!” said Val, equally indignant; “what do I care for her parents, or any one’s parents? I am a man, old enough to know my own mind, and so is Vi. Can parents make us happy?” said the young man, with that cruel frankness which seems so easy to the young, and is so hard upon the old. “Vi, my darling, you know you are mine—you won’t let parents or any one come between you and me?”

Vi did not say a word—there was no need for anything so feeble as words. She clung to him, gazing at him, holding one of his arms fast with her small hands clasped round it. She had been sure he would come; in her heart she had been so wicked as to smile at Mary’s faith the other

way, though she did not say a word of the sweet confidence in her own mind. And Mary, who had not been so treated by Providence, and whose love had not been happy, felt a hot flush of anger against the girl who stood there before her with ineffable smiles, not objecting to the young man's impetuosity, not even answering him a word.

"Violet !" she cried, "come away this instant. Do you know that you are defying both your mother and me ?"

"You have always been my enemy, Mary," cried Val passionately, "and I don't know why, for I have always liked you. Vi, you are not going to do what she tells you—to follow her instead of me ?"

"I am not going to follow any one," said Vi, detaching herself from his arm with much dignity ; then she stood at a little distance, and looked at him with tender glowing eyes. "Oh, Val !" she cried, "but I am glad to see you ! I thought you would never come. I knew you would be here to-day. Val, are you well—are you quite well ? Oh, what a weary, weary time it has been, when I thought I would never see you more !"

“Then you were thinking of me? and you don’t mean to cast me off, Vi?”

“I—cast you off!—that is likely! Mary, you never were Val’s enemy, though he says so, in his hasty way—he was always hasty. He made me give him my promise here, beneath this tree. I cannot take back my word; I cannot say one thing to you and another to him; and you never scolded me when I said I—cared for Val, Mary! not a word! She only cried and gave me a kiss.”

“And she ought to give me a kiss too,” said bold Val, going up to Miss Percival, whose heart was melting altogether away in her bosom, and whose efforts to look stern were becoming almost ludicrous. The audacious boy went up to her, while Vi looked on thunderstruck at his boldness, and kissed Mary’s cheek, which flushed crimson under the touch, making that middle-aged woman look a girl again. “How dare you?” she cried, putting up her hand to push him away; but Mary’s strength was not able to resist this. “God bless you!” she said, next moment, the tears coming to her eyes, “you bold boy! How dare you kiss me? Though I am your enemy, I’ve thought of you and prayed for

you morning and night ever since I parted from you, Val."

"I know that very well," said the young man, composedly ; "for whatever you may say, how could you be my enemy when I am fond of you ? You have not the heart not to help us, Mary. Come and sit down again and let us think what to do. Here is where we played truant when we were children. Here is where you brought us, Mary—you—when we were older ; and here is where Vi gave me her promise. This is the place of all others to meet again. As for any pretence of separating us, how can any one do it ? Think a little," said Val, standing before the fallen tree on which Vi had sat with poor Dick, and from which she now regarded him with soft eyes suffused with light and happiness. "Could they be hard upon *her*, for the first time in her life, and break her heart ? Is that reasonable ? As for me," the young man said, raising his head, while the two women looked at him with tender envy and admiration, "there is no interference possible. I am a man and my own master. So now that you are convinced," cried Valentine, putting himself beside Violet on the old trunk, which, old as it was, had put forth

young shoots of life and hope to make itself fit for the throne of so much love and gladness, "let us consider what is the best means to clear these trifling temporary obstructions out of our way."

I don't think there is anything so silken-green, or that makes so tender a canopy over your head, and shows the sky so sweetly through them, as young beech-leaves in May, just shaken out of their brown busks, and reclothing, as if with tenderest ornaments of youth, the big branches that bear them. Stray airs rustled through them; stray sunbeams, for the day was cloudy, came and went, penetrating now and then through the soft canopy — punctuating with sudden glow of light some one or other of those bold arguments of Val's, which told so well upon his sympathetic audience. Though Violet was not one of the worshipping maidens of modern story, but thought of Val only as Val, and not as a demigod, the soft transport of reunion, the glow of tender trust and admiration with which she regarded that delightful certainty of his, which no terrors shook, gave to her soft face a look of absolute dependence and devotion. She looked up to him, as they sat together holding each other's hands like two children,

with a sentiment which went beyond reason. He was no wiser nor cleverer, perhaps, than she was ; but he looked so strong and so sure, so much above feminine doubts and tremblings, that the mere sight of him gave confidence. As for Mary, seated on the green bank in front of these two, who was ever so much wiser and cleverer than Val (he had few pretensions that way), she, too, felt, with a kind of philosophical amusement at herself, the same sense of added confidence and moral strength as she looked at the boy whom she had watched as he grew up, and chided and laughed at — whose opinion on general subjects had no particular weight with her, yet who somehow gave to her experienced and sensible middle-age a sensation of support and certainty, which the wisest reason does not always communicate. Mary looked at the two seated there together, hand in hand, half-children, half-lovers, under the soft shadow of the young beech-leaves, with that “smile on her lip and tear on her eye” which is the most tender of all human moods. Pity and envy, and amusement, and an almost veneration, were in her thoughts. How innocent they were ! how sure of happiness ! how absolute in their trust in each



other ! and, indeed (when the case was fairly set before them), in everybody else. Notwithstanding the one terrible shock his faith had received—a shock which happily had worked itself out in bodily illness, the most simple way—Val was still of opinion that, if you could but get to the bottom of their hearts, all the world was on his side. He had no fear of Violet's mother, though for the moment she had crushed him ; and, to tell the truth, after his fever, Val had altogether forgotten Mr Pringle's offence against him, and all the harm it had brought. Now that offence was more than past, for had it not been confessed and atoned for, a thing which makes a sin almost a virtue ? Nor was he alarmed when he thought of the old people at Rossraig, who had humoured and served him all his life. What was there to fear ? “It would be against all reason, you know,” said Val, “if our course of true love had run quite smooth. We were miserable enough one time to make all right for the future ; but if you mean to be miserable any more, Vi, you must do it by yourself, for I shan't take any share.”

When a young man thus makes light of all difficulties, what can a sympathetic woman do ?

Before many minutes had passed, Miss Percival found herself pledged to brave Violet's father and mother and overcome their objections. "They have never crossed her in their lives, and why should they now?" said Valentine, with good sense, which no one could gainsay.

When this chief subject had been fully discussed, and all their plans settled, both the ladies drew close to him with breathless interest, while he told them the story of his own family. How Dick was his brother, which made Violet start and clasp her hands, saying, with a sudden outcry, "I always knew it!" and how his mother had come back with them—had come home. It was Mary who, much more than these two young people, who were so sure of each other, had her heart played upon like an instrument that day. She sat quite still and never said a word, while the story was told. I cannot describe her feelings towards the woman who (she felt, though she would not have acknowledged it) had been in the very bloom of her youth preferred to herself. It was not *her* fault; up to this moment the woman who was Richard's wife had never so much as heard of Mary's existence; no blame could possibly attach to her. A strange mingling

of curiosity about her, interest, half-hostile, in her, wondering indignation, disapproval, proud dislike, all softening back into curiosity again, were in Miss Percival's mind; but no one knew how she rung the changes upon these different sentiments as she sat quite still and quiet, listening, now and then asking a question, feeling as if her own life had come to some strange crisis, although she had absolutely nothing to do with it, not so much as one of the servants in the house. And then Valentine's way of speaking of his mother—the lower, hushed, respectful tone, the half-mystery, half-reverence, which he seemed disposed to throw around this gipsy, this tramp who had given them all so much trouble—gave Mary a secret offence, all the more sharp that she felt his feeling to be quite right and just and natural, and would not for the world have expressed her own. Just now, half an hour ago, he had put her in the place of his mother—had taken her interest for granted, had kissed her (the spot burned on Mary's cheek at the thought), and appealed to that strange sentiment in her heart which he seemed to be unconsciously aware of—that sense of the possibility that she might have been his mother, which was always

more or less in her mind in Val's presence. He had taken possession of her in this way, of her sympathy and help, telling her what she was to do, and how to do it, amusing her by his arbitrariness, while he melted her heart by his affectionate confidence. And now all at once, in the same breath almost, he began to talk of his real mother, this woman whom no one knew, who had done him and his family all the harm possible, and now was brought back almost in triumph to reap—not the whirlwind after having sown the wind—but happiness and calm weather, notwithstanding all her folly and ill-doing. Mary sat in a maze, in a dream, while all this went through her mind, yet with all her faculties alert, hearing everything and feeling everything. She was hurt even by Val's description of his mother's beauty, which filled Vi with such admiring interest. "Oh, how I should like to see her!" cried Violet. "You shall both see her," said Valentine, with the arbitrary determination to give pleasure of a young prince. How Mary's heart swelled! But if these two children had guessed what was going on in her mind, with what wondering grieved disapproval they would have looked upon her, troubled by a

sense of natural incongruity that a woman of her age could possibly feel so! She felt this along with all the rest; and, in short, she was conscious of so many different sentiments, that all her vigour and natural power went out of her. Her heart was being lacerated by a hundred needle-points and pin-pricks—like a pin-cushion, she said, faintly trying to laugh to herself.

Val went with them to their carriage, which was waiting at the lower edge of the woods, in the opposite direction from Rosscraig, and took a farewell, which he declared to be the merest temporary good-bye, but which once more made Violet's eyes tearful. Vi grew less certain as she lost sight of him. Various unexpected results had followed the publication of that Apology, which in her youthful heat and energy she had almost forced her father into writing. Even Mrs Pringle had not seen the necessity for it so clearly as Violet did; and the world in general on both sides of the question had taken it, as Lord Eskside did, as a formal retractation, a bringing down to his marrow-bones of Sandy Pringle, rather than as the prompt and frank and generous apology of one gentleman to

another. Some had said that it was fear of an action for libel which had moved him to such a step ; others, with a frank malediction, had d——d him for not standing to what he had said. Nobody had appreciated his motive, or understood Violet's childlike reasoning on the abstract principle, that when you have done wrong and know it, there is no course possible but to confess the wrong and ask pardon of the injured person. This, I fear, is not a course of action at all congenial to the ordinary code ; and Mr Pringle, though carried away by the impetuosity of his daughter, had by this time repented his *amende honorable* quite as much as he repented the evil he had done. To suffer for doing wrong is reasonable ; but it is hard to be punished for doing right, and fills the sufferer's heart with bitterness.

Mr Pringle had been very penitent towards poor Val before the days of the Apology ; but now, in the sharpness of the sting of unappreciated virtue, he was furious against him. Violet knew this only too well, and her courage oozed out of her finger-ends as she saw the young hero disappear into the woods. "Do you think—do you really think—it is all as certain as he says?"

she said to Miss Percival, with tears in her soft eyes, which had been so bright with happiness and courage a moment before.

As for Valentine, he strode home through the woods very triumphant and joyful, as became a young lover ; but sobered as he drew near home. He made up his mind to go at once into the matter, and extort a consent from everybody ; but as he drew near and nearer to the turrets of Rosscraig, it became more and more apparent to him that there would be no small trouble and pain involved ; and he began to feel how disagreeable it is to displease and vex the people most near to you, even in order to secure for yourself the person dearest and nearest of all. This thought did not subdue his resolution, but it subdued his step, which became less and less rapid. Nothing in this world would have induced him to give up Vi ; but he did not like to defy his old grandfather, to make my lady set her lips firm in that way he knew so well. He wished intensely that Vi and he could have been happy without that ; but still, as it had to be done some time or other, it was better, much better, that it should be done at once. So, after walking very slowly the last mile of the way, he

suddenly, to use his own phraseology, "put on a spurt," and skimmed over the last quarter of a mile, making up his mind, as if for an operation, to get it over. He walked straight into the library, still flushed from his long walk, and somewhat to his surprise found all the family authorities collected there, my lord and my lady and his father, all apparently engaged in some mysterious consultation. Val remarked with bewilderment that his father, so placid usually and indifferent, was flushed like himself,—though with speech, not exercise,—and that Lord and Lady Eskside had both a doubtful tremulous aspect, and looked morally cowed, not convinced. To tell the truth, they had been arguing the question over again, whether it was possible to keep the secret of Dick's seniority from the two young men. It was Richard's desire that this should be done ; but he had not convinced the others either of the possibility or expediency of it, though, for the moment, they had come to a conditional bargain to say nothing unless circumstances should arise which made the disclosure necessary. This supposed emergency was to be left to each one's private judgment, I suppose, and therefore the secret was pretty sure of rapid



revelation ; but still the old pair were not satisfied. “ Good never came of falsehood, or even, that I know, of the mere *suppressio veri*,” Lord Eskside had said, shaking his head, just as Val came in ; and they all turned to look at him, with a little wonder and excitement ; for he looked indeed very like a man who had found something out, coming in hot haste to tell it, and ask, Is this true ? The old lord and his wife looked at each other, both of them leaping to the conclusion that this was so, and that Val had discovered the secret ; and they were not sorry, but gave a little nod of secret intelligence to each other. Poor Val ! poor boy ! it was another trial for him ; and yet it was best, far best, that he should know.

“ Grandfather,” said Val, plunging at once into the subject, bringing in an atmosphere of fresh air and youthful eagerness with him, “ I have come to tell you at once of something that has happened to me. It is strange to find you all sitting here, but I am heartily glad of it. My lady, you know how long it is since I first spoke to Violet——”

“ Oh, Violet ! ” cried my lady, with an impatient movement of her head and stamp of her

foot upon the carpet ; “ Lord bless us ! is it this nonsense he has got in his head again ? ”

“ You may call it nonsense if you like,” said Val, seeing somehow that what he had said was not what they expected, and unconsciously, in an under-current of thought, wondering what it was they had expected ; “ it is not nonsense to me. I went to Moray Place this morning, having heard nothing of her for a long time—and there Mrs Pringle received me very coldly——”

“ That was unfortunate,” said Richard, with a smile, which his son called a sneer ; “ that an Edinburgh lawyer’s wife should receive Lord Eskside’s grandson coldly, was, no doubt, something very miserable indeed—enough, I suppose, to justify this excitement,” and he looked at Val with an amused scrutiny from head to foot, which made the young man wild with irritation. He had stumbled into a burn on his way home, and had left, there was no denying it, one huge muddy foot-print on the spotless carpet, which had at once caught his father’s fastidious eye.

“ The Edinburgh lawyer’s wife may not be much to you, sir,” said Val, “ but she is a great deal to me ; for she has my future wife’s comfort and happiness in her hand. I want to let you

know at once that my mind is quite made up and decided. I told you so before. What is the use of wearing our hearts out by waiting and waiting?" cried Val, turning from one to another. "You are good and kind, why should you make me miserable? In everything else you have always tried to make me happy; you have listened to what I had to say; you have been always reasonable; why should you shut your hearts against me now, in the one matter that is most important to me, in that which must decide my happiness or misery all my life?"

"The argument is well put," said the old lord, with exasperating composure; "but, Val, how can you tell at your age what is, or what is not, to decide the happiness of your life?"

"And don't you see, Val," said my lady, more sympathetically, "that it is just because it is so important that we cannot give our consent so easily? Oh, my dear, if you had wanted the moon we would have tried to get it for you; think, then, how strong a motive it must be that makes us cross you now!"

"What is the motive?" said Val, with sudden dramatic force, waiting solemnly for an answer. The two old people looked at each other

again and trembled. What could they answer to this impetuous boy? The motive was that Violet was not a great match for him, such as they had hoped for—not any one who would bring him wealth or distinction, but only a girl whom he loved; and they quailed before the boy's look. If they had been a worldly pair the answer would have been easy; but these two high-minded old people, who had trained him to scorn all that was mean, and to hold love high and honour, how were they to state this plain fact to a young lover of three-and-twenty? They did not know what words to use in which to veil their motive and give it some sort of grandeur worthy the occasion; and, unfortunately, Val saw his advantage as clearly as they saw the disadvantage under which they lay.

“You speak like a foolish boy,” said his father. “It is enough that we think this match a very unfit one for you, and I hope you have sense enough yourself to see its unsuitability. Who is this girl? an Edinburgh lawyer's daughter—a man who has attacked your family in the basest and most treacherous way——”

“But who has apologised!” cried Val;

“who has confessed he was wrong and begged pardon——”

“The more fool he,” said Richard, “not to have strength of mind to stick to his slander when he had committed himself to it. Apology!—you mean retraction—extorted, no doubt, from him by fear of his pocket. It would be more dignified, no doubt, to pay the twopence-ha’penny he can afford to give her, as his daughter’s portion, rather than as damages in a court of law.”

“If it is a question of twopence-ha’penny,” said Val, with a violent flush of sudden anger.

“My boy, you must not use that tone here,” Lord Eskside interposed. “Your father is right. Is it your enemy that you want to ally yourself with? he that raked up the whole old story of your coming here, and tried to ruin you with it, using his falsehood for your destruction——”

“Grandfather,” said Val, still flaming with nervous passion, “the sting of that story, I have always understood, was that it was not false but true.”

“Val!” cried Lady Eskside; but there was a pause after this—and I think in the very heat of the discussion the old lord felt with secret

pleasure that his boy had already made more than one point, even though it was against himself. Twice over Val had silenced the opposing forces. Now, but to live to see him facing the House of Commons like this, who could tell, from the Treasury bench itself! This delightful secret suggestion crept into Lord Eskside's heart like a warm wind loosening the frosts.

"Then if you will only consider," said Val, changing his indignant tone for one of soft conciliation and pleading, "there is no one in Scotland, so far as I can see, so free to choose for myself as I am. If you were not what you are, sir, the first man in the county, as you ought to be—if my father were not what he is, distinguished in other circles than ours—then, perhaps, I, who as yet am nobody, might have required to look outside, to get crutches of other people's distinctions; but as it is, what does it matter? We are rich enough, we are more independent than the Queen, who, poor lady, must always consider other people, I suppose; whereas I, who am your grandson—and your son, sir—I," cried Val, "am more free than a prince to ask for love only and happiness! Give them to me," he said, holding out his

hands with natural eloquence to the two old people, who sat looking at him, afraid to look at each other ; you never in all my life refused me anything before ! ”

I cannot tell how it was that this natural noble attitude in which his son stood, asking, like a loyal soul as he was, for that consent, without which he could not be wholly happy, to his happiness—affected almost to rage the mind of Richard, whose mode had been entirely the reverse ; who had plucked in hot haste, without sanction or knowledge of any one, the golden apples which had turned to ashes and bitterness. To marry as he had done, wildly, hotly, in sudden passion,—is not that much more easily condoned by the great world in which he lived, which loves a sensation, than a respectable mediocre marriage, equally removed from scandal and from distinction ? To marry a gipsy, or an opera-dancer, or a maid-of-all-work, is more pardonable, as being a piquant rebellion against all law and order, than it is to marry a virtuous person out of the lower circles of good society, sufficiently well-born and well-bred to make no sensation. The lawyer’s daughter was gall to Richard. He interposed with one of those sud-

den fits of passionate irritability to which his smooth nature was liable.

“Do not let this folly go any further, Val. We all know what is meant by these ravings about love and happiness. Whatever place I may have gained among men it is not from having been my father’s son ; neither will that serve you as you think. Lord Eskside’s grandson !” said Richard, with scorn on his lip ; “how much will that do for the younger of you two—the one who is not the heir,” he continued, with rising energy—“the one who has a second son’s allowance, a second son’s position ; the one—whom we have all agreed in cheating out of his rights——”

“Dick ?” said Val, with hesitation and wonder. He looked round upon them all, and saw something in their eyes which alarmed him he could not tell why. “Is it Dick ?”

“Valentine,” said his father, suddenly coming up to him, seizing his arm, “it is not for me to speak to you of the miseries of a foolish marriage ; but look here. Give up this boyish folly. You have a foundation, as you say, built up by those who have gone before you ; you may



make any match you please ; you may cover all that has gone before with the world's pardon and more than pardon. I look to you to do this. I can give you opportunities—you will have countless opportunities ; give up this girl who is nobody—or if you refuse——”

“What then, sir, if I refuse ?” Val loosed his arm from his father's hold and stood confronting him, steadfast and erect, yet surprised and with a novel kind of pain in his eyes. The two old people gave one look at each other, then paused breathless to hear what was to come next, both of them aware that Richard, diplomatist as he was, forgot himself sometimes, and perceiving that the crisis, which in their previous talk they had prepared for, had now arrived.

“Then,” said Richard—he paused a moment, and all the old prick of a jealousy which he had despised himself for feeling, all the old jars of sensation at which he had tried to laugh, which had arisen out of the perpetual preference of Val to himself, surged up for one moment in his temper rather than his heart. The weapon lay at his hand so ready ; the boy was somehow so superior, so irritating in his innocence. His face

flushed with this sudden impulse to humiliate Val. "Then," he said, "perhaps you will pause when I tell you, for your good, that you have totally mistaken your own position ; that you are not the great man you think yourself ; that though you have condescended to your brother, and patronised him, and been, as it were, his good genius, it is Dick who is Lord Eskside's heir, and not you."

Lady Eskside started with a low cry. It was because Dick had come in a moment before at the door, in front of which his father and brother were standing ; but Richard thought her exclamation was because of what he said, and turned to her with a smile which it was not good to see.

"Yes, mother," he said, "you wished him to know. *Benissimo !* now he knows. He has been the grand seigneur, and Dick has been nobody. Now the positions are reversed ; and I hope his magnanimity will bear it. Anyhow, now, with his second son's allowance, he will be obliged to pause in this mad career."

"Is it so ?" said Val, going forward to the table, and, I confess, leaning upon it a hand which trembled—for he had been thunderstruck

by this revelation—"is it so?" No one spoke; and poor Val, standing there with his eyes cast down, had, I avow it, a bitter moment; but the very sting of the shock stimulated him, and called all his faculties together. After that minute, which felt like a year, he raised his head with a glimmer of painful moisture in his eyes, but a faint smile. "Well," he said, "at all events there can never more be any doubt about me, who I belong to, or what position I hold. I wish Dick all the luck in the world, and he deserves it. He'll be sorrier than I am," said Val. "What, grandmamma, crying! Not a bit of it! I shall be as happy as the day is long with my second son's allowance; and Vi!—for of course," he added, with a bright defiant smile all round, "there can be no possible objection to Vi now."

Dick had been standing quite still behind, moved not by curiosity, but by that respectful attention to the preoccupation of the others, which I suppose his former lowliness had put into him, though it is the highest grace of a gentleman. He had heard everything, indeed, but his mind was too full of something else to care for what he had heard. He broke in

here, with a new subject, in a voice hoarse with anxiety and emotion. "Has any one seen my mother?" said Dick. "I have been all over the house looking for her, high and low."

## CHAPTER XLII.

THAT had been a weary morning in the new wing. Dick had gone to Edinburgh with his brother, half by way of seeing the beautiful town, half to console Val, who was very eager and anxious. With a curious interest he had walked about Moray Place, to which he had directed his letters in the strange old time when he was still Dick Brown,—a time which it gave him a certain vertigo to think of. And I am sorry to say that Val, in the heat of disappointment, when he came out from Mrs Pringle's presence, forgot that his brother was walking about on the other side of the square waiting for him, and had rushed back to Lasswade without ever thinking of Dick. When he saw that he had been forgotten, Dick too made his way to the railway, and went back ; but it was afternoon when he arrived at Rossraig. He had

never left his mother for so long a time before, and this, no doubt, had its effect upon her. She was alone in the beautiful rooms of the new wing all the morning. It was like a silent fairy palace, where everything was done by mysterious unseen hands ; for the sight of servants fretted her, and she would not admit any personal attendance. She had grown feeble in that lonely splendour without any notice being taken of it ; for Dick, with the inexperience of youth, made no observations on the subject, and to Lady Eskside, who visited her every day, she asserted always that she was quite well. More feeble than ever she had got up that morning, and dressed herself as usual, and taken her sparing breakfast with Dick. After the first few days, Lady Eskside had yielded to this arrangement, seeing it impossible, at least for the moment, to habituate the newcomer to the family table. “ If it is such a distress to her, why should we force her to it ? ” said my lady, not without offence ; and the poor soul was grateful for the exemption. “ Don’t find fault with me, Dick,” she said to him faintly ; “ it can’t be for long. I’ll get used to it, and easy in my mind before long ; ”—and therefore she

had been sorrowfully left to herself in the beautiful new rooms furnished for her three-and-twenty years before. When Dick left her she went to a little room in the front part of the wing, which looked out upon the great door and court, where she sat watching till the two young men went away, and waved her hand in answer to their salutations. Valentine had already paid her a visit in the morning, a visit which he never neglected ; and wherever they were going, the young men never forgot to look up to that window from which it was her pleasure to watch their movements, one of the few pleasures she had.

When they had left the house she had no more interest in it. She wandered back again through various empty rooms to the great handsome sitting-room, which had a lightsome bow-window looking out upon the sloping bank of wood down to where the Esk foamed and tumbled below. Had she had any work to do, as in the days when she was Dick's housekeeper, and kept all his treasures in order, and prepared his simple meals, she might have forgotten herself and got through the weary hours. But she had nothing to do, poor soul ! She sat down in the

window, and passed she did not know how long a time there, gazing vaguely out, sometimes thinking, sometimes quite vacant : in so hazy a state was her mind that it seemed to her sometimes that soft Thames flowed at her feet instead of the brawling Esk ; and that she was waiting till Mr Ross's boat should come down the gentle river. Poor bewildered soul ! a haze of times and places, of the vacant present, and the gleams of interest which had been in the past, possessed her mind ; she scarcely could have told where she was had any one asked her. The silence grew painful to her brain, and reeled and rustled round her in eddies of suppressed sound all centring in herself ; and now and then the light swam in her eyes, and darkened, and there was an interval in which everything was black around her, and all that she was aware of was that rustle, overpowering in its intensity, of the silence, raying out in circles, like those in water, from her brain. I almost think she must have lapsed into some kind of faint, without knowing it, in those moments. About noon Lady Esk-side came to see her, and did, as she always did, her very utmost to win some sort of hold upon her. She talked to her of the boys, of Val who



must soon go to London, of trifles of every description, working hard to rouse her to some interest. "I wish you would come with me," my lady said; and she was glad afterwards that she had said it. "I am alone, and we would be cheerier together, we two women, when all the others are away. Won't you come with me, Myra? My woman, you look lonely here." "I am used to be alone," she said quite gently, but without moving; and half provoked, half sorry, the old lady had at last gone away, despairing in her mind, and wondering whether it had been kind to bring this wild creature here even in her subdued state, and whether she would ever find any comfort in her life. "Perhaps when Richard goes," Lady Eskside said to herself; for Richard's influence did not seem to be advantageous to his wife, though he was very careful, very anxious, not to step over the distance which she had tacitly placed between them, though strangely tantalised and excited by it as his mother saw. What was to be done? The old lady shook her head, and took refuge with her old lord in the library, not saying anything to him to vex him, for what could he do? but finding a little consolation in her own vexation and perplexity

in being near him. How different that silent support and society was from the solitude in the new wing, and even from Richard's dainty and still retirement, where he wrote his letters, with his noiseless Italian servant close at hand to answer every call ! It eased my lady's old heart, which had felt so many pains, only to walk into the library where her old lord sat, and put up the window, or down the window, and look at the letters on his table, and say something about the weather or the garden—just as it eased Lord Eskside, when he was in any perplexity, to go into the drawing-room, and pronounce the novel on her table to be “some of your rubbish, my lady,” and let her know that the glass was falling, and that she had better take precautions about her drive. Lady Eskside wondered with a sigh whether it would ever be possible to bring her new guest—her strange daughter-in-law—into the household life. She meant nothing but kindness towards her ; but there was—how could she help it ?—a little impatience in the sigh.

After that visit the recluse in the new wing was left to herself again, and all kinds of strange thoughts came up into her heart. They were

not so articulate as Lady Eskside's ; but somehow there arose in her, as the old lady went away, a curious reflection of her impatience, an incoherent desire to call her back again. She sat and listened to her steps going all the way along the corridor, and down the stair, and never opened her lips nor made a movement to detain her ; and yet there rose in her mind a mute cry, could the dull air but have carried it without any action of hers. She caught the sound of Lady Eskside's sigh, and, for the first time, a dim understanding of it seemed to dawn upon her mind. Why could not she go with her—make herself one with the others ? The thought was very shadowy and vague, like a suggestion some unseen observer had made to her ; but it raised a visionary ferment in her soul, a gasping for breath, as if she already felt herself confined within an atmosphere where she had no room to breathe.

Then she took refuge in her own room in this painful rush of new feeling. The curtains at the windows, the hangings of the bed, the draperies everywhere, seemed to shut her in and cut short her breath. The great glass which reflected her figure from head to foot, the other

lesser ones which multiplied her face, glancing back resemblances at her as if she, in her solitude, had grown into half-a-dozen women, affected her imagination wildly. She left that room like one pursued—pursued by herself, always the worst ghost of solitude. Then she went to the little room with the window which commanded the great door. Perhaps by this time the boys might be come back ; and the boys formed her bridge, as it were, into the world, her sole link of connection with life in this artificial phase. A little warmth, a little hope, came into her as she sat down there and strained her eyes to watch for some sign of their coming. After a while, the door opened and Richard came out. He stood on the great steps for a moment, putting on his gloves, then, looking up, saw her, and took off his hat to her ; then he made a pause, as if in doubt, drew off the gloves again, and went back into the house. At this sight a sudden wild panic came upon her. She thought he was coming to see her, which indeed was the purpose with which he had turned back. She sprang up, her heart beating, and flying through the lonely rooms, seized a shawl which lay on a chair, and darted down a little stair in the

turret which led into the woods. Her excitement carried her on for some distance before her breath failed her altogether, though her heart beat loud in her bosom, like some hard piston of iron, swinging and creaking in fierce unmanageable haste. She had got into the shrubberies, not knowing where she went, and sank down among the bushes to rest, when her strength failed. The thought of meeting her husband now, with nobody by, drove her wild. She had lived under the same roof with him for days at Oxford, and thought little of it, being occupied with other matters; but deadly panic, as of a wild deer flying from the hunter, had seized upon her now. She never asked herself what harm he could do her. She feared nothing actual, but, with overwhelming blind terror, she feared the future and the unknown.

Oh, how many thoughts came rushing upon her as she lay crouched together on the cool earth among the bushes!—thoughts half made out, not one altogether articulate—gleams of a consciousness that this was folly, that it was impossible, that she *must* get the better of herself, that the fever in her soul *must* be chased away, and could not be submitted to. “I must

change—I must make a change!” she moaned to herself. A whole new being, a new creature, with dim evolutions of reason, dim perceptions of the impossible, seemed to be rising up in her, blotting out the old. Her faults, her follies, her wild impulses, the savage nature which could endure no restraint, had all come to a climax in her ; and reason, which had struggled faintly in the old days, and won her to so many sacrifices, had at last got the balance in hand, I think, and the power to decide what could and what could not be. Yet, when she had got her breath a little, she stumbled to her feet, and went on.

When Dick came back she was not to be found in her rooms, which troubled him greatly ; for she had never before gone out by herself. He searched through every corner, then went to the other parts of the house—to the drawing-room, to Lady Eskside’s rooms, to Val’s—hopeless of finding her, indeed, yet so confident that something must have happened, that no marvel would have surprised him. When he burst into the library he was in despair. And this new alarm, so suddenly introduced among them, diverted them at once from the other subject, which had lost its enthralling and exciting

power now that the secret had been made known. Richard Ross had not been spending a pleasant afternoon. He was excited by Val's defiance, and he had been excited before. He turned very pale as Dick spoke. He knew that his wife had fled out of the house to avoid him—a thing which, naturally enough, had tried his temper greatly. Where had she gone? He remembered that when he looked down the winding staircase in the turret, through which she had evidently fled, the fresh air blowing in his face had brought with it a sound of the Esk tumbling over its rocks. This had not alarmed him then, and he had scorned to follow the fugitive, or to force her into an interview she avoided, in this way; but now suddenly it returned to him with an indescribable shock of terror. He went out without saying a word to any one, moved by sudden panic. The others started to explore the woods; the idea of the river did not occur to either of the young men, who knew her better than Richard did. They set off both together; while Lord Eskside, with the servants, undertook to search the gardens and shrubberies nearer home. “Oh, God forgive her if she's gone away again!” cried the old lady, wringing her hands.

"I can't think that she's gone away," said Dick. His face was very grave. He scarcely said a word to Val, who went with him, and who tried anxiously to ascertain from him what it was he really feared. Dick kept silent, his heart too strained and sore for speech.

As for Val, he was swept out of one excitement and plunged into another without a moment's interval to take breath in, and the fresh air did him good. I need not say of a public-school boy and well-trained "man," that he had picked himself up, to use an undignified but useful expression, ere now, and betrayed, neither in look nor tone, the sudden blow he had received. For that grace, if no other, let our English education be blessed. Val had no idea of contending, of "making a row," or of bearing malice. If the right was Dick's, why, then, the right was Dick's,—and there was nothing more to be said. If his mind was momentarily weak and unable to seize all that was going on, he did not show it, except by a certain mental feebleness and want of his usual energy, which made him disposed to take Dick's lead rather than to form any opinion of his own. But even this lasted only a short time. "Come," said Val,



drawing a long breath, "why should we be so downhearted? She has gone out to take the air—to enjoy the—good weather."

He had meant to say the beautiful afternoon; but then it suddenly occurred to him that the day was dull and cloudy, and that the gleams of sunshine which had been so sweet were gone.

"She never took her walk without me before," said Dick. "Oh, why did I stop away so long? I can't tell you what a weight I have here at my heart."

"Cheer up, old fellow!" said Val, thrusting his arm into his brother's; "things will go better than you think. What harm could happen? She was not ill; and the woods are innocent woods, with no precipices in them, or pitfalls. I roamed about them all day long when I was a child, and nothing ever happened to me."

Dick shook his head; but he was cheered in spite of himself, and began to have a little hope. The woods were alive with sound on that dim afternoon. The sun, indeed, was not shining, but the atmosphere was soft with spring, and all the light airs that were about came and rustled in the leaves, and tossed the light twigs which could not resist them. The birds were twittering

on every branch, scarcely singing, for they missed the sun, but getting through all that melodious dramatic chatter which they do ordinarily in the early morning, before their professional life, so to speak, as minstrels of the universe, has begun. Everything was soft, harmonious, subdued—no high notes, either of colour or sound, but every tone gentle, low, and sweet. Even Esk added with a mellow note his voice to the concert. It seemed impossible to conceive of anything terrible, any grief that rends the heart, any failure of light and life, upon such a subdued and gentle day. The young men went far,—much further, alas ! than they needed to have gone—almost as far as the linn,—before Dick remembered that it was impossible she could have walked to that distance. “I am thinking of her as she was in the old times,” said Dick, “when she would get over a long bit of road, always so quiet, not one to talk much, looking as if she saw to the end, however far it was ; but she couldn’t do that now. Now I think of it,” said Dick, “she’s failed these last days.”

“I do not think it, Dick. Your fears make you see the gloomy side of everything.”

“It aint my fears ; it’s somehow borne in

upon me. Please God," said Dick, devoutly, "that we find her, she shan't be left to herself again without being looked after. No, no one is to blame—except me that should have known."

"Do you think it has harmed her to bring her here?" Val spoke humbly, with a sudden sense of some failure on his own part of duty towards her; for indeed he had taken his mother's strange ways for granted, as children so often do.

"It couldn't be helped, anyhow," said Dick—"she had to come;" and then he paused and thought all at once of the bank of primroses, which was a mile at least nearer home than they were now. He put his hand on Val's arm, and turned back. "I have thought of a place to look for her," he cried.

The spot was deep in the silence of the woods, great trees standing round about, one a huge old beech, every branch of which looked like a tree in itself. Underneath it, in a curious circle, were a ring of juniper-bushes, deep funereal green, contrasting with the lighter silken foliage above. Close to this rose the low knoll, a deeper cool green than either, all carpeted with the primrose-leaves. Something red lying there

showed a long way before they reached the knoll through the trees ; but it was not till they were quite close to it that they saw her whom they sought. She was lying in a natural easy attitude reclined on the green bank. With one hand she seemed to be groping for something among the leaves, and it was only when they were within sight that she dropped back as if in fatigue, letting her head droop upon the rich herbage. "Mother!" Dick cried ; but she did not move. Her consciousness was gone, or going. How long she had been there no one ever knew. Her strength had failed entirely when she had sat down among the flowers, after struggling through the bushes as on a pilgrimage to that natural shrine which had caught her sick fancy. She had a few of the primroses in her lap, and one or two in her hand. The very last, one large star-like flower just out of her reach, was the only other that remained, and she had fallen as if in an overstrain, trying to reach this. Her face was perfectly pallid, like white marble, contrasting with the brilliant colour of her shawl, as she lay back among the leaves. Her eyes were open, and seemed to be looking at the boys as they approached ; but there was no intelligence

or consciousness in them. Her lips were parted with a long-drawn struggling breath.

“Mother!” Dick cried, kneeling down by her side. She stirred faintly, and tried to turn towards the voice. “Mother, mother!” he repeated passionately; “you’re tired only? not ill, not ill, mother dear?”

Once more she made a feeble effort to turn to him. “Ay, Dick,” she said, “ay, lad—that’s—what it is. I’m tired—dead tired; I don’t know—how I am to get afoot—again.”

“Don’t lose heart,” he cried, poor fellow—though every look he gave her took all heart from him—there’s two of us here to help you, mother, Val and me. Try to rouse up once more, for Val’s sake, if not for mine.”

She made no answer to this appeal; perhaps she was past understanding it; her fingers fumbled feebly with the primroses; “I came out—for some flowers,” she said,—“but I didn’t bring—no basket; ay, lad—it is a long way—and it’s dark. Is there a tent—Dick? or where are we—to sleep to-night?”

“Mother, mother dear—home is close by—for God’s sake come home!”

“That—I will!” she said, her voice low

and dull and broken, contrasting strangely with the apparent heartiness of the words. Then she raised her head feebly for a moment, and looked at them with her eyes expanding in great circles of light—light which was darkness; and then dropped back again heavily, upon the green primrose-leaves.

“Has she fainted?” said Valentine, in terror.

“Go and fetch some one!” cried Dick, imperiously commanding his brother for the first time—“something to carry her home.” He was master of the moment, in his sudden perception, and in the grief which he only could fully feel. He did not say what had happened, but he knew it to the depths of his heart. She had not fainted. She had got away where this time no one could follow her, or bring her back any more.

Val rushed through the trees to the broad footpath, to obey his brother's orders, dismayed and anxious, but with no suspicion of what had really taken place; and there met a pony carriage which Lady Eskside had sent after them, judging that if the poor wanderer were found, she might be too weary to walk back. Val returned immediately to where his mother lay,

hoping, with a strange nervous dread which he could not account for, that she might have changed her position, and closed her eyes ; for there was something that appalled him, he could not tell why, in the brilliancy of that look, which did not seem to direct itself to anything, not even to her sons. Dick raised her with difficulty in his arms, showing his brother without a word how to help him. And thus they made their way painfully through the brushwood. How heavy, how still, how motionless, how awful was their burden ! Val's heart began to beat as hers had done so short a time before. Was this how people looked when they fainted ? Before they reached the pony-carriage he was exhausted with the strain, which was both physical and mental. He was afraid of her, not knowing what had happened to her. "Should not we get water—something to revive her ?" he said, panting, as she was laid down in the little carriage. Dick only shook his head. "Lead the pony very gently," he said to his brother ; and Val once more did what he was told—humbly sending the servant who had brought it, on before them, to announce their coming, and to get the doctor. And thus her boys, all

alone, no one with them, brought her home. It was what she would have chosen, poor soul ! had she been able to choose.

I need not describe the commotion and excitement in Rossraig when this piteous procession came to the door. Dick supporting her who needed no support ; Val, with subdued looks, leading the pony. They carried her up-stairs into her own room between them, letting no one else touch her ; and I think that, by that time, Val knew, as well as Dick. But of course all kind of vain attempts were made to bring her to herself, till the doctor came, who looked at her, and then sent all the foolish ministrations away. Richard Ross, coming in very white and worn from the river-side, where he had found nothing, met Mrs Harding coming down-stairs with solemn looks, but did not stop to question her. He went straight up into the rooms where up to this time there had existed a kind of moral barricade against him which he had seldom ventured to face. All was open now to him or any one. He could go where he pleased, penetrating into the very chamber a little while ago more closely shut against him than any Holy of Holies, where his wife lay. They had pulled away, for the



sake of air, all the curtains and draperies which a few hours before had stifled her very soul ; and there she lay, unveiled as yet, a marble woman, white and grand, with everything gone that detracted from her beauty. Her eyes were half closed, revealing still a glimmer under the long eyelashes, which had never showed as they did now, against the marble whiteness of her cheek. The kerchief on her head had fallen off, and the long dark hair framed the white face. The living woman had been beautiful with a beauty that was passing—the dead woman was sublime in a beauty that would last, in the eyes that saw her now, for ever. Richard thrust the doctor out of his way, who turned to speak to him. He put Val away with the other hand, and went up close to the bedside. What thoughts passed through his mind as he stood there ! Sorrow, a certain indignation, a profound and mournful pity. It was she who had wronged him, not he who had wronged her ; and there she lay, for whom he had lost his life, and who had never been his. His cold bosom swelled with an emotion greater than he knew how to account for. She was so beautiful that he was proud of her even at this last moment, and felt

his choice justified ; but she had got away for ever without one sign, without one word, to show that she had ever thought of him. He had given up everything for her, and she had never been his.

“Richard, Richard, come away,” said his mother, laying her hand on his arm ; “we can do her no good now ; and she had her boys with her, thank God, at the last.”

“Her boys !” he said, with a deep breath which was tremulous with injured love, with wounded pride, with unspeakable minglings of indignant sorrow. “I am her husband, mother, and she has gone without one word to me.”

Then he turned, and, without looking at any one, went away.

## CHAPTER XLIII.

I DO not mean to pretend to the reader that, after that one moment of complicated anguish, swelling of the heart almost too great for a man's bosom who was too proud to show any sign, Richard sorrowed long or deeply for his wife, or that this strange blow was profoundly felt as a grief by the awed and saddened household. That was scarcely possible: though the sorrowful pity for a life thus wasted, and which had caused the waste of another, was more deep and less unmingled in the minds of the old people after the death of Richard's wife than it could be while she was living, and proving still how impossible it was by any amount of kindness to bring her to share their existence. Neither could Val grieve as Dick did. He grieved with his imagination, seeing all the sadness of this catastrophe, and touched with tender compunc-

tions, and thoughts of what he might have done but did not, as every sensitive soul must be when the gate of death has closed between it and those who have claims upon its affection. He was very, very sorry for poor Dick, whose grief was real and profound ; and deeply touched by the memory of his mother whom he had known so little. But what more could he feel ? and soon life took its usual course again. The house was saddened and stilled in its mourning—but it was relieved also. “ She never could have been happy here ; and where, poor soul, would she have been happy ? ” Lady Eskside said, dropping a natural tribute of tears to her memory. It was sad beyond measure, but yet it was a relief as well.

Very soon, too, after this, it became necessary for Val to go to London, and for the whole system of the family affairs to be rearranged. Dick had not taken the slightest notice of the revelation which he had heard that day at the library door, if, indeed, he had heard it at all. A day or two, however, before the time fixed for Val’s departure, he appeared in the library, where once more his grandparents were seated together, leading his brother with him. It was about a month after the mother’s death, getting towards

the end of June ; and the windows were all open. Lady Eskside had come in from the lawn where she had been walking, with a white shawl over her cap (the old lady disliked black—but white is always suitable with mourning, as well as very becoming to a fair old face, soft with pearly tints of age, yet sweet with unfading bloom) ; on a garden-seat within sight Richard sat reading, looking out now and then from his book on the lovely familiar landscape. The old lord, I need not say, was seated at his writing-table, with the last number of the ‘Agricultural Journal’ near him, and a letter, just begun, on his desk, to the editor, in which he was about to give very weighty advice to the farming world on the rotation of crops. Thus, when the two young men came in, the whole family was within reach, all stilled and quieted, as a family generally is after a domestic loss, even when there is no profound grief. Dick was the most serious of all. There was that expression about his eyes which tears leave behind, and which sad thoughts leave—a look that comes naturally to any mourner who has strained his eyes gazing after some one who is gone. Val was the only exception to the generally subdued look of the

party. He was excited ; two red spots were on his cheeks, his eyes were shining with animation and energy ; he went to the window, said a few half - whispered words to Lady Eskside, then beckoned to his father, who came slowly in and joined them. Dick sat listlessly down near the old lady. He was the only one who seemed indifferent to what was coming, and indeed suspected nothing of any special importance in this family meeting.

“Grandfather,” said Val, “I have something to say. I am going away soon, you know, and I should like everything to be settled first. There have been so many changes lately, some of them sad enough,” and he laid his hand caressingly on Dick’s shoulder, by whom he stood. “We can’t get back what has gone from us,” said Val, his eyes glistening, “or make up for anything that might have been done differently ; but at least we must settle everything now.” Then there was a little pause, and he added with a smile half frank, half embarrassed, “It seems very worldly - minded, but I should like to know what I am to have and how things are to be.”

“It is very reasonable,” said Lord Eskside.

“First of all,” said Val, “I want to keep my seat now I’ve got it. I don’t grudge anything to Dick—it isn’t that; but as there was a great deal of trouble in getting it, and expense—no, I don’t mean to be a humbug; that isn’t the reason. There’s nothing to prevent the younger son being member for Eskshire, is there, sir? and I want it—that’s the short and long of the matter—unless you say no.”

“He ought to have the seat,” said Richard. “It is a little compensation for the disappointment; besides, Val is better qualified——”

“And again,” said Val, hurriedly, to prevent the completion of this sentence, “I want to know, sir, and Dick ought to know——”

Dick interrupted him, raising his head. “What is this about?” he asked; “has it anything to do with me?”

“It has everything to do with you,” said his father. “He knows, does not he? Dick, I was told you were present and heard what I said—which perhaps was foolishly said at that moment. We had always thought your brother was the eldest and you the youngest. Now it turns out the other way. You are the eldest son. Of course this changes Valentine’s pro-

spects entirely ; and it is well that you, too, should look your new position in the face as my father's heir."

"I!—Lord Eskside's heir?" said Dick, rising to his feet, not startled or wondering, but with a smile. "No, no, you are mistaken ; that is not what you mean."

"Unfortunately there is no possibility of being mistaken," said Richard. "Yes, Val, it is unfortunate ; for you have been brought up to it and he has not. But, my boy," he said, turning to Dick kindly, though it was with an effort, "we none of us grudge it to you ; you have behaved in every way so well, and so like a gentleman."

"Perfectly well—as if I had trained him myself," said my lady, drying her eyes, "notwithstanding that we feel the disappointment to Val." The old lord did not say anything, but he watched Dick very closely from under his shaggy brows.

Dick looked round upon them for a moment, quiet and smiling softly as if to himself at some private subject of amusement. Then he looked at Lady Eskside. "Do you believe it too, *you*, my lady?" he said in an undertone, with a half



reproach. After this, turning to the others again, his aspect changed. He grew red with rising excitement, and addressed them as if from some platform raised higher than they were. "I am a very simple lad," he said; "I don't know how your minds work, you that are gentlemen. In my class it would be as plain as daylight—at least I think so, unless I'm wrong. What do you mean, in the name of heaven, you that are gentlemen? Me to come in and take Val's name and place and fortune! me, Forest Myra's son—Dick Brown!—that he took off the road and made a man of when we were both boys. What have I done that you should name such a thing to me?"

The men all looked at him, abashed and wondering. Lady Eskside alone spoke. "Oh, Dick, my boy!" she said, holding out her hand to him, "that was what I said; that was what I knew you would say."

"And that is just what must not be said," said the old lord, rising from his seat. "My man, you speak like a man; and don't think you are not understood. But it cannot be. There are three generations of us here together. A hardship is a hardship, meant to be endured;

and I would not say but to bear it well was as great an honour to the family as to win a battle. We are three generations here, Dick, and we can't put the house in jeopardy, or trust its weal to a hasty generosity, that your son, if not you, would repent of. No, no. God bless you, my man ! you are the eldest, and everything will be yours."

This time Dick laughed aloud. "When two noes meet," he said, "one must give in, sir. I'll not give in. I say it to your face ; and yours, sir ; and yours, Val. You may speak till Doomsday, but I'll not give in ; not if the world was to come to an end for it. Look here : I am *her* son, as well as Val. I can go further off, more out of your reach, than ever she did—God bless her ! And I'm a man, and you can't stop me. If there's another word about me taking Val's place, (a farce ! as if I ever would do it !) that day I'll go !—that moment I'll go ! and, do what you please, you can't bring *me* back. But I don't want to go," Dick said, after a pause, in a softened voice ; "I aint one to wander ; I'm fond of a home. What I'd like would be to stay quiet, and stand by the old folks, and be of some use to Val. Father and grandfather ! I've never

made bold to call you so before ; don't drive me away ! Val, speak for me ! for God's sake, don't make a Cain of me—an outcast—a tramp !”

“ It is not in your nature,” said Richard, with a smile.

“ You don't know what's in my nature. You didn't know what was in *her* nature,” said Dick, with sudden passion. “ I'll not do this, so help me God !” He snatched up Lady Eskside's big Bible with the large print, from the table, and kissed it, tremulous with excitement. Then, putting it reverently down again, went and threw himself at the feet of the old lady. “ Put your hand on my head,” said Dick, softly, “ my lady, as she used to do.”

“ I will—I will, my dear !” said Lady Eskside.

And to be sure this was how it ended. All the more for their wish that it should be so, the family, in its three generations, struggled against Dick's persistence, calling in external testimony—as that of Willie Maitland—to prove how impossible any such arrangement was. Dick never allowed himself to be excited again ; but he held by his vow, and nothing that could be said moved him. Sometimes he would get up

in the midst of a discussion, and go away, crying out impatiently that they were tiring him to death,—the only time he was disrespectful in word or look to the elders of the party. Sometimes he bore it all, smiling ; sometimes he threatened to go away. I think it was by the interposition of Sandy Pringle's good sense that it was settled at last — Sandy Pringle the younger, a very rising young lawyer, much thought of in the Parliament House. Val had sought Sandy out almost as anxiously as he sought Violet, to beg his pardon for that unadvised blow, and to secure his interest (for is not a friend, once alienated, then recovered, twice a friend ?) with his parents. Sandy was the first of the Pringle family reintroduced after the quarrel to Rossraig. He took Dick's side energetically and at once, with that entire contempt for the law which I believe only great lawyers venture to entertain. I don't pretend to understand how he managed it, or how far the bargain which was ultimately made was justifiable, or whether it would stand for a moment if any one contested it. Such arrangements do exist, they say, in many great families, and Sandy had a whole list of them at his fingers'-ends, with which

he silenced Lord Eskside. One enormous point in his favour was that Valentine, being already known and acknowledged as Lord Eskside's eldest grandson and heir, active measures would have been necessary on Dick's part to establish his own claims—measures which Dick not only would not take, but refused all sanction to. And howsoever it was brought about, this I know, that Val is the eldest son and Dick the youngest, *de facto*, if not *de jure*, to the absolute contentment of everybody concerned; and that this secret, like every other honest secret, is known to a dozen people at least, and up to this time has done nobody any harm.

And I will not attempt to linger at this advanced period of my story, or to tell all the means by which the Pringles, on one side, and the Rosses on the other, were brought to consent to that unalterable decision of the young people, which both Val and Vi believed themselves to have held to with resolution heroical through trials unparalleled. Reflect with yourself, kind reader, how long, if you have an only daughter your middle-aged sternness could hold out against the tears in her sweet eyes?—reflect how long you could stand out against your

boy—the fine fellow who is your pride and glory ? There are stern parents, I suppose, in the world, but I fully confess they are beings as much beyond my comprehension as megatheriums. If the young people hold out, tenderly and dutifully as becomes them, the old people must give in. Is it not a law of nature ? I do not advise you, boys and girls, to flout and defy us all the same ; for that brings into action a totally different order of feelings,—a different set of muscles, so to speak, producing quite different results. But as my boy and girl, in the present case, heartily loved their fathers and mothers, and were incapable of disrespect towards them, the natural consequence came about in time, as how should it not ? Lord and Lady Eskside and Mr and Mrs Pringle, and even the Honourable Richard Ross, in Florence, gave in accordingly, and consented at last. This process occupied the time until the beginning of the next summer from these events ; and then, on the first day in June (not May, the virgin month, which is, as everybody in Scotland knows, fatally unlucky for marriages) Valentine and Violet were made one, and all their troubles (they thought, like a pair of babies) came to an end. The

wedding feast, out of consideration for the old people, was held at Rosscraig; but I will tell the reader of only one incident which occurred at that feast, or after it, and which has no particular connection either with the bridegroom or the bride.

Richard Ross had come from Florence to be present at his son's marriage; and there, too, was Miss Percival, who had been much longer absent from her old friend than was usual, the episode of Richard's wife having interposed a visionary obstacle between them which neither could easily break. At this genial moment, however, Mary forgot herself, and returned to all her old habits in the familiar house. It was she and Dick—who immediately fell in love with each other—who arranged everything, and made the wedding party so completely successful. After the bridal pair had gone, when the guests were dispersing, and Mary's cares over, she came out on the terrace before the windows to breathe the fresh air, and have a moment's quiet. Here Richard joined her after a while. Richard Ross was fifty, but his appearance was exactly what it had been ten years before, and I am not sure that he was not handsomer then than at five-

and-twenty. Mary was a few years younger—a pretty woman of her age—with hair inclining towards grey, and eyes as bright as they had ever been. I do not think it failed to strike either of them with a curious thrill of half sympathy, half pain, that they two might have been—nay, almost, ought to have been—the father and mother, taking a conjugal stroll in the quiet, after their son had departed in his youthful triumph, feeling half sad, half glad that his time had begun and theirs was over—yet so far from really feeling their day to be over, that the sadness was whimsical, and amused them. I think they both felt this, more or less, and that Mary's secret grudge at having been, as it were, cheated out of the mothering of Val, had been strong in her mind all day. They looked together over the lovely woods, all soft with the warmth of June, down to where the Esk, never too quiet, played like a big baby with the giant boulder which lay mid-stream, just as he turned round the corner of the hill. The two figures on the terrace were in shade, but all the landscape was shining in the June sunshine. It was a moment to touch the heart.

“You and I have looked at these woods often



together, Mary, in many different circumstances," said Richard, with a touch of sentiment in his voice.

"Yes, indeed—often enough," she said, compelling herself to laugh.

"And now here have the young ones set out, and we remain. I often wonder if you and I had come together a quarter of a century ago, as seemed so natural—as I suppose everybody wished——"

"Except ourselves," said Mary, her heart fluttering, but putting forth all her most strenuous powers of self-command.

"Except—ourselves? Well, one never knows exactly what one did wish at that time," said Richard; "everything that was least good, I suppose. We are very reasonable at our present age, Mary; and I think we suit each other. Suppose you have me, now?"

"Suppose—what?" she asked, with surprise.

"I think we suit each other; and my mother would be more pleased than words can tell. Suppose you have me, now?"

He held out his hand to her, standing still; and she turned and looked at him steadily, gravely, the flutter utterly stilled in her heart.

“No, Richard, thank you,” she said. “It is too late for that sort of thing now.”

He shrugged his shoulders as he looked at her. “Well—if you think so,” he said; and they walked together once more to the end of the terrace. I suppose he could have gone on quite steadily, as if nothing had happened; but Mary was not capable of this. When they turned again, she broke away from him, saying something incoherent about my lady calling her—which was not the case, of course. Mary found it unpleasant to be near him all day after this; and in the languor of the waning afternoon, when all the guests were gone, she escaped to the woods, where Dick followed her, anxious too to escape from his own thoughts. But yet what kind thoughts these were!—what an exquisite, gentle melancholy it was that moved poor Dick, infinitely sad, yet sweeter than being happy! He had a feeling for Violet which he had never had for any woman—which he believed he never would have again for any woman—and she was his brother’s wife, God bless her! Dick was right in that last thought. He would never think of any other again as he had thought of Vi; but for all that his wound was not a deadly wound, and

his love was of the imagination rather than the heart. He did not mean to tell Miss Percival about it in so many words; but she was an understanding woman, and could make a great deal out of a very little. She read him as clearly as if she had seen into his heart. And so, I think, she did; and Dick's heart was so soft that a great deal came out of it which he had never known to be there. Once only she startled him greatly by an abrupt exclamation. In the very midst of something he was saying she broke out, interrupting him, in words of which he could not tell what they meant, or to whom they referred.

"This is the one I used to think I knew!" cried Mary to herself. "I was not deceived, only too early for him. This is the one I knew!"

Was she going out of her wits, the kind woman? But years after Dick had a glimmering of understanding as to what she meant.

Before Richard went away he told his mother what had happened. He was too much a man of the world to believe for a moment that such a secret could be kept or that Mary would not tell; and it was one of his principles, when anything unpleasant could be said about you, to take care to say it yourself. Just before he bade her

good-bye, he told Lady Eskside : "Don't say I never try to please you, mother," he said ; "I asked Mary to have me on Val's wedding day——"

"Richard ! Lord bless us ! and Mary said——"

"No, thank you," said Richard, with a laugh ; and kissed his mother, and went away.

Lady Eskside, very full of this strange intimation, walked down the avenue to meet the old lord on his return from the station whither he had accompanied his son. She took his arm and they walked up together. "The train was in time, for a wonder, and he's off, Catherine," said the old lord. "So now you and me must settle down, as it's all over ; and be thankful we have Dick to 'stand by the old folks,' as he says."

"Yes," said my lady, a little *distracte* ; "but I've something to tell you. Richard asked Mary before he went away——"

"Asked Mary ? What ? And she told you, my lady ? She should not have told you ; unless she consented, and I doubt that," said the old lord.

"*He* told me, and she refused him. She was not blate to refuse my Richard. Should I say anything about it ?" asked my lady, leaning

heavily on her old lord's arm, for the path was steep and tried them both.

Lord Eskside laughed, his eyes twinkling under his eyebrows. "They're quits now, or more," he said; "and I would not say but something might come of it yet."

The avenue was very steep; it tried them both as they went up slowly leaning on each other. When they stopped to take breath, they both spoke, the same thought coming to their minds at the same moment. "The house will be dull without Val," Lady Eskside said with a sigh. "When the bairns are gone, the house grows quiet," said her husband. Then they set forth again and climbed the last turn to their own door, holding each other up with kind mutual pressure of their old arms. Both of them were beyond the measure of man's years on earth. "The bairns come and the bairns go—but, thank God, you and me are still together, Catherine," said the old lord.

PRINTED BY WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS, EDINBURGH.