COLONEL NORTON

A NOVEL.

BY

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"MISUNDERSTOOD," "THROWN TOGETHER," "TRANSFORMED,"

ETC. ETC.

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CHAPTER VII.

TWO NATURES AND TWO NATIONALITIES.

"Nature, that great tragic dramatist, knits us together by bone and muscle, and divides us by the subtler web of our brains; blends yearning and repulsion, and ties us by our heart-strings to the beings who jar us at every movement."

VERY early in the day, indeed before they had been together a week, Ruth had discovered that there was to be none of that happy dual solitude she had pictured to herself, in which the long-separated mother and daughter were to learn to know each other, and so bridge over the gulf that that long separation had made. No *tête-à-tête* dinners, no quiet cosy evenings; at any rate, for the present. She was disappointed, but she

was content to wait; and, meanwhile, was ready and willing to do what her mother wished, and what her mother chose, not what she would have chosen herself.

And apparently this was society. Society day and night was to be her life for the time being, for never a night hardly did they remain at home.

But this whirl would not last, she told herself. A quiet period would come. There would be time enough later on for the quiet domestic life, and for that time she would wait patiently. Moreover, she had herself long wished to "see life," to drink of its joys, and to take part in an existence which should have more movement and variety than the one she had hitherto known.

The disappointment at seeing so little of her mother alone, passed away in the pleasure of seeing her in society. She looked on with admiration, coupled with amazement, at her mother's social success—her power of attraction, her wonderful ease in conversation, her capacity for small talk and "badinage," which made the dullest dinner-party go off with *éclat* and spirit. She felt so proud of her—of her beauty, her brightness,

her agreeability. She felt that she, Ruth, always brought with her the "star" of the evening, the person whom every one wanted to talk to.

"She belongs to me. I bring her; I take her away. We belong to each other," would be her proud inward reflection, as she observed how, the moment they appeared, all was gaiety and brightness. How fortunate she was, she told herself, to gain her experience of life in such company, under such auspices, and to go about with any one so clever, so popular, so beautiful! Unobtrusive herself, she was content to hide, as it were, behind her mother, and to follow her, a humble admiring shadow, wherever she went.

The baroness, on her side, enjoyed her young daughter's worship, and was relieved to find the girl never put herself forward, neither wished nor attempted to come in her way; and, indeed, that, far from getting a rival, she had but added to her train of admirers an admirer more admiring than them all. So that at first all went well; but after a time there developed another side of things.

With the curious inconsistency of her character, the baroness began, as the children do, to

want to "eat her cake and yet to have it." In other words, her mind being relieved as to a young rival, she began to want the reflected glory of a daughter who shone in society, and, the desire having seized her, she discovered that Ruth afforded her none of that kind of gratification.

"La plus anglaise des Anglaises" had been her first impression of her daughter, and the impression, she told herself as the days went by, was fully confirmed. And the *soubriquet* was by no means a complimentary one; coming from the baroness. For she hated the English; she hated their ways and their habits as well as the national character. Everything about them was, in her eyes, dull and uninteresting; their taciturnity, their exclusiveness, the heavy way in which they took their pleasures. She was fond of quoting, because it expressed her own ideas so exactly, what she had somewhere read, *i. e.* that this exclusiveness was the "result of their insular awkwardness, combined with their phlegmatic temperament; and of all uncomfortable and foolish prides, 'la morgue Anglaise' was the most unpleasant and the most laughable."

So she set to work to alter her daughter. She told her she was too quiet, too self-contained, too fond of grave *tête-à-têtes*. She tried to initiate her into the art of *la conversation*. She should, she told her, have more life and movement when she talked, she should accentuate what she said by little exclamations, little gestures—some bye-play, in short.

It was all Greek to Ruth. With the best intentions, she could not gratify her mother in these respects; with the best will in the world, she could not metamorphose herself into a being she was not intended by nature or nurture to be.

The baroness made the fatal mistake of trying to make her daughter act contrary to her nature. She tried to embue her with *her* nature and with *her* feelings—a thing impossible in any case, but in this case more impossible than usual, since not only nature and nurture, but also nationality was against it. And on her conspicuous failure, Ruth was deeply grieved and mortified by the effect she saw it had on the baroness.

One day, in a fit of ill temper, she gave the poor girl a rude shock by launching some of her

usual shafts against the English at her, ending by telling her that such an exaggerated type of *une Anglaise* as she was, she could not have imagined if she had not seen it. And after that, at almost any moment this sort of tirade might break out.

Poor Ruth learnt to dread the stream of invective against her nationality. Never before had she given it a thought; now it seemed to be cast in her teeth every moment. The word "insular," of which until now she had never taken any heed, seemed to ring in her ears. She was always hearing of "insular pride," "insular prejudice," insular something or other.

Everything English ladies did was a crime; their dress, their habits, their ways, their large feet, their clumping walking-boots, their long walks over muddy fields, their manly coats, shirts, and walking-sticks; but, above all, their silence, their dulness, their want of sparkle in conversation.

"Oh, I know the look of you English!" her mother burst out another day, impatiently; "sitting by silent, without the slightest idea of what general conversation is, or dreaming of taking

your part in it. You none of you know the least what agreeability is, or have any idea of the light give-and-take which makes the life of pleasant chat in a circle of intimate friends. No! *tête-à-tête* is the one and only thing you understand, and even that often degenerates into monologue. Va! I know what your idea of an agreeable man is! Your *beau-idéal* is the man who talks to the whole table, while every one else perforce sits silent; who pours out a ceaseless stream of discourse and anecdote, more like a paid lecturer than anything else. Mon Dieu! of all monstrous bores, the raconteur!"

Ruth was sorry for her mother's disappointment in her, and did all she could to make up to her for it. She submitted herself to her wishes in every respect; allowed herself to be dragged about to modistes, and milliners, and boot-shops; and patiently wore any kind of costume in which the baroness chose to deck her, however contrary to her own taste and inclination. She could not adopt a new style of speaking, acting, and feeling, but it was easy to adopt a new style of dress, though she knew that it did not suit her nearly so well as her own. Her nature she could not

change, but in all other respects she was ready to change anything or do anything to please her.

She did not rebel against her mother's verdict and opinion. No doubt, she said to herself, she was all her mother said she was, and lacked all her mother said she lacked. No one knew how she longed to be what her mother would have been pleased with and proud of; nor how she wished, for her sake, that she was attractive and brilliant in conversation. For the baroness was always giving her to understand that *such* a daughter it would have been a pride and a pleasure to her to have taken about.

It was a sad thing for the poor girl, after all she had expected, all she had looked forward to and dreamt about for so many years, to find, as the climax, that she was the very type of both the nature and the nation which her mother disliked.

The sense of never giving satisfaction, never affording her mother any gratification, and of being a failure in her eyes, began to weigh Ruth down, took away all her self-confidence, and made her more instead of less self-contained and silent. So that in what the baroness did as regarded her

daughter, she defeated her own object, inasmuch as she discouraged her.

Ruth believed what her mother said, and made no fight against it. She had it so constantly dinned into her that she was devoid of all feminine attraction and charm, that she was getting to accept it as a fact, and was, indeed, in danger of becoming what she was always being told she was—a stiff, unattractive woman.

Hers was a nature that needed encouragement, needed drawing out; and her mother's reproaches shook her confidence in her powers of pleasing. So she grew never to suppose for a moment that any one would care to talk to her, and acted on the supposition, effacing herself entirely.

She did not, in her freedom from vanity, realize that it was her mother who took care to render it impossible. For the latter, under no circumstances, brooked any interference with herself. She must be first; she must have all the plums. To her, and to her alone, must every one's homage be given. While she was always telling Ruth that she would have delighted in a daughter who carried all before her, it is very certain that she

would have been furious if that daughter had diverted attention from herself.

And yet, unsuspected by either, there were those in the society in which they moved, who, in comparing the mother and daughter, and discussing the curious likeness in unlikeness which existed between them, did not by any means give the mother the palm. Indeed, some gave it openly as their opinion that there was a want in the mother's face which was amply fulfilled in that of the daughter; and that, if only she had a little more animation in her expression, and did not look so grave and sad, she would have been the prettier of the two. And these, too, would have liked to cultivate the daughter; but somehow or other the baroness made this impossible, and the girl never held out a finger herself.

Sunlight and Moonlight they were called. All the brightness, it was said, emanated from the mother. She brought with her an atmosphere of gaiety and sunshine; the daughter brought an atmosphere of stillness and repose.

But to some this made the latter the more attractive, and in them it started the desire to rouse her from her state of passive indifference;

to say something which should cause a sparkle to come into her eyes, a glow into her grave, sad face. For sad Ruth not only felt, but looked. The sense of failure was heavy upon her. Day and night she bore it about with her.

Moreover, as time went on, it was not only the inability to please or satisfy her mother which weighed upon her so deeply. It was bitter, bitter disappointment. And it was disappointment to which she saw no end; for she had discovered that, directly the season was over, they were to go to a French watering-place—which would be practically the same thing over again—and then for a tour of visits in England and Scotland; and that this country-house visiting was to go on until such time as the London season should begin again.

This, then, was to be the order of her life henceforth; and the bright dream she had of happy dual solitude and intimate companionship was not to be—was, indeed, never to be. Worse still, she had realized that, even if it could be, it was not a thing to be desired. She had discovered that her mother was a prey to *ennui,* and that directly they were alone, this *ennui* set in at

once. She could not live without society, and if she was not in it, boredom overcame her directly. And that when she was bored she was out of temper, was another of the painful discoveries poor Ruth had made.

It was just about this time that she had first met Colonel Norton, in the train, and later on, at the wedding and concert. She had, perhaps, on the first occasion hardly faced her position or put into words, even to herself, her sorrow at the downfall of all her hopes and anticipations. But at the Richter concert it had all come more definitely before her. The music had done at once what she had only vaguely done before, and expressed to her almost cruelly in its plainness what she had hardly realized she felt.

The plaintive wail of the reeds had brought that sob into her throat which had so stirred Colonel Norton's compassion; for it had spoken to her in a way music alone can speak, and put into a tangible shape much which had till now only floated in her mind.

It had spoken to her of a beautiful and long-cherished dream scattered to the four winds of heaven; of a hope on which she had built for

years being nothing but a heap of shifting sand which had no solid foundation, which never had, and never, never could have, any existence but in her own imagination; in a word, it had spoken to her of one of the bitterest disappointments of which our natures are capable.

PART III.

EGERTON COURT.

CHAPTER I.

MEETING AGAIN.

"As people are not quite gone when they first depart, so they are not always quite come after a long separation."

COLONEL NORTON and Lady Manorlands both felt this to be true when they met again. They did not "take it up where they had left it," as is often the case in like circumstances. With some friends, one has, as it were, to begin all over again.

Colonel Norton found this. It may have been his fancy, but she seemed to him to have, so to speak, retired into her shell again; and he felt it would be very difficult to renew the conversation so abruptly broken off the day he had been telegraphed for at Manorlands.

He made up his mind, therefore, not to try

and force her confidence, but to let things take their own course, and come easily and naturally if they were to come at all.

He saw her under rather different circumstances here to those at Manorlands. This was her own, her very own. Here she had made her mark. On Egerton Court she had evidently expended thought, care, attention, and money, ever since she had come of age, and the results were now beginning to show.

The day after his arrival, when he got up in the morning and looked out of his window, there, the first thing, in the near distance, was the church, which he had said to his wife he never heard any whisper of building.

It was the same as regards all the schemes of benevolence and thought for the welfare of the poor, which he had lamented as not likely ever to be undertaken. In short, every statement he had made was falsified by the result, and it was to him almost startling to see with his own eyes the exact contradiction to all his prognostications. In every way she had acted differently to what he had expected and predicted.

It would have seemed as if all this might

have led naturally to his claiming her promise, and given him an opening for resuming the interrupted conversation of the summer; but somehow it did not. Besides, they were not alone; nor, indeed, did they seem likely to be. Comings and goings of divers kinds were expected, and the covert-shooting party was assembling.

"We have rather one of our *omnium gatherums* this week," she said to him on the evening of his arrival, "though of course the sporting element prevails. But there is great variety among the ladies, so you will have full scope for your taste for seeing human nature displayed before you, which you said you considered one of the great interests of country-house visiting."

"Is there any one here I know?" he asked.

"The Graham Percys are here," she replied, "and Philip; and I have not been able to spare you the infliction of Erskine, I am sorry to say. But you will bear it philosophically, I know."

"I assure you the young fellow does not disturb me," he answered. "Why should he? He is not worth being annoyed with."

"No," was her reply, "and I believe Alfred is

right, and that you might do him all the good in the world. He says I am too squeamish about him, and that I ought to put him down myself, and encourage others to do so. So as long as you do not overdo it, I suppose I must give you *carte blanche* to keep him in order and not allow him to give himself airs."

"I promise to keep well within bounds."

"I must own I myself find him a great bore in a gathering of this kind," she resumed. "He is so dreadfully cliquish; and positively rude sometimes to some people, as you will see. He, as they say, 'looks over the heads' of any one he does not happen personally to know; such, for instance, as our country neighbours, whom Alfred always makes a point of asking for the covert shooting. Our *omnium gatherums* need a good deal of harmonizing sometimes to make them go off pleasantly. And I *do* like every one to leave my house without anything disagreeable to look back upon; no soreness, or wounding of *amour propre*. I dislike any one to be made to feel uncomfortable or 'out of it' in any way. I always view cliques with a certain suspicion, though I know it is quite possible for those with really

nice feeling to form part of one, and yet not to let others feel the pain of exclusion."

"Young people are often very remorseless in these ways," he said, as she paused.

"Very," she answered. "The dull young man of the party, dull perhaps from shyness and want of self-confidence, is scouted by all the young girls; for, as soon as it gets wind among them that he *is* the dull young man of the party, every girl in the house is ashamed of being singled out by him for fear of the ridicule of the rest, and will not talk to him or take any notice of him. The consequence is, he gets more shy and more uninteresting. If any one had taken the trouble to draw him out or encourage him, he might have become quite different. By degrees each girl detaches herself from him. No one will be on his side in a game, no one wants him to sit next her at breakfast; and they all give him the slip in a walk. All that is very sad, I think. I always think of his poor mother at home, who is perhaps so anxious he should be fond of society, and have his shyness and want of self-confidence taken out of him; instead of which, by this process, he is only having it intensified."

Colonel Norton agreed with her; but as he did so, his mind went back to a certain young man of the kind at Biarritz, towards whom no one could have been more remorseless than Maud herself—so much so that he had once remonstrated with her on her conduct, receiving for his pains the laughing answer, "He has no *business* to be dull."

"Well," she resumed, "then there is Lady Alton. I am sure you will like her. She is a type of what a middle-aged woman should be. Wise with the wisdom of experience, tolerant, and sympathetic, she is, to my mind, the perfection of that time of life which always has more attraction for me than any other—middle age. You know the lines—

"Si Jeunesse savait! Si la Vieillesse pouvait!"

Middle age always seems to me to combine the advantages of the two. "La Vieillesse" is represented in our party by Alfred's grandmother, a charming old lady on her annual long visit to us, and "La Jeunesse" by Philip. There are several others, a good large party in all. But I am not going to describe them to you, but leave you to discover for yourself what they are all

like. And especially I shall leave to your penetration the making out of Mrs. Lambton, our member's wife, for I know her very slightly. I am sure, from the expression of her face and the tone of her conversation, that she is a pessimist, and I should like to know if I am right. Well, on the top of all these will descend in a few days the Baroness Carrachi! By the way, after little Miss Ashley comes, you must give all your time and attention to her. Yes, I know what you are going to say! You do not care for young people at all, etc. But for my sake you must waive all that, for I really do want to know what she is like."

"Put before me in that light," said Colonel Norton, "I would undertake a far less agreeable task. But this young girl interests me already, so it will not be done so *contre gré* as you seem to think, or as it might in a general way be; for I quite own I *do,* as a rule, prefer the society of my own contemporaries."

But perhaps the real truth was that he preferred at this moment the society of his hostess, and was therefore sorry to find the house so full, and so likely to continue so, as there seemed

but very little chance of his getting her to himself.

On the evening of the day after his arrival, he found himself seated at dinner between Lady Alton and Mrs. Lambton. He had now got to that stage in a friendship, when it is a pleasure to hear other people praise its object. He wanted to be confirmed in his favourable verdict of Maud; and he soon turned the conversation he had opened with Mrs. Lambton on to the subject of Egerton Court, and to all that had been done there since the present owner came into possession.

"Lady Manorlands," he said, "is one of the most prosperous people I ever met. Everything she does answers, everything she undertakes turns out well. She has what so few have—the will as well as the power and the opportunity to do the very best for her surroundings, and to enable every one about her to live their best and their highest, if they choose to do so."

"I quite agree with you," answered Mrs. Lambton, "as to her being a most prosperous person. I find myself wondering sometimes if it is fair that one human being should have so

much, and such varied, though unvarying, prosperity."

"But surely," he urged, rather dashed by this remark—"surely she deserves it. She makes the very best use of all that is hers, and shares her good things with those less happily dowered."

"It is all very easy for her," answered Mrs. Lambton, rather bitterly. "She has got everything this world can give. She is not only a rich but a happy woman—rich in all that makes life happy, as well as fenced off from all sordid and petty cares. She has all social as well as all domestic blessings. She is lapped in love and appreciation. And people are always at their best when they are happy."

At this moment, rather to Colonel Norton's relief, Lady Alton joined in the conversation.

"Do you think so?" she said. "One of the most prosperous people that I ever knew, told me once that she always prayed, 'In all time of my prosperity, good Lord deliver me!'"

"You mean," said Colonel Norton, "that you think prosperity is a dangerous thing."

"I do," she answered—"far more so than adversity. I think few can bear it for long.

Apart from that, many people are frightened at prosperity."

"You mean," rejoined Colonel Norton, "that when people have everything, they have a nameless fear that something must happen, and any change must be for the worse."

"Yes, I suppose so; at least with some. Whose prosperity were you and Mrs. Lambton discussing? I did not catch the name."

"Our hostess's," he replied.

"Oh," said Lady Alton, "it would not be so with *her*. She is, anyhow, not the sort of person to give in to so superstitious a feeling. She is above it. Besides, there is no danger in her case, because——"

Here, to Colonel Norton's annoyance, the ladies began to move, just as he particularly wanted to hear what Lady Alton was going to say.

"Because?" he said inquiringly, as she rose from her seat.

"Because," she replied, "in her case there is a power in the events of past life to form the elements of present character."

He thought over the words after the ladies

had gone. Evidently Lady Alton knew all about the events of Maud's past life.

He was now seated next to the clergyman of the parish, or rather of the neighbouring town—the "church nine miles off," of which he had once spoken to his wife. He had been there, as Colonel Norton knew, ever since Maud had succeeded to the property, at the age of nine. He rather abruptly turned the conversation into the channel he desired.

"You have a very real Lady Bountiful here," he said.

The old man bowed his head.

"Were you here during the time of Lady Manorlands' minority, when the place was let?" he said.

"I was," he answered; "and very good tenants they were, and good friends to me, and to the parish. It made a great break when they left."

This was not at all the tone of remark Colonel Norton had either anticipated or desired when he began the conversation. He felt slightly irritated. "You, as a clergyman," he proceeded, "must understand very well the difference I draw

between a 'mere' Lady Bountiful and the real thing."

"I do," he answered; but he did not take up the subject in the way Colonel Norton had intended.

"Your present Lady Bountiful," he said, rather impatiently, "is not a mere Lady Bountiful. Her motives are as pure as her acts are gracious. There is none of that self-complacency about her you see sometimes. On the contrary, she never thinks of herself at all, but as the steward of the share of this world's good that has been entrusted to her."

"Quite so," answered the old man.

Colonel Norton felt inclined to shake him.

"A perfect woman, nobly planned,"

persisted Colonel Norton.

The clergyman hesitated, and Colonel Norton almost turned upon him. His palpable hesitation was like a jug of cold water down his back, for he thought there was something behind. He looked straight at him and repeated his question, determined to have an answer. But the innocent old man was only debating a general question in his own mind.

"No," he said, "not perfect; who is?"

But this answer only irritated Colonel Norton. He went off into a burst of invective against pattern people. For his part he preferred a few defects. Pattern characters one admired, of course, but coldly. They did not inspire nor reproduce themselves in others, which was the great test. He did not believe in untried goodness. If people began by being perfect, there were no temptations to overcome, and untried goodness was no goodness at all, etc.

The old clergyman replied very quietly that there was a good deal too much in this age of the glorification of defects; and continued to show a disposition to make the conversation a general one, and to drift away from the main point.

Colonel Norton felt how annoying was the abstract when one wanted the concrete and the personal.

Lord Manorlands was now moving, and Colonel Norton followed the rest into the drawing-room. Lord Erskine had already got possession of Maud, so he sat down by himself for a minute or two, thinking over what the old man had

said. What did he mean? Or did he mean nothing?

Of course he knew Maud was not perfect. She was certainly impatient, even a little intolerant; but that he rather liked. It prevented her being too tame, and gave force and originality to what she said and did. "Glorification of defects," he supposed that old man would call his present train of reasoning.

His meditations were interrupted by Lord Manorlands carrying him and all the rest of the party into the billiard-room to play pool.

CHAPTER II.

AN "OMNIUM GATHERUM."

"Nor spring nor summer beauty hath such grace
As I have seen in one autumnal face."

THE next day the covert shooting began. It was past ten o'clock, and the men were beginning to think about starting. Breakfast was over, and some of the ladies were sitting in the drawing-room, working and talking, or writing letters.

The sportsmen were in the usual state of

dawdling in and out of the room preparatory to starting, while Lord Manorlands vainly endeavoured to collect them together. As fast as he secured one or two he lost the others. His head was every now and then put in for a moment at the drawing-room door. "Have you seen Percy?" "Is Lambton here?" "Oh, there's Alton! Come along, like a good fellow. Don't be all day."

The long-suffering keeper, punctual to a minute, was waiting with his dogs and beaters outside.

After all had been collected, Sir Graham Percy was still standing by the mantelpiece, with his back to the fire, chatting to some of the ladies. Shouts of "Percy! Percy!" penetrated into the room. Lord Manorlands' head appeared again.

"I'm coming," Sir Graham said, leisurely bending down and flicking some dust off one of his boots with his pocket-handkerchief. "I never hurry myself. It shortens one's life to be in a hurry."

"Yes," said his wife, looking up from her work, and nodding emphatically at him; "but

it shortens other people's lives to keep them waiting."

The sting of her little speech was lost in the pleasant smile with which she accompanied it. He went off directly.

"Oh, those restless, fidgety men! They are really off at last," said Lady Manorlands, entering the room. "I often wonder," she continued, as she seated herself, "whether a covert shoot is such a joy after all. What with the fears, and the fuss, and the uncertainty, I always think we are all happier when it is over for the year. 'Life would be tolerable if it were not for its amusements' is more true, I think, of covert shooting than of any other (so-called) pleasure. Now you will see to-night how low they will all be. I always find Alfred more depressed on these two days than on any other two days of the year."

"Philip will enjoy it, if no one else does," said Lady Percy.

"Ah, yes! But, then, he is not concerned in the management. It is those who are responsible for the success and *éclat* of the thing who are to

be pitied. I don't know which I am most sorry for, Alfred or the poor keeper."

The party of ladies in the house were not a very easy team to drive, and Lady Manorlands rather wondered how she should manage so heterogenous a collection till the men returned.

First there was Mrs. King, the wife of the neighbour asked to shoot. She was a simple kind of woman, who lived a quiet country life, and to whom the visit to Egerton Court was the great event of the year. She was a guileless sort of person, full of her own domestic affairs, and quite unsuspicious that every one else was not equally interested. "Can any one tell me of a maid?" she had said almost immediately on her arrival. "She would have, you know, to do a little light house work, and to make herself useful in various ways. I give twenty pounds a year and all found. And she does not have my wardrobe; that you must make very clear." (But it would have been plain to the veriest tyro in such matters that this last would not be likely to form an objection to Mrs. King's situation.)

There was something almost touching about her. She was too unconscious and simple to be

shy, and she was so sure of every one's sympathy. As new people had arrived, and she had been introduced to them, the inquiry had at once been repeated, "Oh, do you by chance know of a nice maid? I give twenty pounds a year and all found. I always ask every one I meet, and then one feels one is doing all one can." She said it with the air of one who meant, "I won't leave you out; no one need be jealous. You shall all have your turn."

Mrs. King never went to her room, never wrote her letters upstairs. You never got rid of her for a moment. She had come on a visit, and a visit she was determined to have. This annual Shoot was, as we said just now, the great excitement of her year, and she made the most of it, and was apparently resolved to have every inch of it.

The other ladies were beginning to get a little worn out. She could not leave any one alone for a moment. She had advice to give on all matters—households, children, illness; a plan, or a remedy, or a prescription ready-made for every occasion of life. She was so sure her company and her conversation would be as

great a pleasure to every one else as theirs was to her.

Then there was Lady Alton, whom Maud had spoken of to Colonel Norton as her ideal of middle age; and old Lady Mary Trevor (Lord Manorlands' grandmother), a charming old lady representing a generation now passing away; and a few others who need not be particularly described, except as being very much bored with poor Mrs. King.

Lastly, there was Mrs. Lambton, the wife of the county member. She looked on the dark side of everything, and had a curious half-sad, half-defiant way of talking of things in general. She was a sort of stoic, who considered it was best to face things firmly, and to have no illusions about anything; to allow to one's self that the world was a sad place, and the people in it very disappointing; in short, to see things as they were, and make the best of a bad job. She hated, she said, people who hid what was disagreeable from themselves, and persuaded themselves that things were as they wished them to be. Anything was better than being an ostrich. She, at any rate, never deceived herself, or allowed others to do so.

She was not young, and her life had not been a happy one. Neither husband nor children had fulfilled her hopes or expectations. But she never grumbled. She was not "the woman with a grievance." She was simply a woman who had found the world a hard place, and faced the fact. No illusions; but, then, no delusions. She thought it a pity now that any one should expect anything of life. She had long ceased to do so, and she thought it by far the best plan. Because indifferent, she thought she was happier. "Expect nothing, and you will not be disappointed," was her maxim, and she tried to impress it on others.

But all this made her rather a wet blanket, and one or two of the younger ladies were profoundly depressed before the morning was over. Even Mrs. King, with all her power of enjoyment, was slightly flattened by the end of the day; and Lady Manorlands was thankful when the hour drew near for the return of the sportsmen.

When Colonel Norton came in, he went straight into the drawing-room, and found all the ladies assembled at tea.

Presently,

"Descending the broad hall stair,"

the soft chatter of children's footsteps and children's voices were heard; the door opened, and the three little boys entered, filling the room with the sound of their prattle and merry laughter.

Geordie was anxious for a romp, and at once claimed Colonel Norton as his playfellow; while little Alfred became speedily engrossed in a game of his own invention, in which he was, as usual, deeply interested and wholly absorbed.

When the romp was over, and the restless Geordie had strayed on to some one else, Colonel Norton came up to the table where little Alfred was playing, and took a seat near Lady Alton, who was watching the little fellow with great interest.

"I think he is such an interesting child," she said, in answer to a remark of Colonel Norton's on the subject of the child's disposition; "so are they all three in their different ways—all dear little things. My own children," she added, with something of a sigh, "are growing up, or grown up, most of them; and it is so refreshing to me

to come back to this delightful time in a child's life again. I feel envious of Lady Manorlands."

She looked regretfully at the pretty little fellows in their velvet blouses and lace collars.

"But she is like all young mothers," she continued—"anxious for the next stage in her children's lives. She is always thinking of what is to come. But when she is a little older she will feel as I do, that this is the most delightful phase of all, and wish to prolong it as much as possible."

Lady Manorlands caught her own name, and asked with a smile if she might know what Lady Alton was saying about her.

Lady Alton at once repeated what she had just said, adding, "Ah, Lady Manorlands, take my advice, and do not hurry them on. It will come quite soon enough. This is your happiest time, I do assure you, when they come in their velvet suits or white frocks and sashes; and one has nothing to do but to play with them, and laugh at the quaint things they say. And when, if they show their natures, or even their faults, it only makes them more amusing. Enjoy it while you can. It passes while one looks at it, and

slips from one's grasp unawares. I found some lines in a magazine the other day which exactly embody what I am saying. I must bring them down and read them to you some time."

"I am sure," she added, turning to old Lady Mary Trevor, "that you will agree with me about this. You have reached the happy grandmother stage, when you can enjoy a child as it stands, without thinking of what it will be in the future; when you do not look beyond the pleasure of a child as a child."

"Yes," answered the old lady, "and I think that is why I especially enjoy these little great-grandchildren of mine. Why should I trouble myself about what they will be in a future which I shall not live to see? I know they are darlings in the present, and that is quite enough for me."

In truth, the ways of the generation *behind* the little Mildmays were already more than old Lady Mary could compass! She floundered about between "preliminaries" and "furthers" and "finals" in the wildest confusion, tending always towards an inclination to put the former of the three last upon the list; from its being the longest word, she imagined it must be the most

important, a sort of culminating-point, as it were. She was always murmuring to herself how different things used to be in her day. When your boy was old enough, you bought him his commission, and there was an end of it. She could not, she said, understand all these complicated arrangements or see the use of them. It only ended, it appeared to her, in the dear boys being terribly overworked, and looking ill, and getting overstrained and nervous, and not having half the spirits they used to have. She was sure the old way was far the best, and why it had ever been changed she had never been able to understand.

"Look at dear Philip, now. Always slaving and working, and hardly ever able to get a good holiday and enjoy himself! And not in the army yet, after all! Why, my sons had been in their regiments two or three years at his age, and without any of this fuss and anxiety. Oh, the old way was the best. There is no doubt at all about that."

At this moment, there was the peculiar burst of a door when it is opened by an energetic, high-spirited youth, and Philip Mildmay entered.

He was fresh from his day's sport, and bubbling over with spirits, for he brought a good account of his day. He looked very handsome as he stood by the fire, in his shooting-clothes and gaiters, with the light on his flushed cheeks and wavy hair, flushed as he was with exercise and the keen, sharp air, bending down to caress the dog who had followed him into the room.

"Well, my dear boy," said old Lady Mary, "how you must be enjoying your holiday; and how *much* better it is for you to be out all day!"

"So *I* think, granny," put in the merry boy, with a laugh.

"Instead," continued the old lady, "of being always at that everlasting stuffing, or whatever you call it."

"Dear Gran!" remonstrated Philip.

"Ah well, my dear," said Lady Mary, always a little suspicious of a *double-entendre,* "you know what I mean. You mustn't expect me to keep up with all your new words. I belong to a past time; and I think it was a far better one."

"So do I, Lady Mary," said Lord Alton, taking a seat by her. "I quite agree with you. I

am sick of the whole system myself. And after all, what does it come to? We defeat our own object by what we are doing with our boys. My eldest was a clever fellow, fond of reading, and of getting information of all kinds, till he had to give all his time to this 'cram.' Well, he passed at last, and got into the army. And what is the consequence of it all? Why, that now he smokes all day, and never opens anything but a railway novel. Doing nothing is his idea of bliss, and he will never do anything now that requires a mental effort. And I am sure I hardly wonder at it."

"It spoils their youth," said another of the fathers present, "and ruins their health. We have our nervous invalids of nineteen, and our hypochondriacs of twenty-two."

"Ah, yes," said Lady Alton, "and one does *regret* so that anything should spoil youth or overshadow childhood. I always feel so strongly we ought to try and give our children as bright and happy a childhood as possible."

"I quite disagree with you," here broke in suddenly the hard, dry voice of Mrs. Lambton. "I think there is a great deal of sentiment talked on this subject. To my mind it is no kindness

to give children such a false idea of life; it is such a bad preparation for what must inevitably come. If you make everything so smooth for them, the disillusion is positively cruel. On the contrary, if I had to begin all over again, I should be inclined to *create* little disappointments for them instead of always shielding them from them. It would be a juster representation of life as it really is, and it would spare them the trying period of disenchantment."

Then Lady Alton spoke again, and this time more warmly than before.

"Childhood," she said, "soon passes. It is short enough anyhow, that golden period of life. I think we parents ought to do all we can to fill it with what will be a pleasant retrospect some day. We thus lay up for our children a store of happy memories. And the past we all feel ourselves, now that we are older, is a great possession." She paused a moment, and then added softly, "Over their future lives we have no power. The time will come when we would give our right hands to spare them sorrow, or to provide them with some longed-for joy. But then we shall be powerless. Our love and our longing

will be alike ineffectual. But in their early years their happiness is to a great extent in our hands. We can order their lives and give them a happy childhood. And I say it is their right. Of it we have no business to deprive them. With it we have no business to interfere; nor to overcloud, for the sake of our theories, the bright morning of their life."

Here Lord Erskine strolled in with a large photograph-book under his arm. Turning his back on Mrs. King, who looked up to ask him "what he had been doing with himself all day," he made straight for Maud.

"I have been having Erskine House photographed from all the different points of view," he said to her, as he seated himself by her side, "and I want to show them all to you, and get your advice as to putting them in."

Maud, with her usual kindness, gave her attention to him at once, and the two, with their heads over the book, became engrossed with the photographs.

Colonel Norton was standing near the fire at a little distance, talking to one or two of the members of Parliament on political subjects.

Presently, in answer to some remark of Colonel Lambton's, Colonel Norton quoted Theodore Parker's saying that democracy meant not so much, "I'm as good as you are," as "You're as good as I am;" and, in an evil moment, Lady Manorlands looked up from her study of the photographs, right in the middle of something Lord Erskine was pointing out to her, to applaud the sentiment.

Lord Erskine had by no means forgiven Colonel Norton his past offences, and had not been at all pleased to find him at Egerton Court. He had thought and hoped that his appearance as the new star in the Manorlands' hemisphere might have proved only as a wandering, and not as a fixed one. Jealous at her attention being diverted from himself, he lost his temper and turned upon Colonel Norton. "I suppose," he said, with a sneer, "you are one of those who would cut up Manorlands Park into allotments, and make Egerton Court a potato-ground?"

Colonel Norton was taken by surprise at the suddenness of the attack, but he answered quietly—

"Believe me, no. Not at all. I agree with

Mr. Lowell that land should not be divided, because the quantity had been limited by nature. You are probably acquainted with his writings," he concluded, "and will remember that he adds, 'We might on the same principle insist on a division of human wit, for I have observed that the quantity has been even more inconveniently limited.'"

Lord Erskine glared darkly at him, only half understanding his meaning, which was not the case with Philip Mildmay, who was standing near, and who could not conceal his delight.

Shortly after Colonel Norton strolled out of the room.

"Our dear Maud," said old Lady Mary to Lady Alton *sotto voce,* referring to the conversation which had just taken place, "is somewhat liberal in her ideas sometimes, and just a little—well, just a *leetle* radical in her way of talking."

"Oh yes, granny," struck in Philip, overhearing the remark, "Maud is an out-and-out Radical and Socialist. I have always said so."

"No, she is *not,*" said Lady Alton; "that is just where people never can or will distinguish. Hers is the goodness and kindness of heart which

is pained by the great and startling inequalities of the world; the 'socialism,' if you will (what's in a catch-word?), which springs from philanthropy and an enthusiasm for humanity, and from such socialism very few kind-hearted people are exempt. Even you, dear Lady Mary, Tory as you are, are not free from it. There are few indeed who would not wish to see a change in the appalling misery and wide-spread pauperism to be found in this country, and which is a disgrace to England."

"I never can see," drawled Lord Erskine, catching the few last words in the pauses of arranging one view after another of his grand old Elizabethan mansion in the photograph-book—"I never can see what people want changes for, nor why they are always finding fault with their own country. I think it is very unpatriotic. I, for one, am quite satisfied with England. I think it is the finest country in the world. And *I* don't want any changes; I am quite content with things as they are."

"Doubtless," said Lady Alton, dryly, while "Oh, how I wish Colonel Norton had not gone out of the room," was her inward ejaculation.

Colonel Norton was not near Maud at dinner again that night, and when the men got into the drawing-room afterwards Lord Erskine was already in possession. But he watched his opportunity, and when, owing to a game being started among the younger people, there was a little rearrangement of seats, he took advantage of it, and went and sat down by her, in the seat Lord Erskine had just vacated.

"At last," he said, with a smile. "I thought I was never going to have a chat with you again."

She smiled also.

"Never," he continued, "since that sudden interruption of our conversation in the rhododendron avenue at Manorlands have we had a chance of resuming the subject on which we were then embarking."

The smile was gone. She looked troubled. "We will resume it one day," she said hurriedly; "but not in so public a manner. Have you seen anything of George Hardy?" she went on. "He writes very seldom now, but I suppose it means he is busy."

"No, I have not seen him since last July," he

answered; "but I hear he is rising rapidly, and is much thought of."

"I wish we had him here," she said. "Little Claud had another of his croup attacks not long ago. I very nearly sent for George at the time, and I shall certainly do so if he is ill again. However, I hope it may not be necessary."

Colonel Norton could not help feeling how sincerely he echoed her hope. He did not at all want Hardy on the scenes just now. Lady Manorlands was quite difficult enough to get hold of as it was, and he knew that, in the event of George's arrival, he should have no chance at all.

"Have you no good doctor here?" he asked.

"No," she answered; "the old doctor here is past work, and his assistant is a young man I would never trust my children to."

"Why?" he said. "I think that these very young men, straight from the hospitals and primed with all the latest discoveries in medical science, are really better than the older and more old-fashioned doctors."

"That may be," she answered; "and I think myself that it is. But this is a young man of whom I have a most profound distrust. He has

no reverence for his profession, and only looks upon it as a means of his own advancement. He has no faith, no heart, and no sympathy. His patients are to him only 'material,' or, worse still, 'clinical matter.' Nothing would induce me to trust any one I loved to his care if I could possibly help it. You remember," she added, "warning me not to encourage the scientific spirit in my boys? Well, this young man is an instance of having allowed that spirit to do what you then said it did—to harden his heart, and deaden his spiritual nature."

"I know the kind of fellow," said Colonel Norton. "I have no doubt he thinks that the soul is 'embedded in the gastric juices.'"

"Most probably," she replied. "I may be prejudiced, and Alfred thinks I am; but, as I say, I should send for George Hardy at once if either Alfred or the children were seriously ill."

"I should fancy he might find it difficult to get away from London," observed Colonel Norton. "He was busy morning, noon, and night when I was last there."

"He would leave any one if *I* sent for him," she said, with something of pride in her voice.

Colonel Norton glanced at her with curiosity, and, after a pause, he said, "Talking of Hardy, I made a little discovery about him which interested me very much."

"What was that?" she said.

"Why, that he was brother to my nieces' governess."

"Oh yes, they told me about that," she rejoined. "They did not know Lady Travers was your sister; neither did I. They also," she went on, laughing, "told me a funny little incident which grew out of your ignorance of the fact, which amused me very much. I had no idea matchmaking was in your line, Colonel Norton. But do tell me," she continued, looking up at him with an entire change of manner, and speaking with great earnestness, "is your sister pleased with her? Does she satisfy her as to the training of the children under her care, and does she have a good influence with them?"

There was no trace of mystery in her manner; but there was, he saw distinctly, the same look of deep, almost anxious interest which her face had worn when she first questioned him about his impressions of George Hardy.

He answered very warmly, expressing his high opinion of Miss Hardy, and his heartfelt satisfaction that his nieces should have been so fortunate as to have come across her.

Maud's eyes glowed with evident pleasure, not unmixed with pride.

"It gives you pleasure to hear this?" he said, suddenly and questioningly.

Her answer was given very low, and in a tone of deep feeling. "I could hardly be told anything that could give me more," he thought he heard her say; but there was rather a buzz of conversation round them, and he could not quite distinguish her words. He bent eagerly towards her.

"What did you say?" he said. "I could not quite catch it."

"What she wanted, you see," here burst in the voice of Mrs. King close by, "was thirty-five pounds a year, and all found, and a kitchen and scullery-maid under her."

CHAPTER III.

BETWEEN THE LIGHTS.

"One of the charms of older people is that they fill in with experience what we have only guessed at."

"Our aim, no doubt, should be perfection, but patience is the road."

THE Baroness Carrachi and her daughter arrived the next day, just before the men came in from shooting, and shortly after Maud conducted them to their rooms.

Colonel Norton was the first of the sportsmen to appear in the drawing-room. He came in tired after a hard day's shooting, and more inclined for an armchair and a newspaper than for *la conversation;* so he was not otherwise than relieved to find he had just missed the lively baroness.

But in a quarter of an hour the door was flung open, and she sailed in, attired in a magnificent *negligée,* eager for society, and ready for any amount of chatter and "badinage."

It soon became evident that Colonel Norton was the object of her attention, and that he

should sit and read the paper was not at all what she intended.

Now, when the Baroness Carrachi was set on securing the attentions and interest of any one particular person, she managed it somehow, no one could ever quite tell how. In some subtle and inexplicable manner, she contrived to chain to her side the man she wanted. She had not the slightest scruple in breaking up *tête-à-têtes*, or in diverting any one's attention from what was being said to them by some one else.

In five minutes it was clear to every one in the room (except Colonel Norton himself) that she was laying herself out to secure him, and to keep him at her side. But in this she for the moment failed; for the immediate consequence of her manœuvres was, that as soon as he decently could he strolled out of the room, and sought refuge in the smoking-room, though he was annoyed at having to do so, for it was always a pleasant, genial bit of the day at Egerton Court, this "between the lights," or "blind man's holiday," and he was bored at having perforce to forego it.

As a rule, at this hour the more formal guests

had retired to their rooms, leaving the more intimate friends and the lovers of children assembled together. And, as Mr. Mallock truly says, "Nothing is so depressing as to be left with one's self by one's friends; nothing is so charming as to be left with one's friends by one's acquaintances."

Colonel Norton, however, was a little too hasty. Had he returned to the drawing-room after the little boys came down, he would have found the Baroness Carrachi conspicuous by her absence. She had a holy horror of the "children's hour" in country houses, and invariably fled at its approach. He would have found a little group of friends seated comfortably over the fire, and the children playing about.

Even Mrs. King had at last left the room. The one thing that took her upstairs was the return of her husband from shooting. The group was composed of Maud, Lady Percy, and Lady Alton, and they were in earnest conversation. The only alien element was Mrs. Lambton. She was sitting at a little distance from the others, in silence.

Maud, perceiving this, endeavoured to include her in the party.

"Mrs. Lambton," she said, "do come a little nearer the fire, and join us. We want your help. Both you and Lady Alton will be able to give me and my sister-in-law valuable advice as to the training of children, which is what we are discussing. Please come and add your personal experience to our own crude theories on the subject."

"Some wrinkles," put in Lady Percy, "because, you know, you 'fill in with experience what we have only guessed at.'"

"I must say," continued Maud, as she pushed up a chair for Mrs. Lambton, "that the task seems to me a very difficult one. I am often disheartened already."

"You are too impatient, my dear Lady Manorlands," said Lady Alton; "you really must not expect to see results so quickly."

"That is what every one tells me," said Maud, "but I want so much to teach them great and noble ideas from the very first, and I am constantly thwarted.

" 'The child's nature everywhere shows its imperfections. It is hard to open it to what it ought to receive, and it is hard to close it against what it ought to reject.'

That is the somewhat depressing thought I found the other day in a book I was reading, and I must say my own experience, though I admit it is a slight one as yet, fully bears out the sentiment."

"You are like all young mothers," said Lady Alton, with a smile. "You think you can *make* your child into what you wish him to be. That is a mistake soon corrected by a little experience. All we can do is to instil into our children the highest religious and moral ideas; teach them their own natures thoroughly, and the self-control, self-restraint, and strength of will necessary to enable them to take themselves and their natures in hand, and then let life do the rest; not expecting to see results all at once, but trusting to see them as life teaches the lessons she alone *can* teach, and which we have been preparing the children by our training to learn."

"Yes," said Maud, with a sigh, "I have no doubt you are right. But I do so long to see my children start as I know they must and will one day wish they had, and so to save them

from future regrets. I want them to *begin* by realizing the true meaning of life, and not to wait to find it out through perhaps bitter experience. Why," she continued impetuously—"why cannot they take our word for it? It seems so hard that we should be of so little use to our children. What is the good of our having learnt lessons hardly and painfully if we cannot hand on our experience to them?"

"Ah!" said Lady Alton, softly, "how many of us have felt that!"

Here the door opened, and Ruth Ashley came quietly in. She seated herself at a little distance from the rest, near the little boys, and watched them at their play with evident interest.

Maud glanced at her, and wondered what she was thinking about. For, as she sat with her eyes following the movements of the pretty boys as they every now and then ran up to their mother, to claim her interest in what they were doing, there was on Ruth's face a sadness which seemed to Maud unnatural in one so young, and she inwardly deplored that so youthful a face should have any cause to wear so unyouthful an expression.

"I think," continued Lady Alton, "that the reason parents and others in charge of the young are so often disappointed is, that they make that mistake of thinking they can *alter* a child. Then when they fail, they, the mothers especially, are often very unhappy and despairing, and blame themselves and the training they have given. 'In other hands,' they say, 'in other homes, in other circumstances, the boy or girl might have done better.' 'I brought them up,' says one mother, 'too strictly.' 'I,' says another, 'not strictly enough,' etc. The failure they take to be their fault, and owing to their bad management; whereas all they could do, and all they ever *can* do, is to give the right *direction*.

" 'A child is not a block of marble to be hewn into what you will. He is a plant which you are to set in the right soil of truth, and then watch as it develops its own especial nature.'

There the nature is, and there it will be to the end. We can modify it, no doubt, but not alter it. Years hence, perhaps, we shall see the reward of our labours. We must trust and wait. Let us have faith and leave the result, which is in higher hands than ours. And meantime we must

take into consideration that no training of ours and no education of ours are of any avail unless the individual takes himself in hand when we let go the reins."

Mrs. Lambton had not as yet apparently taken any interest in the discussion. Her face had worn a half-contemptuous expression during the whole of the conversation. But she now turned suddenly to Maud and said—

"What is it you specially wish for your boys? What is your particular ambition for them?"

Maud paused a moment before she answered. Possibly the expression of Mrs. Lambton's countenance and the tone of her voice were not calculated to draw out hidden and cherished ideals.

Then she said with great earnestness, as if some inner thought gave her courage, "I wish with all my heart that it may be said of them some day, that 'the world was the better for their having lived in it.'"

Mrs. Lambton looked pityingly at her.

"You are preparing for yourself terrible disappointments," she said, "by expecting so much. If your sons have a few negative virtues, you will

find you are expected to be quite content. Nay, more than content; happy and thankful."

"I should never be content with negative virtues!" exclaimed Lady Manorlands.

Mrs. Lambton shrugged her shoulders.

"So I felt at your age," she said, "but you will find, as I have, that you will have to be quite satisfied if your sons do *not* drink, do *not* swear, do *not* bet and gamble. For such negative virtues you will be told you ought to be most grateful."

Rather a chilling silence fell upon the group.

"I do not wish to dishearten you young mothers," said Mrs. Lambton, perceiving this, "or to prevent your doing your utmost for your children. Only what I mean is, prepare for disappointment. I know how often fond hopes come to nothing. I have seen not only the beginnings of things and their further development, but the end—seen, that is, how things turn out. I am old enough now to have seen results. And they are, as a rule, disappointing. Moreover," she continued, after a moment's pause, "it is not alone by my own personal experience that I judge. I started with many others who married

and set up homes of their own at the same time as I did, so that our children were the same sort of ages. We all began training and educating at the same time, and we all had our various schemes and plans and theories. Well, all our children are grown up now, and not only grown up, but started in life, embodying, or supposed to embody, their various educations and trainings——"

"Well?" interrupted Maud, eagerly.

"Well," Mrs. Lambton answered, with a short, dry laugh, "it appears to me that, various as are the ways of starting, it is all much of a muchness in the long run, and *in* the long run—failure! It seems to me now, that all paths lead to the same road, and all roads to the same end." She remained thoughtful for a few minutes, and then went on with another hard little laugh, and half speaking to herself, "How funny it is, looking back upon it all now, to remember how hot we all were about our plans, and how we used to talk and discuss our schemes; and how many different theories we all had, and how certain we each were that we were right, and our ideas the best, and would in the end be the most successful! How little things seem to matter which we

thought so all-important at the time! It seems like a dream now. Every stage in the children's lives seemed of such vast moment. First came the baby phase, and the interest in the food, and the sleep, and the frocks, and the cutting of teeth. What comparisons there were, what competitions, what funny little jealousies! How envious one was of the mother whose baby cut its teeth early, while one's own was all behind; and still more of the child who talked and walked first! Then, when the educating stage came on, what heart-burnings because this child read sooner than one's own, and that child could learn by heart so quickly! Then came the question of the governess, the tutor, and the private schools. Then the public schools, the universities, the crammers, and so on *ad infinitum*. Each phase in its turn so overwhelmingly interesting at the time. *Now* how little it seems to matter!—whether the teeth were cut late or early; whether the hair was curly or straight; who read young or who read older; who learnt quickly or who learnt slow. It is all past and done with now. And what do I care now what place my son took at Eton? I don't even recollect, though at the

time my hand shook so that I could hardly open the letter which was to tell me. . . . When I come across a little first tooth in a drawer now in an old desk, I don't even remember who it belonged to; and the same with packets of various bits of curly hair. The old schoolboy letters I preserved so carefully, do I ever read them now? Tout passe! Tout lasse! The interest passes with the occasion, and it is well, perhaps, for us mothers that it does."

A deeper gloom fell on all when Mrs. Lambton ceased speaking, but Lady Alton came to the rescue.

"Well," she said, "if all this is so, then I say all the more reason for you, dear Lady Manorlands, to take my advice, and enjoy your children's childhood while it is still there, and not to be always looking ahead to some point in the future, and hurrying on to the next stage in their lives. I am so anxious you should be warned against this habit, and Mrs. Lambton's experience accentuates my warning."

She sighed as she spoke, and looked regretfully at the pretty little Mildmays as they played round her.

"Time speeds on so quickly," she said, "and suddenly you will look round in surprise to find your children are grown up, and the whole thing over. All this," she added, "is embodied in the lines I told you of yesterday. I have brought my book down. Shall I read them to you now?"

"Oh, do!" said Maud.

"They have absolutely no literary merit," pursued Lady Alton, "but they so exactly express my own feelings that I have copied them out. They are called 'A Mother's Lament; or, Grown-up Children.'"

She took up her commonplace book, which lay on the table at her side, and in her soft musical voice she then read the following:—

A MOTHER'S LAMENT.

I.

"Where are the boys and the girls, all the children, oh, where are they?
Changing and ever changing, at last they have quite gone away.
Where are the little baby girls, with their clust'ring golden hair?
Pattering footsteps! prattling voices! Where are they gone, oh, where?
Where are the little sailor-boys whose pictures hang on the wall?

I never found them again in the growing youths slim and tall. . . .
I thought when my first public schoolboy came home as tall as me
(Proud and glad as I was), 'Where, oh! where is my darling of three?'
But where is my public schoolboy? What has become of him now?
All that is left a tall grave man, with lines of thought on his brow.
So with them all; here, and yet gone. The children are gone away;
Before I had half enjoyed it they had had their little day.
I do not mean gone out of my sight; I see them daily still.
Tho' little forms have slipt away, others their places fill;
But I've just as wholly lost them as if they'd been call'd away
While their curls were clust'ring over their heads, from their baby play.

II.

"What curious things are a mother's dreams of all that her babe will be!
Early promise is not fulfilled (at least so it seems to me).
I was always dreaming, when they were young, of what they would be some day.
I thought they were something wonderful; they prov'd only common clay.
Their youth seemed so full of promise when they set out the race to run;
Nor better nor worse than their fellows, they have neither lost nor won.

But 'tis not this I'm deploring, tho' I griev'd in a bygone day;
'Tis that while I've been dreaming and planning their childhood has passed away.
I should not mind disappointment if only I had them still;
But the children, I say, have vanished, and I hadn't half had my fill.
'Tis not ambition thwarted that brings a tear to mine eye;
'Tis that while watching the goal-post I've let all the runners slip by.
Could I more wholly have lost them had they been called away,
While their curls were clust'ring over their heads, from their baby play?
It is not that I would murmur. I have drunk deep of life's full cup;
But no child dies so completely as the child who lives to grow up."

"I entirely agree with that last sentiment," here broke in Mrs. Lambton, "and when you all come to my age you will feel as I do, and I only am competent to judge, for even Lady Alton's children are hardly grown-up yet, whereas mine are all men and women. And what I say is that, except for the *knowledge* that the men and women round one are one's own children, they might just as well be other people's, so little is there left in them of the children you once knew, so little

sometimes have you in common with them, or they with you."

"Oh, Mrs. Lambton!" exclaimed Lady Percy, horrified, "what are you saying?"

"Better, perhaps," resumed the remorseless Mrs. Lambton, "better that they *should* be other people's, for then they would not be tied to you and you to them, when you do not suit each other."

Here Maud observed that Ruth Ashley had raised her head towards Mrs. Lambton, and was listening with deep attention.

"Not suit each other!" exclaimed Lady Percy. "Oh, surely your own, very own child must always have something in common with you!"

Mrs. Lambton shrugged her shoulders. "Not necessarily. Why should it? It is a beautiful theory, no doubt, or rather a beautiful delusion; but still only a theory and only a delusion. The reality is often something very different. But is it so very much to be wondered at after all? Consider what your baby is."

"I do," said Lady Percy, "and I say it is one's very, very own."

"But is it so very much one's own?" resumed

Mrs. Lambton. "It comes into the world a mixture of two distinct families and six distinct individualities. There is your own and your husband's, your father's, your mother's, your husband's father's, and your husband's mother's; not even to mention side contributions from uncles and aunts and former generations. Well, out of all that it very likely has less of you, and what suits and appeals to you, than it has of some of the others. By-and-by that develops more, becomes more marked and more intensified, and you find yourself powerless to alter or check it. Educate, train, and restrain as you will, you find heredity is too strong for you. And what is the consequence? Why, that, as your child grows up, you find not only that you are disappointed in it as a sympathetic companion, but that its nature unsuits you in every way. You find yourself, perhaps, in mid-life, tied to the companionship of a woman who bores you, who is even distasteful to you, and whom you feel you would probably have avoided had you met her in society. And yet this was once your own, very own little baby, whose birth was the occasion of joy and thankfulness."

Here a slight movement in the room caused Mrs. Lambton to stop for a minute, and Ruth Ashley's place was seen to be vacant.

"Or take the case of a son," she continued; "do you remember what George Eliot says of one of her heroines in the character of mother?"

"No," said Lady Percy, rather fearfully; "what does she say?"

"She says," was the answer, "after sharing the common delusion that, when a beautiful man-child was born to her, her cup of happiness would be full, she had travelled through long years apart from that child, to find herself at last in the presence of a son of whom she was afraid, who was utterly unmanageable by her, and to whose sentiments in any given case she possessed no key."

There was silence in the room when Mrs. Lambton ceased speaking. A kind of chill seemed to fall on the young mothers. Lady Percy put down for a moment the socks she was knitting for her baby boy at home, and Maud drew little Alfred nearer to her, as if the contact of his clinging arms helped her to fight against the statements just made.

"I am sorry to be a wet blanket," said Mrs. Lambton, with a little mirthless laugh, "but I see these things round me every day. The baby boy you worshipped grows up to break your heart, and the little daughter you longed for becomes the worry and torment of what might otherwise have been your calm middle age."

Lady Alton felt sorry for the young mothers, observing that they were quite depressed and disheartened by the conversation, and by the pessimistic nature of Mrs. Lambton's information—coloured and darkened, as Lady Alton knew it to be, by a sad disposition and a still sadder experience—and she was anxious to put an end to the discussion.

"Shall I finish reading the lines now?" she said.

Maud and Lady Percy eagerly assented. They were evidently as anxious as she was to have no more of Mrs. Lambton's theories.

Lady Alton's musical voice once more sounded in the room.

III.

"But stay! I have not told you of the sorrow I had to bear.
My first-born child was taken, out of reach of my love and care!

With his curls clustering over his head, my boy was taken away:
Yes; my eldest child has been my youngest for many a day.
Maidens, young men, and young matrons are those around me now;
Not one had a look of childhood, with its bright unclouded brow.
About me I see their faces, but ever hovering o'er
Is the face of the child who will be a child for evermore.
The others' childhood has faded from me, lost in a time gone by,
But the child that went before me will be a child for aye.
And, though little I thought it that day as I wildly mourn'd and wept,
The child I deemed I was losing is the only child I have kept.
So what I lost I have kept, what I kept I lost long ago,
Strange as it seems and perplexing, I feel it is even so.
What I thought I was keeping is gone, for—thought not unmixed with pain—
Neither here nor hereafter will *they* ever be children again.
But when to God's bright heaven the angels my soul shall bear,
The child that I lost as a child, *as a child* shall meet me there."

There was silence in the room when Lady Alton stopped. Maud sat with her arms more closely clasped round little Alfred, and Lady Percy's head was bent very low over her work. A slight rustle was heard in the momentary hush, and Mrs. Lambton slipped hastily out of the room.

"Poor woman!" said Lady Alton, softly. "I suppose she must have lost a child at some time, but I did not know it; I am very sorry for her," she added. "She is not, I am sure, as hard as she seems to wish to appear. Her husband is an odd, unfeeling sort of man, and her children all more or less like him, hard, unsympathetic sort of people. She has been, I think, 'frozen by her surroundings,' and has led a 'dumb, repressed life.' You must not attach too much importance to what she said."

CHAPTER IV.

THE BARONESS AND HER "PREUX CHEVALIER."

"As if in close committee on the sky,
Reports it hot or cold, or wet or dry."

When Colonel Norton came down to dinner, he found he was told off to take in the Baroness Carrachi, and he gave her his arm with a slight feeling of impatience. He was consoled, however, by finding Lady Percy on the other side.

The baroness, as the reader is aware, liked full and undivided attention, and the tendency he displayed to talk to Lady Percy or to join in the general conversation which was going on imme-

diately round him annoyed her considerably. They were discussing abstract subjects, of which she knew little and cared less. She did not care for that sort of conversation at all. She was by no means a really clever woman, and certainly not a cultivated one. She read absolutely nothing but French novels and the "Society" papers. She either liked flippant talk, sprinkled with compliments, or else "badinage;" something which brought out her powers of repartee, of which she was very proud.

She was determined to put a stop to all this.

"Colonel Norton," she said, putting on the air of a girl of seventeen, "you are too clever for poor me. You must really lower yourself and come down to my level, if we are to have a pleasant chat. Voyons!"

Colonel Norton answered her in a matter-of-fact manner, repudiating the implied compliment.

"You frighten me, you know," she said playfully, "with your deep subjects of conversation. I am lost in amazement—coupled with admiration, *bien entendu!*—as I listen (mingled, may I say, with *awe*), when I think of the brains

and the reading which such conversation represents."

"My dear baroness," he said, laughing, but feeling rather impatient, "I don't know what you mean. It appears to me I was talking on the most ordinary and commonplace topics."

"Ah, *sans doute* it appears so to you," she said, deceived by his laugh, and not seeing that he was annoyed, "but that only shows how high your standard is."

"You give me, I assure you," he answered, "credit for a great deal more brains and reading than I deserve."

"What is your secret, then?" she said. "Do tell it to me. How is knowledge and information to be picked up without reading? And without brains!"

She wanted to retain his attention at all costs. She was so dreadfully afraid of its straying to Lady Percy, and she therefore, much as her vanity was hurt that she could not succeed in turning the conversation into the channel she desired, made up her mind to it, and began feigning an interest she did not feel and a knowledge she did not possess, in various ways.

She talked about books, asking his opinion on the subject as if she were about to begin a course of severe reading which he was to direct. Reviews? Newspapers? What special papers would he advise her to have sent to her while she was visiting, etc.

But presently he committed a grave offence, and she nearly lost her temper with him, so great was her annoyance. He alluded to himself, in the course of something he was saying, as "a middle-aged man like myself." This was most disagreeable and unpardonable, since they were contemporaries.

"So stupid of him," she inwardly said, "so handsome and young-looking as he is, and with no grown-up daughter like poor me to show him up."

She even went the length of remonstrating with him, but only got the following answer: "My dear lady, if seventy be the age of man, must not several years over the half of that period be middle age?"

"Certainly not," she answered quickly; "and, moreover, eighty is now the age of man."

She was too put out to speak for a minute or two.

"I assure you," he went on, quite unconscious, "I feel a perfect Rip Van Winkle sometimes. I have been away from England so long, that I forget how time has sped, and have all sorts of shocks continually as to people and their ages."

"Being away a long time often has the contrary effect," she said pettishly. "As a rule, people take up time and things where they left them, and forget the time which has intervened. And a very good plan, too."

"I cannot do that," he answered. "I find too many changes, both in things and people, to deceive myself like that. Though I am not sure," he added thoughtfully, "that, as regards people, the marvel to me is not that they should be so much, but that they should be so little changed."

She interrupted him with great glee. She had, she thought, at last drawn from him a personal compliment.

"And yet it is certainly some years since we met," she said, recovering herself and speaking in her liveliest manner.

He looked at her vaguely. He had not an

idea what she meant. He had been following the course of his own thoughts, and had been on the track of those moral reflections which his return to English society so often brought to his mind; the marvel that, after so many years, people should be so little changed for the better; should still be so occupied and satisfied with the pursuit of trifles light as air; that the lessons of life should be all unlearnt, and its warnings all unheeded.

"But as regards things," he resumed, just as if he had not heard her remark, "the changes are no doubt very startling. Society I find extraordinarily changed."

"For the better, I hope?" she said.

"Well, yes, perhaps, in many ways," he replied, "though I am not so advanced as to think that change always means improvement."

"Ah, but there was much in English society that wanted changing," she rejoined, "and, indeed, there is much still which 'laisse quelque chose à désirer.' Conversation, par exemple. Now, Colonel Norton, lay aside for a moment your insular prejudice, and confess—you who have lived so much

abroad—that your compatriots need a little change in this respect, which *would* mean improvement."

"Ah, well, yes," he said, "I am quite ready to own that. It does strike me how very few people really converse, and how much we all talk about the weather."

"Mais n'est-ce pas!" she exclaimed, delighted. "Oh, that poor weather! How much dull, vapid talk does it not have to answer for!"

"And yet you must allow that ours is such a variable climate, that we can find something new to say about it every day. So that there is room for a good deal of variety in our conversation even there."

"Variety, yes," she answered; "but of a kind which is unvaryingly and invariably dull and tiresome. Oh, and it is not only the weather! There are many other subjects just as worn out which are always coming to the front. Now, don't you yourself find the same old stories being told by the 'agreeable man' of the party as were being told when you dined out in London twelve, fourteen, fifteen years ago?"

"Yes," he said; "I quite admit that."

"The same long-winded stories," she went on;

"the same stock jokes and anecdotes, the same rejoinders. Oh, la la! Vraiment la vie est fatiguante!"

"Is life worth living? in short," said Colonel Norton.

"Mais précisément," she said brightly; "though as to that——" She stopped and looked at Colonel Norton.

"Oh, now, baroness," he said, "you are not, I hope, going to say, 'it depends upon the liver.' If so, I shall put you down as quite as bad as the rest of us, for that was a 'stock' rejoinder to the question quite fifteen years ago."

"Mais non," she said gaily, tapping him with her fan as she rose from her seat, for the ladies were just moving; "I was *not*. I was going to say, C'est une affaire de foi! (e)."

Now, the sort of feeling entertained by Colonel Norton towards the Baroness Carrachi cannot but be felt in some degree by the other person. She was too vain a woman to allow it to herself, or in any way to define it. Nevertheless, she was just sufficiently aware of it to be piqued by it, and to be determined to overcome it. She was resolved to win him, and to bring him to her

feet, and during the next day or two she spared no pains, no arts, to do so.

Meantime Colonel Norton, all unaware of her deep-laid intention, was only conscious of feeling daily more and more bored with her, and with her attempts to monopolize him; though, not being a vain man, he was not so alive to them himself as were some of the other people in the house. Her light talk, he reflected to himself, was all very well when you only met her once in a way; but day after day, in the same house, it became wearisome. Besides, he wanted to cultivate her daughter according to Maud's desire, and anything of this kind the baroness made impossible. The girl in her mother's presence, whatever she might be elsewhere, appeared to be an utter nonentity. It was apparent to all that she was not at ease in her mother's company, and that she rarely spoke unless the baroness was out of the room. That, of course, some of them agreed, might be because her mother talked so much. But the general opinion was that it was not only that, but that, in some subtle way, the mother acted on the daughter, and prevented her taking that part in conversation which

they all felt, to judge by the intelligence of her face, she was capable of doing.

Colonel Norton soon told Maud that his attempt was a miserable failure, and that he thought he must give it up. The young girl, he said, was absolutely unapproachable. She was not only difficult to get hold of, and to make friends with, because she was always, as it were, hidden behind her mother — a sort of lady-in-waiting, as he described it; but that also she gave no one any encouragement, and, as it seemed to him, himself especially, to approach.

And so it all went on for a day or two, and then Colonel Norton began to get impatient for all the guests to go, and to get his hostess to himself. Surrounded as she was, there was never any chance of a private conversation. To get her alone, even for half an hour, seemed hopeless.

The house continued quite full, and as fast as one set of people went away, another arrived, and the chance of resuming the subject so abruptly broken off in the rhododendron avenue appeared to be more remote than ever.

Maud's promise on that occasion had, how-

ever, been so distinctly given, that he determined to remind her of it.

"Lady Manorlands," he said to her one day, after he had been at Egerton Court nearly a week, "when I left Manorlands you made me a certain promise. When are you going to fulfil it?"

"Oh," she exclaimed, "you must indeed wait until the house is less full!"

"But when will that be?" he rejoined. "People follow each other so closely; there seems no end to it!"

"There will be a lull, soon," she answered; "stay them all out, won't you?"

So he stayed on, and the days succeeded each other pleasantly enough.

Not once since his arrival had Maud seemed the least depressed or thoughtful. Not once had she had on her face that peculiar expression which had attracted his attention at Manorlands. The thought, whatever it was, was evidently not habitual. And, indeed, as he watched her in her happy domestic life, or throwing herself with real enjoyment into the entertainment of her guests, he began almost to think it was mere fancy on

his part that her past held anything sad or mysterious. But an evening came when he was convinced that in this he was mistaken.

It had been a lovely autumn day, and every one had been enjoying themselves in various ways out-of-doors. Towards evening, however, the weather showed signs of changing, and as Colonel Norton entered the house at about five o'clock a gale was springing up, and began to sweep round the house. He strolled into the drawing-room. Maud was sitting alone in the gloaming by the fire, and did not perceive his entrance. The room was rather dark, but through the big bay window at the further end of the room could be seen, in the afterglow, the trees in the garden and woods beyond standing out darkly against the light in the horizon, and the faint outline of a mountain in the far distance. Just as he caught sight of her, a low "sough" of wind wailed round the house, and as it fell upon her ear she raised her head and listened. As she did so the firelight shone upon her face, and he observed the look of deep sadness come over it which he remembered so well. Her eyes assumed the same dreamy far-away look he had

seen them wear before, and George Hardy's quotation recurred to him—

> "As if drawn from thoughts more far
> Than our earthly jestings are."

Feeling as if he were intruding where he had no right to be, he was about to leave the room again, when the door opened, and the servants came in with the lamps and the tea. They were followed by some of the ladies, who came in talking and laughing together.

With an evident effort, Maud shook herself free of her abstraction before any of them had time to notice it; and by the time that the curtains were drawn and the tea on the table, she was sitting as usual pouring it out, and talking to her guests. But he thought that her face looked rather drawn, and that her cheerfulness was rather forced.

Wondering much at what he had seen, he presently left the room, for it was to him a little painful, after what he had been a witness of, to see her obliged to talk and laugh so soon, and he felt sorry that she should have had to put such a strain upon herself so suddenly. He could not, he thought, have done it in her case. And

he went off to the smoking-room with a feeling of great compassion for her, pursued, as he crossed the hall, by the babble of sounds by which she was now surrounded, the shrill tones of the Baroness Carrachi talking in broken English, the drawl of Lord Erskine, and the high-pitched voice of Mrs. King asking some new arrivals if any of them could tell her of a maid.

CHAPTER V.

GEORGE HARDY AGAIN.

"The holiest task by Heaven decreed,
An errand all divine;
The burden of our common need,
To render less is thine.

"That healing gift He lends to all
Who use it in His Name;
The power that filled His garment's hem
Is evermore the same."

THE party broke up suddenly, and in an unexpected manner, and by the middle of the next day all the guests except Colonel Norton had departed. For the silence of the night had been broken by the loud and repeated ringing of the nursery bell, and when the morning dawned the

news spread gradually through the house that one of the children had been taken ill in the night, and that the doctor had been hastily summoned.

When Colonel Norton came down to breakfast, he found a general stampede among the guests going on. Some were naturally leaving Egerton Court, and those who were not had immediately made up their minds to do so, so as not to act as a *gêne* upon the young parents.

He met Lord Manorlands in the hall, who told him that it was little Claud, who had been seized with an attack of his old enemy croup; and that his wife, having no confidence in the local doctors, had begged him to telegraph for George Hardy. Then, asking Colonel Norton to do what he could to assist the departing guests, and by no means to go himself, Lord Manorlands hurried away, and Colonel Norton went into the drawing-room. Here he found a great hubbub going on. The Baroness Carrachi was in a great hurry to be off. She had telegraphed for rooms at an hotel in the county town, and had had her boxes packed as quickly as possible.

A strong revulsion seized Colonel Norton

when, on asking her if he could do anything for her, he received the following flippant and unfeeling answer:—

"My dear Colonel Norton, the kindest thing you can do for me is to give me your arm and assist me out of this house as fast as possible. Illness gives me a depression which I cannot describe to you. I am not one who can put up even for a day with the atmosphere of a sick-house. Doctors coming and going, grave faces on the stairs. Mon Dieu! Non. I am so constituted that I must have joy and laughter and sunshine all round me, or I cannot exist. I very strongly advise you to do as I am doing, and to come to the hotel too. Pourquoi pas! Non? Well, there is no accounting for tastes. Come, Ruth, the carriage is waiting."

So saying she took Colonel Norton's arm, and proceeded to the hall door.

He handed her into the carriage without a word. He was disgusted at her light talk at such a moment; and her daughter's grave, anxious glance as she shook hands with him, and her few earnest words of sympathy for Lady Manorlands, were most refreshing to him as a contrast.

As he watched the carriage drive away, a feeling of regret came over him that he had not been able to cultivate the young girl more, and that, during four whole days in the same house, he had made little or no way with her. He registered a determination that when they met at the Percys', which, according to present arrangements, they were to do in the course of another week, he would make further and more determined efforts, and not allow himself to be so easily put off, either by her own manner or by the obstacles which her mother somehow or other seemed to contrive to put in the way.

These thoughts were, however, for the time laid aside by the anxious interests of the moment, and his own sympathy with his friends in their trouble.

In about an hour the house was absolutely empty, and he found himself alone in the deserted rooms. It was with a keen sense of "the unfitness of things" that he reflected that the consummation he had so desired a few days ago had been brought about, but in so sad a manner and in such a way that, notwithstanding the absence of all guests but himself, his chances of

conversation with Maud were more remote than ever; add to which there would soon be the presence of George Hardy in the house. He could not arrive till the evening, but he had already telegraphed that he was on his way.

The day wore on as such days do, slowly and wearily. But at last the welcome sound of the carriage which had been sent to meet Hardy at the station was heard driving up to the door.

Colonel Norton, all his own feelings on the subject of the young doctor's advent forgotten, hurried eagerly out to meet him in the hall, and himself conducted him up to the nursery. He had not seen Maud all day. She had never left the child's side for a moment. But as the door was opened quickly by Lord Manorlands to admit George Hardy, Colonel Norton had for an instant a full view of her, and of what was going on in the room.

She was bending over the little crib where the sick child lay, her whole attitude expressing the deepest dejection. It seemed to him like a beautiful picture of Maternity and Death engaged in a hand-to-hand struggle for the possession of the child.

As the door opened, she raised her head and looked round, and as she caught sight of Hardy advancing to the bedside, a sudden light broke over her face—a look of satisfaction and hopeful confidence, quickly passing into one of sorrow as she exclaimed in a low, despairing voice, "Oh, George, look here, look here!"

* * * * *

George Hardy sat up all night with his little patient, watching the effect of his remedies; and when day dawned, the little fellow had taken a sudden turn for the better, and all danger had passed away.

Morning broke on an altered state of things; the anxiety was entirely over, and the gloom which had hung over the whole house for so many hours cleared.

When Colonel Norton met Lord Manorlands at breakfast, he learnt that little Claud was quite out of the wood, and that Hardy would be able to return to London by the night train, there being, happily, no occasion now for him to remain.

"Indeed," he added, "he has been pursued by telegrams even here. It was most difficult

for him to get away at all, and he has more than one urgent case awaiting him. But he would do anything for Maud, naturally."

Here Lady Manorlands entered, looking worn and pale, but with a happy light in her eyes; and George Hardy followed.

It was now so long since Colonel Norton had seen the two together, and his own intimacy with Maud had made such strides in the interval, that he was a little taken by surprise. He had rather forgotten all that had so struck him at Manorlands—the deep interest she showed in him, the intimacy she displayed in her manner towards him, the air of something like maternal solicitude mingled with pride which her face wore sometimes when he was speaking.

Still more did this feeling possess him, when, on returning late in the afternoon from a long walk by himself, he went into the drawing-room and found Maud and George Hardy together.

They were standing in the deep bay window, at the far end of the room, so deep in conversation that neither of them perceived his entrance.

"Tell me, George," he heard her say, "what

do you think of that young assistant? Was I not right in what I told you about him?"

"I think you were," Hardy answered; "but he is young, and has much to learn and to unlearn. He has hardly gone deep enough yet to discover and realize many things which will come to him later. Don't you remember," he added, turning to her with the look of almost reverent admiration which Colonel Norton recollected on his face the day he had first mentioned her on board the Channel steamer, "what you warned me of when I first entered the profession?"

"No," she answered, smiling upon him with a look of deep interest; "what was it? Tell me."

"That," he replied, "it was—

'. . . the profuse discovery of means, especially in medical science, that in our day clouds the thought of the Maker in many minds, and that the more the mind is fastened on second causes the more danger there is that it will fail to reach the Great First Cause of all.'

That, you said, was one of the dangers you wished me to recognize in beginning a medical life."

"Yes; I remember now," she rejoined. "I had a vague fear of the dangers to faith which I fancied beset the medical student. I had heard

medical students spoken of, as a class, as atheistical, and it had frightened me. This young man, I suppose you mean, is just at the stage against which I warned you. The study of second causes has taken an undue hold upon his mind."

"I think he is going through that phase," said Hardy; "and he must go through several others before he passes out of it. But he *will* pass out of it. If he is an earnest thinker, and not, as they say, one who thinks that he thinks, he must in time discover that 'He who works everything, works *by* everything;' and that by the deepest study of the laws of God we come to an ever profounder faith in the God of Law."

The voices ceased, and the conversation came to an end. Maud perceived Colonel Norton, and turned to him with a smile.

Soon after, both she and George left the room, in order that the latter might take a farewell look at the little boy upstairs; and in about an hour from then they all met in the dining-room for an early dinner, arranged for the traveller by the night train.

"Ah, George!" exclaimed Maud as the meal drew to a close, "how can you be a doctor! How dreadful it must be to live always in scenes of sickness and suffering, and in an atmosphere of anxiety such as this house has been for the last twenty-four hours! Ours, thank God, is over. But you are going back straight into other scenes of the kind, and you live always more or less in them. I wonder you can bear it, and that it does not wear you out."

"Or else," said Lord Manorlands, "that it does not make you callous to human suffering, hard, indifferent, and unsympathetic."

"Curiously enough," replied George Hardy, "I was talking to a veteran surgeon on this very subject only the other day. And he said that his experience, as nearly as he could state it, was that 'the sight of pain ceased to act as a source of emotion, but continued to be effective as a motive for action; that the misery of seeing it passed away, but the desire to relieve it grew stronger and stronger.' And this, I think, expresses something of what one feels."

Here the carriage was announced which was to take the young doctor to the station. Maud

rose and took both his hands in hers, as he came to wish her good-bye.

"God bless you, my dear boy," she said fervently, as she wrung them warmly, and her voice shook with deep feeling. "How can I ever thank you enough for coming to our help! Under God, I feel I owe my child's life to you."

He answered in a few low words which Colonel Norton could not quite distinguish; but it was evident that the young man was much moved, and he seemed to say something to the effect of how thankful he was to be allowed to make some return for all she had done for him, and all she had been to him and his.

She answered in a still lower tone, and went with him to the door and out of the room. Directly the carriage had driven off, she went straight upstairs, and Colonel Norton saw her no more that night.

CHAPTER VI.

MAUD'S STORY.

"One of the charms of autumn is its wordless influence. It lies in the fact that it gives a voice to that in man which feels the transcience of all things earthly, . . . when every day is filled with the sentiment of twilight, when all we see breathes the spirit of recollection."

BUT, the incident of the young doctor's visit having revived in Colonel Norton's breast all his wonder as to Maud's relationship with George Hardy, he was fully determined not to turn his back on Egerton Court without claiming her promise. The mystery which overhung her past hardly interested him more than did this apparently coincident fact with it. Her excuse as to publicity no longer held good, and her mind was at ease as regarded her child. There could now, therefore, be no reason why she should put him off again, and he rose the next morning with a fixed resolution, which he lost no time in carrying out.

It was a glorious autumn day, and the sun was flooding the breakfast-room as he entered.

Maud, seated at the head of the table, looked up and greeted him with a radiant smile, as she gave him, in answer to his inquiry, an excellent report of the little quondam invalid. She looked happy and beautiful, and with the two elder little boys, one on each side of her, made a picture pleasant to look upon.

Every one and everything seemed to reflect the brightness and the gladness of the lovely morning. The children were in the highest spirits, and their merry voices and laughter rang through the room. Their mother apologized for the noise they were making, saying that they had had to be kept so quiet all the day before, and had been so unhappy about their little brother, that the reaction was, she feared, a little overpowering. She hoped Colonel Norton would make allowances for them. This he was more than willing to do.

Peace, however, was shortly restored by their being fetched away for their walk, and Colonel Norton and Maud were left alone to finish their breakfast.

"Where is Manorlands?" he asked presently.

"He has gone to a meeting," she answered, "and will not be back till dinner-time. He left a

message to say he hoped you would go and get some snipe if you felt inclined."

"Lady Manorlands," said Colonel Norton, suddenly, "I am going away, as you know, to-morrow. I want you to fulfil your promise to me before I go."

Her face changed immediately; its joyful expression died away. She did not answer for a moment. Then she said slowly, "Very well, I will keep my word. I will tell you all you want to know. But not," she added, almost imploringly, "not at this very moment. You must let me choose my own time. I cannot"—she stopped for a moment—"I cannot," she concluded in a low voice, "always be quite sure of myself."

"The subject," he said, "shall not be mentioned between us again, until you re-open it yourself."

"Thank you," she said gently; "but you shall not have to wait over this afternoon."

After that they parted. He went out shooting, and did not return to luncheon. It was far on in the afternoon when he turned his steps homewards, and he was just firing off his gun as he neared the house, when the hall door opened,

and he saw Maud come out and walk slowly towards him. It was evident that she was coming on purpose to meet him. As she approached he saw that she had a peculiar expression on her face, though she greeted him with a slight observation on some trivial subject. She looked like a person strung up to a great effort.

She joined him, and they walked on together; but she did not lead the way to the house. She turned off in a somewhat determined way to a more solitary part of the grounds, and she did not speak. They walked on side by side in silence.

It was a lovely calm autumn day, the perfection of that still time of year when nature seems to be bethinking herself ere she sinks into her winter grave. Not a sound was to be heard but the cawing of the rooks and the sleepy sound of the distant rumbling of the wheels of a cart on its way home. All around—

"An over-mastering stillness rose,
And the fields and trees seemed thoughtful in their absolute repose;
And I saw the woods consuming in a many-coloured death,
Streaks of yellow flame down-deepening through the green that lingereth."

"Colonel Norton," said Maud, suddenly, "I will tell you now."

They were standing, as she spoke, on an old grey stone bridge which spanned the side of a slope where had once been the bed of a little mountain stream. Right in front the ground sloped sheer down, and its base was lost in a mass of foliage. In the foreground were the large bare barks of two Scotch firs, whose tops high above the line of sight stretched away overhead. A grand old beech stood majestically away to the right, whose leaves were beginning to fall. A shower of them lay like a carpet of gold at its base. In every direction where the eye fell was the gorgeous colouring of the autumn the fiery rays of the chestnut and the red of the scarlet oak and the wild cherry tree contrasting with the deep dark-green of the firs, while the golden tints of the beeches showed clear against the intense blue of the sky. The setting sun shone like a glory on the woods round the old house in the distance. Its sober colour was illumined, and it seemed to be enveloped in a ball of fire. Everything was bathed in a flood of light in the beautiful October sunshine.

And there in the golden sunset she told her tale.

He will remember it always, and every detail of the scene will be for ever photographed on his mind—the face with the glowing light upon it, and the intensity of its expression; the profile against the skyline getting dimmer and dimmer as the short autumn day waned to its close, and the gloaming came on; the moving sound of the voice with its low thrilling tones; and the deep silence all around, only broken by the cawing of the rooks as they wheeled restlessly backwards and forwards, and the faint rustle of the falling leaves as they fluttered gently to the ground.

Then, as the gloaming passed into the twilight, and the twilight into the darkness, the moon slowly rose; and as the tale wound to a conclusion, it shone on her face and revealed her intent and far-away expression. She was gazing outwards, as if she saw what he could not see, and heard what to him was silent and empty.

We do not propose to give the recital in her own words, but to relate the circumstances as they occurred. We will therefore ask the reader

to carry his thoughts back to the time when this story opens, and Colonel Norton put Maud Egerton on board the steamer at Bordeaux, in charge of the captain of the vessel and of a lady going on the same voyage, and to bear in mind the Maud of that day as described by Colonel Norton to his wife. With these premises we will take up our story from that point, as if it had never been broken off, and begin a new chapter.

PART IV.

HOW UNDINE FOUND A SOUL.

CHAPTER I.

FROM BORDEAUX TO LIVERPOOL.

As the ship steamed out to sea Maud Egerton remained standing on deck, leaning against the side, gazing at the receding land, still trying to see the last of Colonel Norton and a group of other friends, who were waving hats and handkerchiefs to her from the shore. When the last trace of them had disappeared, she drew a long breath and looked round her with a slight sense of loneliness.

There was now no one but herself on deck. The other passengers, having seen the last of their vanishing friends, had gone below to settle themselves in their various cabins. Maud, however, did not feel inclined to follow their example. The day was fresh and blowy, but not

disagreeably rough; and she wanted to become familiar with her new surroundings on deck, for she had never, except just crossing the Channel, been at sea before, and she wished to make herself at home.

The trackless ocean now lay all around her. She walked up and down for a little while, and then began to feel a little depressed. There was nothing to be seen but the sky, the flying clouds, and the seagulls following the steamer, swaying and fluttering; two or three of the crew on deck, engaged in various duties; and the solitary form of the captain on the bridge, his manly figure standing out in bold relief against the sky and sea-line.

A sense of greater loneliness came over her. She almost regretted having come by sea. It was rather weird, she thought, and she began to think it would be very dreary. The chaperone provided for her seemed likely to be laid low and to keep her cabin, and she, Maud, would be left to her own devices and to do whatever she liked. The prospect, however, did not give her as much pleasure as she had anticipated, nor promise her as much "fun" as it had seemed to

do when Colonel Norton had first mentioned his project to her. On the contrary, it seemed only likely to be very dull. It was all quite different to what she had imagined. She had pictured to herself gay groups of people sitting about on deck, enjoying the sunshine and the sea-air, some reading, some chatting, some looking through glasses at ships sailing past. But there was nothing of all this. True, a few of the passengers had by this time reappeared, men chiefly, who were now walking up and down the deck with regular paces, as if taking a sharp constitutional on shore; but they did not look at all interesting.

The weather was not at all what she had anticipated, either. It was cold, and the sky looked dark and lowering. She turned her eyes from the pacers, and, leaning against the side of the ship, she looked out to sea. It was rather a sudden change from the gay clique at Biarritz, of which she had been the star and the centre, to this intense solitude on the wide ocean. Maud was not accustomed to be alone, and she felt the whole thing to be rather gruesome.

The pacers had now got out of sight, and

there was nothing moving anywhere; nothing even to be seen, but the solitary form of the captain on the bridge. Maud watched him with some curiosity. How still he stood; how quiet; how intent was his gaze out to sea! And this, she reflected, was his life; this was what he was always doing; and she, in one short hour, was already depressed by it. She wondered how it would be to live always in such grand and majestic, though weird and melancholy, surroundings. An effect of some sort it must have upon any one. She felt a little more thoughtful herself already. *He* was always in such scenes; and the words of the Psalms recurred to her: "They that go down to the sea in ships, and occupy their business in great waters; these men see the works of the Lord, and His wonders in the deep."

Mrs. Norton's parting words had rather upset Maud; she was sobered by them, and was in a more thoughtful vein than usual. Her thoughts recurred to them again and again, though she tried to put them out of her head. Till the moment of parting, she had never taken in the gravity of her friend's condition. She had looked

upon her as a confirmed invalid, but had never looked beyond to the inevitable and now imminent end. Occupied with herself and her own pleasures, she had never, somehow, realized how ill she was. She wished, now that it was too late, that she had done so sooner.

But this fit of thoughtfulness, or, as she inwardly called it herself, "depression," did not please Maud. She felt she must try to shake it off. And to do so she must seek the society of her fellow-creatures, of whom no doubt there were plenty below. So she left the deck, and went downstairs to the drawing-room saloon.

She found herself eagerly scanned. Every one was glad to see something fresh; for many of them had come in the ship from further afield, the steamer having only touched at, not started from, Bordeaux, and the passengers had had time to get tired of each other. Moreover, it had already got wind that there was a pretty heiress on board, and it was not difficult, among the other ladies, to identify Maud by this description.

A young man, Fitzclarence by name, came up and introduced himself, saying he had Colonel

Norton's leave to do so. He had had a few words with him on the quay before starting, being a former acquaintance. He hoped, if he could do anything for Miss Egerton during the voyage, she would remember he was always entirely at her service.

Maud thanked him. She liked his looks better than those of any of the others in the saloon. He was, at any rate, quiet and gentlemanlike. Some of the rest to whom she was introduced, both girls and men, were decidedly vulgar, and were laughing and giggling together in a noisy manner. And Maud, though high-spirited herself, and ready for any amount of laughing and fun, disliked giggling and silly chaff.

It was evidently a very foolish and frivolous clique of friends that she had come across, and her desire for good fellowship and company was rather checked. However, she made herself very pleasant for a few minutes, and then made an excuse to get away by saying she must go and see after her friend, Mrs. Grey.

She found Mrs. Grey all got ready for a bad passage and sea-sickness, and she announced that she should not attempt to come in to dinner, but

would have some biscuits and soda-water in her cabin.

Maud felt rather blank at the prospect of dining alone with all those people, without any one else to exchange a word with, in case she got very sick of their conversation. The freedom she had coveted was beginning to pall upon her.

"We are at the captain's table," said Mrs. Grey; "you can find your way in, I dare say."

Maud went away to prepare for dinner, but she put off going in till the last moment, so as to avoid a long talk in the drawing-room saloon just before. Guided by the sound of voices and laughter, and the clatter of knives and forks, she found her way into the dining-saloon, which appeared to her to be crowded, and where she did not at first see a seat. She found, however, one reserved for her between young Fitzclarence and one of the other young men, right in the midst of the clique before referred to. She began to wish she had come in earlier. There was a good deal of whispering and laughing among them when she first came in, which suddenly ceased

on her appearance, which made her think they had been talking about her. Young Fitzclarence looked annoyed, and more so when his rising and showing her her place next to him caused an hysterical giggle from one of the girls, and an exchange of glances between her and her friends. Maud sat down and looked round her.

At the head of the table, at some little distance from her, sat the captain, the same man she had watched on the bridge. Round him the conversation seemed to be graver and more earnest, but it did not spread far enough to reach the frivolous circle in which Maud found herself placed.

She wished she was nearer him. She felt she would like to hear more distinctly what he said. He talked very little, and as if it were a stupendous effort to talk at all; but she noticed, when she did catch what he was saying, that it was always something worth hearing, and that he seemed at once to raise the tone of the conversation. Several times she noticed this. And yet he did not force it, or try to turn the conversation into certain channels. It seemed to be perfectly natural; but he nevertheless impressed

himself somehow on the rest, and Maud was conscious of the effect he produced on them.

As the senseless talk surged round her—banter which was not humour and never could be, silly jokes with no point in them, and chaff of the most foolish kind—a feeling of great weariness and satiety came over her. Sick of all the nonsense talked, and of the vulgar frivolity of her companions, she felt a dawning feeling of respect and admiration for the grave man at the top of the table.

She was attracted now as much by his face as she had been by his solitary figure with the sea and the sky all round him. She felt drawn towards him, she could not tell why. Looking at him once across the table, she caught sight of a look on his face which had stirred her—a look of settled pain, mental, not bodily, coupled with and overborne by a look of calm strength.

Dinner came to an end, and young Fitzclarence asked her if she would not come up on deck for a little while. It would be pleasant up there, he said, for a time before dark. She consented, and went to get her coat and hat. She

would join him, she said, in the drawing-room saloon in a few minutes.

She was opening the door on her return to fulfil her engagement, when a burst of chatter and laughter fell on her ears. No one perceived her, and the group was sitting together in full talk. Evidently some very delightful subject for chaff had been found. The word "heiress" fell on her ears, and the giggling that followed appeared to be directed at young Fitzclarence.

Suddenly it dawned upon Maud of what and of whom they were speaking. A quick angry flush came into her face, and, with a feeling of great disgust, she closed the saloon door again, and determined to go on deck by herself, and keep away altogether from these very uncongenial companions. She was filled with dismay at the thought of having four days or more of this company.

It was a relief to her to find herself once more in the calm scene she had left; and, with the strong distaste for what she had experienced below still fresh upon her, it no longer seemed so dreary as it had done before. She was glad

to be alone—alone with the wide sea, the flying clouds, and her own thoughts.

The captain was already there, standing on the bridge as if he had never left it. She was more than ever attracted by the silent figure gazing out to sea. It fascinated her, why she could hardly tell. He seemed so in harmony with his surroundings, so entirely a part of the whole thing. By contrast with the babble and the noise so lately left, this calm man, this still figure, seemed to give her a deep sense of reality and repose. She had a sudden longing to talk to him, or rather to hear him talk; to know what were the thoughts which possessed him, as he stood there with that earnest look on his strong face, that intent expression in his grey eyes, under the overhanging brows.

She dreaded the advent of young Fitzclarence and the others, and she felt that up there she would be secure and safe. So she advanced to the foot of the bridge, and, looking up, she said rather timidly—

"May I come up there, Captain Hardy?"

The captain started, so unaware was he of the near vicinity of any human presence; but,

with grave courtesy, answered in the affirmative. He assisted her up, and in a few moments she was standing at his side, looking out, as he had been doing, on the wide sea. The freshness of the wind took her breath away at first, and for some minutes she did not speak; they stood side by side together in silence. And as she stood there, silent, she seemed to realize forcibly the responsibility which lay on the shoulders of this one man, the solitariness of his calling, and its solemn nature. Vastness above, vastness below, vastness around—height, depth, and trackless-ness; such were the surroundings in which he perpetually lived. And the ship, like a little shell on the top of the unfathomable fathoms beneath, so full of human lives, and all in his care!

It took hold of her imagination. She invested him with the poetry of the situation, called up by the poetry of her own thoughts. He seemed to her a sort of ruler and guide; a presiding power over her destiny and over that of all the other people in the ship. He was guiding them through the dangers of the deep with watchful, unceasing care. How her heart would faint, she

mused, did she bear on her shoulders the tenth part of the responsibility which rested on his! Yet she felt, as she glanced at him, that he was well able to bear it—fashioned by his calling into the strong, brave man he was.

She spoke at last, but the wind carried her voice away, and he did not hear. She thought, as he did not answer, that she perhaps ought not to have addressed him. She had some vague recollection floating at the back of her mind of the words, "Do not speak to the man at the wheel." So she did not try again. She was, for a wonder, content to stand there silent, and, more wonderful still, wrapped in thought.

All unsought returned upon her again the parting words of Mrs. Norton, and of something she said about setting off on a voyage to that other shore, that bourne from which no traveller returns, and at the recollection Maud's eyes filled with tears. As she thought of it, and compared it with what lay before herself, with the gay voyage in life on which she was embarking, and all that was awaiting her of pleasure, wealth, and independence at the end of the journey, a sort of pang seized her. A feeling of regret and sorrow

came upon her, and a tear fell from her eyes before she was aware.

The captain's grave voice broke in upon her meditations—

"You are in trouble, my dear young lady?"

Almost before she knew it, Maud had told him all that was passing in her mind.

He listened with grave attention and reverent sympathy. It is probable that he thought it a greater grief to Maud than it really was; for, for the moment, her whole mind was on it, and gave an unusual earnestness to her manner.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "does it not seem hard to die, to feel all life lies behind you, and nothing but gloom and darkness in front?"

He did not answer for a moment; and then, half speaking to himself, he said—

"To the young perhaps it may seem so; but to us, further on in life's journey, no. The greater gloom seems for those left behind."

He paused, and Maud, glancing furtively at him, saw the same look of pain come over his face which she had observed at dinner. And as her eyes fell on him she noted, for the first time, that he had a deep band of new *crêpe* round his

arm. Her heart smote her. Here she had been gabbling on all unheeding to a man who had evidently had some great loss recently. She resolved to be silent, and to leave him to talk or not, as he should choose.

He was also silent for a time, and then he said—

"Nevertheless, I am sorry for the young."

This unexpected remark unlocked Maud's lips at once.

"Sorry for the young!" she exclaimed in her astonishment; "sorry for the young! *Sorry* for those who are full of life and health and enjoyment! Oh, you cannot mean it! Just think what it is to be young! All the possibilities of life lie before us, the power to enjoy them, and the hope of long, long years in which to do so. *Why* are you sorry for them?"

"I am sorry for them," he answered, "because of the inevitable disenchantment with life which *also* lies before them, and will have to be lived through. And because, not realizing the meaning of their lives, they rebel and struggle so against that disenchantment; and in the keenness of the disappointment which they suffer (and the young

do suffer so keenly!) they see nothing beyond. They are crushed and hopeless. They have yet to discover that there is a deeper purpose in their lives than mere enjoyment." He paused a minute, and added reverently, "And then, too, they know in the hour of sorrow nothing of the 'God of consolation, the God of repair, the God who takes the broken life into His hands and mends it.' And, sooner or later, every life comes to need that knowledge."

He was gazing out to sea again, absorbed in his own thoughts, and Maud watched him with a sort of fascination, knowing they were thoughts which she could not follow, and glad that he had not called upon her to make any answer to what he had said. She felt her powerlessness to do so; and she hardly knew why, but she did not wish him to find this out. She knew how far she was from being able to understand, far less enter into, the line of thought which seemed to come to him as a matter of course.

For she had no real religion herself; none of the conviction which comes from personal experience. She "went to church;" she "said her prayers." Here her religion began and ended.

There was, of course, the traditional faith of her childhood, though even that was a very slight thing with her, her training having been most imperfect. But she had never come to that time when tradition and personal experience meet; what has been called the "great middleland," the "coming of age of the spirit." Her inward experience had by no means "come of age." She had nothing within her to say, "I know Whom I have believed." Not that she was a doubter. She had never given the subject enough consideration for doubt. She had never cared sufficiently to think deeply; and it "is to the thoughtless that all things are plain."

Was he thinking, she wondered as she watched him, of himself and his own life? and was it, perhaps, one recently broken, which stood in some deep need of repair?

If it were so, he sought and found the consolation he needed, for his sad look lightened. He took off his cap, and the wind blew his iron-grey hair away from his broad forehead.

Maud rather dreaded what he would say next, for she was feeling awed, and at a disadvantage.

"And yet, if you come to think of it," he

said, turning to her again, "it is a strange thing that the young should look upon death as such a far-away and unlikely thing, and should talk as though the old and the sick had a monopoly of it, and they themselves an immunity from it. Daily experience contradicts such an idea. The young and the strong are taken; the old and the sickly left. It is the unexpected that so often happens. Of this," he added half to himself, "I have just had an instance. And after all you, young strong girl as you are, may for all you know be *nearer* than your apparently dying friend."

"Oh, surely not!" exclaimed Maud, rather startled.

"Why not?" he answered. "At all times our lives are more or less in jeopardy—

> " 'A snake's nip, a falling tile,
> A taint in the tank,
> Half a span of angry steel,
> And life is over, and the man is dead.'

Have you never realized, for instance, that there is at this moment only a plank between you and eternity?"

Maud recoiled for a moment, and then laughed a little.

"You are trying to frighten me, Captain Hardy," she said; "but I assure you I am not a coward."

"You have, perhaps, never had your bravery tried," was his quiet answer.

"Well, I mean to enjoy the present, and leave the future to take care of itself," said Maud, rather defiantly; and, anxious to turn the conversation from the grave tone it was assuming—for the feeling of being awed and at a disadvantage was new to her, and she did not like it—"Why should one be always thinking of disagreeable things? Far better take every day as it comes, and enjoy it to the full while it lasts."

The next moment she would have given a good deal to recall the speech she had made, for she felt rather than saw the effect it had upon him, and somehow she did not want to fall in his estimation.

"Forgive me, Captain Hardy," she said impetuously. "You are a good man, and I am a wretched, frivolous creature."

He did not speak again for some minutes, and when he did, to Maud's relief, it was on quite a different subject. The conversation turned

upon his sea experiences. Maud enjoyed hearing of storms and adventures, and pressed him to tell her more and more.

He gave her some exciting accounts of some of his voyages, and the perils he had shared and escaped. Twice, it seemed, he had been shipwrecked in his youth, and had on each occasion, in common with the rest of the crew, barely escaped with his life, after saving the women and children.

"I always think that is such nonsense," said Maud, impetuously, "saving a pack of useless women and children and letting all the men drown. Just think how many valuable lives are often sacrificed to useless ones! It is a false sentiment, to my mind. Fancy an emigrant ship, for instance, crammed with women and children! If you save them all first, what chance is there for the men, and still less for the crew? And when the women *are* saved, how helpless they are without the men they belong to! It is a mistaken idea altogether, I think. I assure you I have no patience sometimes, when I read accounts of shipwrecks, to think of the boat-loads of helpless women being pulled off, and the grand, brave,

self-sacrificing crew going down with the ship. Valuable lives all sacrificed to those wretched, useless——"

"But why do you call them wretched and useless?" he interrupted.

"Oh, all women's lives are!" she retorted impatiently.

"Your experience has been unfortunate," he said gravely. "I disagree with you altogether."

"Well, *mine* is, I know," she answered, "and one can only judge by one's self, and by those one has known. *I* never met a woman yet who could hold a candle to a man in point of worth or usefulness; and I am sure that many a sailor must feel he is sacrificing his own useful and valuable life to very worthless ones, and perhaps, too, with the feeling that his own wife and children at home will suffer cruelly by it."

He was silent for a moment, and then he said—

"But even if it were so, what has that to do with it when the duty before him is so very clear?"

"But *is* it so very clear?" she persisted. "One ought to think of results a little, and the conse-

quences of one's actions, and what will come after."

"One can but do that which lies straight before one," he answered; "it is the only rule—

> "'Do thy duty—that is best;
> Leave unto thy God the rest.'"

"Ah, well," said Maud, lightly, again anxious to change the tone of the conversation, "all I can say is, if this ship goes down, don't attempt to save *me*. Your life and the lives of your crew are worth more than those of all the women in *this* ship. Of that I am very sure. And the value of yours as compared with mine is simply incomparable."

"Why do you say so?" he asked; "how can you tell?"

"You would probably leave a blank in the world not easily filled," she answered. "*I* should be no loss to any one."

"Who," he said, "can speak with any certainty of the relative value of lives?"

"I have no belongings to miss me," she said rather huskily, as if for the first time her forlorn position came home to her, in spite of the worldly prosperity which was hers, and on which her

thoughts usually dwelt with so much pleasure; "no one, I mean, to whom I am nearest and dearest, or, indeed, even near and dear. And those I have would reap a benefit by my death which my life would never confer."

Young Fitzclarence had meantime for long been walking up and down at the foot of the bridge, impatient at this prolonged conversation. Seeing at last that there appeared no chance of its coming to an end, he had given it up and joined the rest again.

The evening was wearing on now. The ladies by degrees went below, and the men into the smoking-saloon; but Maud was quite unaware of the lapse of time. Still she stood by the captain's side on the bridge, in earnest conversation, or wrapped in earnest thought, as the ship continued her swift and even course. It was the captain at last who warned her of the lateness of the hour.

"I am sorry," she said, with a sigh. "It is so quiet and peaceful up here. I should like to stay here all night. However, I suppose I had better go, though I don't feel the least inclined to go to bed. Good night, Captain Hardy; and thank you for letting me come and talk to you.

And thank you, too," she added rather timidly, "for all you have said to me. Perhaps you will let me come again to-morrow. I feel rather lonely, as I don't really know any one on board, not even the lady under whose charge I am supposed to be." She looked rather wistfully at him as she made the request, adding, "And, you know, I *am* under your charge too."

He answered with grave courtesy that she was welcome to come whenever she wished it; and she went her way. To bed, but not to sleep. She lay thinking over what they had talked about, and what he had said. It did not, when she came to think it over, amount to very much after all. Why, then, she asked herself, had it affected her so strongly? She could not tell, and she fell asleep and dreamed she was standing by his side again.

CHAPTER II.

CAPTAIN HARDY.

THE next day Maud joined a little in the occupations and amusements of her fellow-passengers. She did not wish it to be supposed

that she was keeping aloof, or in any way giving herself airs. But she was conscious all the time of being absent and preoccupied. Her eyes seemed to have an irresistible inclination to wander in the direction of the bridge, where the solitary figure was standing as it had stood the evening before.

Young Fitzclarence suited her best of the whole party; and, moreover, he seemed able in some degree to enter into her interest in the captain, and to be impressed, as she was, by the fact of the impalpable influence exercised upon others by him. He had not only noticed it, but had felt it himself.

"He is a first-rate fellow all round," he said; "a brave man and a good officer. His crew are devoted to him, and he is respected by every one. I have sailed with him before. Poor fellow!" he added, "he has just lost his wife."

"Oh, has he?" exclaimed Maud.

"I must say," put in a more frivolous speaker, who had joined the ship at Bordeaux—"I must say it is rather depressing to have dropped in for a captain in such low spirits. In my last voyage on board one of these ships the captain was the

life and soul of the whole thing, and it makes all the difference. It casts a gloom on the voyage to have a man so down as he is at the head of affairs."

Maud cast a look of indignation at the unfeeling speaker; but the next moment she remembered with shame it was just the sort of thing she might have said herself in her dislike of anything the least sad or that depressed the atmosphere around her. She bit her lip, but she felt it was not for her to say anything in the way of reproof.

"Poor fellow!" exclaimed young Fitzclarence; and she felt drawn towards him as he spoke. "What can you expect? He only heard the news at Bordeaux, and that simply by telegram. And, besides, he is in great anxiety about his children, who are left, by the death of their mother, quite alone and friendless, and until we arrive he can hear nothing about them, and he does not know who is befriending them. Surely he has enough to make him low and silent."

"He is a man of few words at any time," said some one else; "you never can get much out of him."

Jarred on by the tone of the conversation, Maud walked away. Young Fitzclarence followed her.

"He is a real good man," he said, in answer to a remark of hers; "you feel it all over you somehow when he talks to you. Not that he says much. He does not what you call "talk good" or put on a superior air; but you have a sort of feeling he is above you, all the same."

"That," she said softly, "is just the impression he gives me."

"There are times," the young man went on, waxing confident, but in the shy, awkward way an Englishman puts on directly he tries to express his feelings, "in the evening, when it's dark, don't you know, and quiet, and when one's own thoughts are perhaps a little more serious than I'm afraid is often the case, and I have passed by him leaning against the ship's side, looking out to sea; that a sort of reverent fit has come over me, if you know what I mean. As if, don't you know, I was going into church, or something of that sort," he finished awkwardly, and getting rather red.

"That is just what I feel," said Maud; "you have put my own fancy into words."

They were now just passing under the bridge, and, in the interest of what they were saying, Maud stopped still for a minute, and was gazing intently up at the quiet figure just above.

The captain looked down, hearing voices, and when he perceived her he took off his cap, and, with a grave bow, asked her if she wished to come up.

Maud answered eagerly in the affirmative, and presently breathed a sigh of satisfaction at finding herself in her post of the night before, by his side. What she had been told concerning him added a fresh interest to that he had already awakened in her. She looked at him with that sympathetic reverence which all true-hearted people feel for the majesty of grief. She was rather ashamed of having talked so much the evening before, and she made up her mind to be quite silent, and to leave it to him whether the silence should be broken or not; for the words were lying somewhere at the back of her mind, "And none spake a word to him, for they saw that his grief was very great."

Presently he said quietly, as if the conversation of the evening before had never been broken off—

"What is this life lying before you at the other end of the voyage, to which you are so keenly looking forward, and which seems to you to promise so much?"

Maud hesitated.

"What," he added, "will the purport of your life be?"

She blushed deeply. She remembered that this was one of the questions Colonel Norton had once or twice put to her, and the recollection of her light, laughing answers sent the blood rushing to her face and dyed her cheeks with shame. For the life of her she could not answer *this* questioner in the same way. How could she talk to this man of "fun" and amusement, and all the other items of her usual list, in this grave presence, meeting the glance of those steadfast, earnest eyes? She turned her head away for a moment, and answered in a low voice—

"I could never make *you* understand, Captain Hardy," she said.

"I am told," he went on, "that you, young as

you are, are in a very responsible position. Is it so?"

"A very responsible position?" repeated Maud, puzzled. She really had not an idea to what he was alluding, or what was in his mind.

"That you have been given great responsibilities," he explained.

Then Maud suddenly perceived his meaning, and the drift of his observation; and, with a shrinking from what might be coming, she tried to answer lightly. Nevertheless, she cast down her eyes with rather a shame-stricken feeling, as she answered, in a would-be careless manner—

"Do you mean wealth and property? I have them, if that is what you mean."

He bowed his head gravely as he answered—

"I do. Surely they are both of them a great responsibility and a great charge. Do you not feel them so?"

Maud hesitated, blushed again, stammered, and yet, absolutely truthful as she was, she could not make up her mind to say what she did not feel. Yet she would have given much to be able to say what would raise her in his estimation.

"You take everything so dreadfully seriously, Captain Hardy," she said at last, moving nervously from one foot to another.

He looked at her in surprise.

"How other would you take things?" he replied. "Life is a serious thing. And to the young, as well as to the mature, are the words spoken, "To whom much is given, of him will much be required."

Maud, feeling again overawed, knew not how to answer. To change the subject, or else, perhaps, in her desire to know something about him, she suddenly turned his question upon himself.

"Tell me," she said, "what the purport of *yours* will be? What is lying before *you* at the other end of the voyage?"

A very sad expression came over his face, and Maud's heart smote her. Why had she asked so cruel and inquisitive a question, when she knew the trouble he was in?

But he answered quite quietly and simply, though a drawn look came on his strong, manly face. There was no display of grief, no posing as an object of interest, in the true, simple sailor.

"Do you really care to know?" he said.

"I do indeed," said Maud; "it would interest me more than you can guess."

And then he began to speak to her of his home, of his children, and, with a falter in his firm voice, of the wife he had left strong and well, whom on earth he should never see again. Talking, as it were, to himself quite as much as to his questioner, he told, with that simple directness which is pathos itself, and more touching than all the eloquence and rhetoric in the world, how it was with him. She had died quite suddenly; not able even to send him a message, or express a parting wish—killed by an accident, in the very flower of her strength and health. And the children! . . . Here his voice faltered again. The children left alone—alone and friendless in London. A young son and a little daughter, friendless and alone.

In all his comings and goings, in all the uncertainties of the future, he said, he had never contemplated such a thing as this. This was a thing he had never imagined. His own death he had often contemplated parting them (was he not

always living more or less with his life in his hand?), but hers—never.

And it was she, and not he, who had been taken! He had, of course, had no news since he received the telegram at Bordeaux, which had announced her sudden death; and he could hear nothing till he landed, as to how his children were faring, or what had happened to them after their mother's death. Much, he went on to say, lay before him of difficulty and perplexity, even when he did reach them; much to arrange and consider; and he could not, as yet, see where his own duty lay.

On the one hand, he felt he must give up his profession and make a home for his little daughter. On the other, if he did so, poverty would prevent him starting his son in the path which he had chosen. He was a clever boy, and his ambition was to enter the medical profession; but the education was an expensive one, and would be impossible with such small means as his would be, under such circumstances. However, that was matter for future consideration. For the present, his one desire was to be with them; and the ship could hardly go quick enough

to satisfy his eager longing to reach them, and to allay the anxiety he was suffering on their account.

"It needs all my faith," he said, "to leave my children in their heavenly Father's hands. A storm, a fog, a contrary wind even, might delay us, and delay makes me anxious and fearful. Dear young lady, will you pray for my motherless children? I should like to feel you did."

And poor Maud shrank back, blushed, and trembled; and at last, with difficulty restraining her tears, she burst out—

"Oh, do not ask me! I am not worthy! *My* prayers could do them no good!"

Young Fitzclarence, meanwhile, was much disappointed at having again lost his companion, and at dinner that evening he told Maud so.

She answered kindly, but gave no promise as to the future. She was fully determined, in her own mind, to see as much of Captain Hardy as possible. He interested her more than any man she had ever met; and she had, when with him, a dawning sensation of elevation of thought which was altogether new to her. Never before had she experienced anything the least like it, and it

held a fascination for her for which she could not account.

So the next day came, and the next, and always found Maud in earnest conversation with the captain whenever there was an available opportunity. And as he opened out to her more, and talked to her more and more unreservedly, she was ever more and more struck with the contrast between his views of life and hers, his aims and aspirations and her own.

"No one has ever put things to me like this before!" she exclaimed one evening, when he had been talking in his simple, matter-of-course way on the deeper side of life and things; "I have never been told such things before."

Young Fitzclarence reproached her at last with giving all her time and attention to one person, when there were so many on board who would be glad to participate in her society.

"Do not grudge it," she said earnestly, turning to him with an expression on her countenance which he had never seen on it. "No one knows what it may do for me."

"It has certainly beautified an already beau-

tiful face," thought the young man to himself as he walked away.

For her companionship with a higher nature was calling up an ideal within her, and thoughts were stirring in her mind which had never yet found a place there.

Day by day she felt herself uplifted by it. It raised her out of herself, and out of the net of frivolity and worldliness in the meshes of which she was entangled both by nature and circumstances. She was beginning to look at things from a different point of view; and higher ideas of life and its meaning were beginning to dawn upon her, bringing with them more exalted views of her own duties and responsibilities. For the time, all things seemed possible.

But when the voyage should be over, and the felt sense of his uplifting power be gone, would not better thoughts flee away, and be as though they had never been; and, losing the glimpse she had caught of a higher vision, the taste of a purer air, would she not sink to the level of her ordinary environment again, and all be with her as before?

As the time drew near for their arrival in

England, this feeling increased almost to pain, and over her there crept a dull sense of fear. She shrank from the thought of the snares and pitfalls which might be before her; the temptations to frivolity and thoughtlessness which the life awaiting her would inevitably bring, and bring so abundantly. She longed to sail over life's sea for ever with this strong uplifting power at her side.

The moment she had longed for was at hand, the long-looked-for hour of freedom and independence was close in front of her, but she had room in her heart for nothing but sorrow that the voyage was so nearly over. The time passed all too quickly for her, and the last evening on board came. Liverpool would be sighted early next morning, and by nine o'clock they would be on shore.

But now the weather, which hitherto had been so fair, showed signs of changing. The sky became overcast, then dark and lowering, and a strong wind got up. It increased steadily in violence. The port-holes were shut, and other preparations for heavy seas and squally weather made. The captain did not come to dinner, and Maud realized, with a sense of bitter disappoint-

ment, that all chance of that last talk with him, upon which she had so counted, was over. She, in common with the rest of the passengers, retired early, and for the first part of the night she could not sleep. She lay awake, thinking of many things, and listening to the noise of the wind and the waves.

There were various and unwonted sounds above and around her, but she felt no fear. Her last thought, as the unconsciousness of sleep at length stole over her, was of the strong, brave man overhead, who, she knew well, would not leave his post that night, and in whose trustworthy hands she and her fellow-passengers might leave themselves in perfect confidence, and sleep in safety. That night found the ship in the teeth of a wild and furious gale, which raged fiercely through the long hours of darkness. Suddenly, towards morning, there rose above the roar of the elements the sound of a grinding noise, a fearful crash, and then for a moment silence. . . .

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CHAPTER III.

A CRISIS.

THE grey dawn broke upon the hapless ship, to see men working at the pumps in the energy of despair, but all without avail. A great leak had been sprung in the fury of the gale, and the ship was filling fast. The captain saw there was nothing for it but to lower the boats, or for all to go down in the ship without an effort. The sea was running high, and it seemed doubtful whether the boats would live in it. There was, moreover, the added danger of panic among the passengers, and of their overcrowding the boats by all attempting to get into them at once. But there was no time to be lost, for the ship was fast beginning to settle down for the final plunge.

The captain's voice rang out clear and calm, "Lower the boats. Steady's the word, and remember that the women and children come first."

The boats were lowered one by one; but, when lowered, they came into such dangerous contact with the ship that they might be dashed to pieces at any moment. The terrified passengers

looked down upon the boats half buried in spray, and wondered how they could possibly be the means of rescuing such a crowd of people.

It is a terrible scene; the many helpless, frightened people, and the comparatively small boats tossed wildly about in the rage of the waves, their only hope of rescue. The work of getting the people into the boats, too, promises to be difficult and dangerous.

The first boat was now launched.

The captain's voice sounded again: "Jervis, you will steer her. Take four men and no more."

The sailors are slung in bowline over the side of the vessel to help the women down, and the first lady is led to the gangway. The men stand with outstretched arms, ready to catch her if she falls. Another and another is lowered in the same way, and, the boat being now full, they shove off. It shoots clear of the ship and bounds away through the boiling sea. All this took place in less than two minutes.

Then the second boat was lowered, filled, and pulled away. And the ship settled more and more every moment.

Boat after boat was launched and filled in the same manner, and cleared away from the ship, and the turn of the last boat came. By this time only male passengers, the remains of the crew, and the captain were left on the ship. The boat was manned and filled to overflowing.

It might go hard with those who did not get in among the first, as at any moment it might become necessary to get it out of the swirl of the ship when she went down, and she was fast settling.

One by one the crew filled the boat and prepared to start. The captain lingered, the last man on the ship. He was casting his eye round for a last farewell glance, and to satisfy himself that all had got clear off before leaving himself, when a faint cry broke upon his ear—a cry repeated quickly. He turned hastily round in the direction from whence the sound appeared to come.

A white fluttering garment, a figure waving its hands, apparently doing its utmost to attract attention, and then—the face of Maud Egerton, white as marble, and with terror and despair

written on every line of it, became plain in the near distance.

"One minute, lads," he called out; "a woman still on board!"

It was an awful moment. The ship could not float much longer, and if the boat were not very soon at a safe distance from her, it would, too surely, be smashed to atoms, or sucked down in the vortex of the ship's last plunge. All knew this well, and murmurs had already been heard at the captain's hesitation to jump in and give the word to clear away from the ship's side.

The thirst for life was very strong, but the captain's influence made itself felt. He was already straining every nerve, at fearful odds, and in the teeth of all but insurmountable difficulties, to reach the spot where Maud's half-fainting figure was to be seen. And the danger to the boat became every moment more pressing.

CHAPTER IV.

DEEP WATERS.

WORN out, Maud had slept profoundly all through the noise and the fury of the storm. Even the crash of the catastrophe had come to her only in the shape of a dream; not the terrible reality it was. What finally woke her, she never knew. But, with the sense dawning on her of something unusual, she rose hastily, threw on a dressing-gown, and left her cabin.

In a moment it came upon her that something dreadful had happened. With the greatest difficulty, her heart beating with a nameless fear, how she hardly knew, she made her way on deck. Once there, the whole horror of the scene we have been describing burst upon her, and her heart seemed to stop beating for a moment. A sense of deadly faintness came over her, and she steadied herself by an effort, or she would have fallen down. For, as in a flash, she took in the whole situation—took in the point at which matters had arrived, and realized that in another

moment she would be left alone on the sinking ship.

A cry of horror and dismay broke from her, and in her agony she cried aloud, "Oh, Captain Hardy, Captain Hardy! Where are you? Help me! Save me!"

But her cry was carried away in the noise and fury of the gale, and did not for some time reach him. Again and again it was repeated, and at last, as we saw, it fell upon his ears. He did not hesitate an instant, and by the time that she saw that she had attracted his notice, he was already advancing towards her. The light of hope and faith sprang up in her agonized and terrified face, and trust and confidence in her breast.

She watched his advance with the most eager and painful tension of anxiety, as she saw him fail, and strive, and strive and fail again. There was, just for an instant, a lull in the blast, and in the momentary hush rose clear upon the ear loud cries from some of the passengers in the boat, "For God's sake come back, or we shall all be lost!" Then, and not till then, did Maud realize how things stood, and what he had done and was

doing for her sake. And as all of a sudden it burst upon her, came back also, as comes in a flash to the dying, all she had said, all she had boasted of, and how entirely she was falsifying every word she had uttered. A bitter cry broke from her, for it was too late now.

"Coward that I am!" she wailed in her futile and impotent despair. "I am sacrificing his life to mine; doing just what I condemned—sacrificing a life of untold use and value, to a worthless one like my own!"

It was too late now, but she feebly tried to wave him back. "Save yourself," she faintly cried. "It is useless trying to save me. We shall only both perish."

All this took place in a quarter of the time it has taken to write; and all this time he was advancing nearer, with his fixed intention written on every line of his set white face.

And now he is within reach of her, and his hand is on her fluttering garments. She was still feebly waving her arm, and her voice was growing fainter and fainter, as she made one more effort to repeat what she had tried to say. For all

answer, he lifts her up in his strong arms and bears her away.

"Oh, Captain Hardy! Captain Hardy!" she burst out in despair, finding her voice for a moment, "Your children! your children! Forgive me!"

Was it fancy, or did she feel the arms round her tremble for a moment, and amid the roar of the elements did she hear him say—

"Do thy duty—that is best;
Leave unto thy God the rest"?

She could not tell—she never knew; but the next thing she was conscious of was his voice ringing out clear and calm—

"Quick now, lads! One of you stand ready to receive her when I give the signal."

What was going on, what passed, she did not know; but she heard his hoarse whisper close to her ear, "You must obey me now. You must not struggle. There is just a chance for us both, if you do exactly what I tell you."

And she lay back in his arms like a stone.

He was watching the moment when the wash of the swell should bring the boat against the ship's side, and preparing, by a desperate effort,

to place her within reach of the hands stretched out to receive her.

"Now!" he suddenly exclaimed; and he lifted the girl over.

"God in heaven bless you, my brave child!" she heard him say. And then a wild cry of horror broke from the boat, and the oars were plied in mad haste; for in another moment, unless they had pulled quickly off, all would have been engulfed.

She thought she heard his voice again giving an order; but she lost consciousness for a time, and knew nothing more. But this did not last. One moment all was a blank to her, but the next she came to herself, and, raising her aching eyes, she strained her eager gaze out into the wild scene around her. And she saw—saw what she will never lose the sight of till her dying day—saw the strong, brave man going down with his ship into the darkness; down—down—into the darkness alone! Erect, bareheaded, with his arms folded on his breast and his intent gaze outward, down into the darkness alone!

How still he is! how quiet! How grandly his solitary figure stands out against the wild, restless

sea all around him, the only still thing there! On that grand, lonely figure her eyes dwell and dwell. They follow it with a strained and agonized gaze as long as it is possible to do so —follow it as it slowly sinks, as it slowly disappears, and then—then all is boiling surf, and she sees the brave man no more.

CHAPTER V.

UNDINE.

"It is seven years ago," Maud murmured dreamily, when she came to this part of her narrative, "but as present to me as if it were yesterday."

Yes, just as present, and will be in seven years more. As she saw him last, so she ever sees him, and so she ever will. In the midst of happy home surroundings, or in the dead of a wakeful night, brought back by the spell of music, or the sound of the sough of the wind, that dark scene rises and comes before her, and she lives through it all again. She sees him again stand calm and still in the maddened rage of the storm; she sees him again, with his steadfast

gaze outward, fold his arms on his breast and go down with his ship alone!

She seemed unconscious of any human presence as she stood with the moonbeams on her, illuminating her pure, pale profile, gazing out into the west, as if she saw it in the distance, as if it lived for her somewhere still.

She went on as if talking to herself, "If ever I have failed or faltered in the path of right, if ever the temptation to frivolity and thoughtlessness, so inherent in my nature, has come upon me, the thought of that noble life given for mine, sacrificed for my worthless one, has had the power to bring me back, and to make me try once more to follow in his footsteps. I say *his*, but he would have been the last to wish me to say that. I mean in the footsteps of the Master he loved so well and served so faithfully, of Him, who did for us all what *he* did for me!

"Oh, Colonel Norton!" she exclaimed with almost passionate earnestness, as she drew a long sobbing breath, and seemed to return to a sense of the present again, "I often think that if the thought of that other life laid down could be as forcibly brought home and as constantly present

to all as is the thought of that one to me, they would, they must, walk in His footsteps, and try to live Him out in their lives; it would, it *must,* exercise a compelling power on wills however unruly, and hearts however hard!

"'Thou gavest all for me;
I give myself to Thee.'"

Colonel Norton did not speak for some time. He was unwilling to break in upon the solemn nature of her thoughts, or to disturb the intense absorption in which she seemed to be sunk.

Moreover, he was deep in thought himself, and was asking himself some very searching questions. He, Basil Norton, with all his plain speaking, had never influenced or even impressed Maud Egerton during a whole winter's acquaintance. This man, a stranger, had done it in less than a week. He, as Maud herself had said, had always been her monitor. He had tried to drill into her a sense of responsibility, and of a higher meaning in life. Why had he never accomplished any result?

He felt a momentary envy of the influence which had brought about what he had been powerless to instil. He had failed conspicuously.

For, quite apart from and putting aside altogether the tragic circumstances, which had, of course, intensified the impression made, the fact remained that that other man had been able to wake the soul within her, prior to and independently of those events. Why?

Because of his intense personality; because of the spiritual force within him which went with him wherever he went, spoke whenever he spoke, equally spoke when he was silent; the "forceful aggregate of character, the self within the self which can practise no deception, which makes actual words and deeds instinct with a life and a power beyond their own;" in a word, reality—what the man was, not what he said.

And as Basil Norton realized this, a misgiving and a sense of failure came over him. Was he, he asked himself, after all, in spite of all his talk about reality, a great sham himself?

Presently Maud roused herself from her abstraction, and spoke again in a low dreamy voice—

"Can you wonder," she said, "that from that hour I should have looked upon my life as a vicarious one; not so much my own as his—his

to live and be; and by doing for his children, however feebly, something of what he would have wished done, to try and atone to them, in some small measure, for their untold loss, for all of what I, alas! was the means of depriving them?" She paused for a moment, for her voice grew faint and low. "And," she added, "not only so, but to try, with God's help, to act up myself in some faint way to the true meaning of life which he made clear to me, and the high ideal which he set before me?"

"And you have done so!" exclaimed Colonel Norton, impetuously, "and have spread the lessons he taught you far and wide. He *is* not dead, that brave, true man who passed out of your sight into the darkness seven years ago; for in your dedicated life, and in your changed and transformed character, with their far-reaching consequences to others, he lives still! 'He being dead yet speaketh!'"

There was silence between them when he ceased; but he saw the effect of his words on her lovely and expressive countenance.

She looked at him for a moment with a searching look of incredulity, as if she could

hardly believe he really meant what he said. And then there broke out all over her face a look of joy and thankfulness so intense that her eyes seemed to shine in the moonlight like two stars. But she did not speak.

Once more the deep silence between them was unbroken, save by the distant cawing of the rooks and the faint rustle of the falling leaves as they fluttered gently to the ground.

Then she began to move slowly away, as if she felt the need of being alone to recover from the agitation of the feelings which the recalling of the past had awakened in her mind, and he made no attempt to detain her.

He stood watching her receding figure as she walked slowly and rather falteringly towards the old grey house in the distance. The last flutter of her gown disappeared, the moon was obscured by a passing cloud, and he was left alone in the gathering darkness.

PART V.

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER.

CHAPTER I.

DISILLUSIONED.

"Sad it may be to be longing, with a patience faint and weary,
For a hope deferred—and sadder still to see it fade and fall;
Yet to grasp the thing we long for, and, with sorrow sick and dreary,
Then to find how it can fail us, is the saddest pain of all."

BETWEEN the Richter concert and the arrival at Egerton Court, there had been a further development in the relationship of mother and daughter. By that time they had lived nearly six months together, and the baroness's character and disposition were no longer a secret to the girl. Slowly but surely her eyes had opened, and the scales had fallen from her love-blinded vision. She had realized slowly and painfully (fighting every inch of the ground, as it were, in

the loyalty of her love, which was so unwilling to see flaws in the object of her devotion, and always hoping against hope that she might still be mistaken,) that her—

"Idol was a thing of clay,
And false the altar she had knelt before."

The awakening to the truth had been hard and painful, the process of disenchantment very slow, so greatly had she idolized her, so sure had she been that she was all she wished and expected. For the girl's pure and peaceful upbringing, and the isolation of her youth, had made her not only guileless and unsuspicious, but had taught her to believe implicitly in her elders; and so from the first she had taken her mother's goodness as a foregone conclusion and matter of course, and had endowed that very faulty character with all the purity and single-mindedness of her own.

The fact was, it was all too sudden. Out of the simple home, and the refined and intellectual atmosphere and companionship in which she had been reared, she had been plunged too ruthlessly and all unprepared into an atmosphere and a companionship so different. Of the world in the

general acceptance of the term she knew no more than a child, and she was as ignorant of the existence of its petty aims, its follies, and its littlenesses as she was of its deeper evils.

What it was to such a girl slowly to discover that the mother she worshipped was the embodiment of all these petty follies and littlenesses, the reader may be left to imagine. What she suffered as she realized that her mother's highest aims in life were admiration and attention, and the chief excitement and occupation of her day the keenest of competition for them with other women, perhaps only those as guileless as Ruth, and yet so enthusiastic for all that was great and good and noble, can quite conceive.

No doubt the glamour which her mother had at first thrown over her had been a help, but she realized more every day how tremendous that glamour had been. She had been entirely taken in—that she saw now more and more clearly. She had admired so many things in her mother, gloried in so much as regarded her, which she had since seen infinite cause to deplore.

How firmly she had believed at first that her outward beauty was but the expression of her

inward goodness, and that her bright eyes were the windows of the soul within! How she had delighted in what she thought was her mother's liberality of mind, her "charity," as the girl had inwardly called it, towards all kinds, all forms of religion! For she had mentally concluded that hers was that large-hearted Christian charity and liberal-mindedness to which she had been accustomed in her grandfather, only carried, perhaps, to a somewhat wider extent. If the "real thing" existed, Ruth had gathered that her mother did not so much care in what particular form it happened to be enveloped.

But slowly she had discovered that this "liberality" was only a cloke for the most utter indifference. All kinds, all forms of religion were equally acceptable to the baroness, because to her all religion was equally indifferent.

The baroness, meanwhile, had been making discoveries about her daughter. Gentle and yielding as she found her, obedient and submissive, ready to give up her own way, and invariably deferential and respectful, on one point she was as firm as a rock. If she asked her to do anything her conscience did not approve, she was

quite immovable. Here they clashed, for the baroness's standard of right and wrong and that of her daughter was of a very different kind.

The baroness thought few things wrong that were expedient, and would say or do anything to be popular or to please. Her standard was easily lowered to suit the whim of the moment, or in deference to the opinion or wishes of those by whom she was surrounded. In short, she recognized no law but her own will, and would sacrifice any one or anything to get what she wanted.

But she found that neither by arts nor wheedling, nor by anger and upbraiding, was Ruth to be moved. On these occasions she was—

"Made to feel
The velvet scabbard held a sword of steel."

At first her daughter's unvarying and dutiful obedience had made her unaware of this. She had fancied she could do what she liked with her. Often, too, she had thought she had prevailed, because the girl offered so little opposition in the way of protracted argument or discussion. She quietly went her own way, and it would perhaps be some time before the baroness discovered

that all she had poured forth and hurled at the girl had had no effect whatever.

It was only by very slow degrees that she learnt how very much, on matters of conscience, they were at two. But though it annoyed her, she did not altogether dislike it. If it be true that there are no faults a man detects so unerringly in another as the faults with which he is most familiar himself, the same may be said for the virtues in which we know ourselves to be most deficient. Neither high-principled, straightforward, nor sincere herself, she could the more easily recognize these characteristics in Ruth, and could appreciate and admire where she did not imitate. It was pleasant to feel she could trust her daughter implicitly, could always count on her dutiful behaviour, and she made no scruple of acting on the girl's strong sense of filial duty, and using it as a propelling power to forward her own plans and wishes when it suited her to do so. Sometimes, of course, she found her goodness inconvenient. She was very untruthful when it was expedient so to be, and here she found Ruth's transparent truthfulness much in the way. Ruth, on her side, was shocked and distressed

beyond measure at her mother's failings in this respect.

It showed often in minor things as well as in the more important. To none of the little white lies of society would Ruth lend herself; it was, to her nature, an impossibility.

The baroness's favourite joke was their passing off as sisters. She took great pleasure in doing this, and she wished Ruth to do it also. On one occasion, the baroness had palmed off this "joke" on some one, and had got into a difficulty by being too closely questioned by the person as to her parentage, he having asked something which, in order to carry out the delusion, necessitated her tacitly allowing that her maiden name was Ashley.

She turned to Ruth to help her out of the scrape. The girl, absolutely truthful, could not corroborate what she had said, in spite of a warning glance from her mother, and had been attacked on the subject with some sharpness the moment they were alone.

"I cannot tell a lie, even for you, mother," she had answered gently, but with a firmness

which the baroness was beginning to understand was final.

"Oh, you must not be so straitlaced!" she would say, with a light careless laugh.

She nicknamed her "The little Puritan," and tried to turn it all into a joke; but nevertheless she grew to feel that somehow, she hardly knew how, in matters of right and wrong Ruth always got the best of it.

In her heart of hearts she respected her daughter. Professing to believe in nothing and nobody, she inwardly believed in Ruth. She realized that she was a high-minded, religious girl; and this was so entirely beyond her own ken, that she perforce yielded it a kind of admiration. Sometimes, even, she almost felt she envied her. She felt she possessed a secret of which she herself knew nothing, but that, did she possess it, it would make for her happiness. At any rate, Ruth seemed free from many things from which she suffered which distinctly did *not* make for happiness. She seemed always calm and quiet, and knew, apparently, nothing of those violent alternations of excitement and depression which formed her own life. *Ennui*, restlessness,

and discontent were evidently to her daughter unknown things, and whereas she herself was miserable if she was out of society for a moment, she saw that Ruth was quite happy alone.

Not that she ever allowed Ruth to guess that she had these feelings as regarded her. On the contrary, she never lost an opportunity of scoffing at all that the girl held dear and sacred. Worldly and irreligious herself, she constantly sought to justify and excuse herself by trying to prove that those who were otherwise were no better than the rest.

"Religious people," she said one day on one of these occasions, and she said it for by no means the first time, "are not a bit more unworldly than any one else. They like the good things of this world, the loaves and fishes of life, just as do we ordinary mortals, who do not profess to do anything else. *I* have never found all this unworldliness and unselfishness one hears so much about. They seem to me to have a very keen eye to the main chance, like all of us, and to be looking out for themselves just as much. Had I ever seen *results* in them, I might have believed in their religion more than I do."

Ruth made no answer. She had learnt that contradiction and argument were worse than useless, and did more harm than good. Her grandfather's maxims were more than ever present in her mind. "Few," she seemed to hear him say, "can understand an argument; all can appreciate a character." "Do not talk, but act." "Such sermons they who run may read."

How she wished her mother could be thrown with those who could prove to her the power and the strength of what she dismissed as so worthless!

The London season came to an end, and they went to a French watering-place. Here they lived in a perpetual whirl, morning, noon, and night. Ruth was never alone with her mother for a moment, far less so than she had been in London. They lived almost entirely with French people, and, as they were mostly in the same hotel, they all dined together, took their expeditions together, and sat out-of-doors together in the intervals; so that it seemed to Ruth there was never any possibility of getting away from them all for a moment.

But this appeared to be what her mother

found the most delightful thing in the world; and she was quite in her element, and the centre of attraction. As they all sat in large groups under the trees, incessantly talking, and for hours together, and Ruth for the first time heard her mother converse in French—the language, of course, in which she could really make herself the most agreeable—she felt a return of the same wondering admiration she had first felt for her social powers when they began to go out in London together.

She listened with a sense of marvel to her wealth of ejaculation. She watched with astonishment the gesticulations and the "bye-play" of which her mother had told her, and which she had failed to understand. And as she did so she realized that if this was the sort of thing her mother had expected of her, she did not wonder she had been such a disappointment.

She saw how much these ejaculations and these gesticulations filled up in the conversation, and what an impression of quickness and of appreciation of what was being said they gave. Indeed, she came to the conclusion at last that it was the ejaculations themselves that often made

the conversation sound so sparkling and interesting—much more so than, as it seemed to her, it sometimes really was.

They formed such apt rejoinders to all sorts of remarks, and not only to those which were original and interesting, but often to the most obvious commonplaces and even truisms. The baroness was always ready with a "Mais je crois bien: allez!" "Oui, justement!" "Si si!" "Mais n'est-ce pas!" "Ah ha!" "Ah bien oui!" "Mais parfaitement!" "Voilà!" "Ah bien sure!" "Oh! la la!" "Oui; allez!" "Maiz pensez donc!" "Oui oui!" "Mais précisément!" "Ah!" etc., etc.

She had several ways of rendering the ejaculation "Ah," giving a new meaning to each. There was short and sharp "Ah!" then prolonged "A-a-h!" and then gliding into "Ah—ha!"

Ruth had plenty of time to make all these observations, for her mother's friends took little or no notice of her. She was, anyhow, not sufficiently at home in French to join in what went on, even if she had wished to do so; so that her part was that of spectator and listener, which, however, she was well content to be. She had grown very weary of the life she had been leading

for so long. There was no repose, no quiet from rising in the morning to going to bed at night. The restless days and equally restless nights wore her out. It was a racket and a whirl, and yet a weary round of the same thing every day and all day long.

She got as tired of all these people and their endless small talk, as she had of the frivolous and fatiguing life she had perpetually to live. How she longed sometimes to get away; to wash her hands of it all, and to return to the peace of her early home, appreciating it as she had never done before by an experience of a life so different!

Sometimes the peace and serenity of the atmosphere she had left would come over her so strongly, the thought of the dear old rectory raise in her such longings, that she could hardly bear it. How full of charm what she used to think monotonous and dull now appeared to her!

The foreign phase came to an end, and they returned to England, and set out on their tour of visits, of which one of the first on the list was Egerton Court. By that time, as we said, her illusion as regarded her mother was complete,

and all glamour had died away. Only the love remained, for with Ruth to love once was to love for ever. But, with the loyalty so inherent in her nature, she wanted to keep up in the minds of others the illusion which had faded from her own.

She was painfully aware, directly she arrived at Egerton Court, that her mother was not likely to suit Lady Manorlands and her friends, and that the atmosphere of the house was one altogether different to anything her mother was accustomed to, or would be likely to appreciate. For herself the atmosphere suited her exactly, and was a great rest and refreshment after her experience abroad.

But the whole thing made her nervous. She was sensitive as to the impression her mother was making—sensitive and suspicious of kindly and somewhat pitying glances cast at her by both Lady Manorlands and Lady Percy. They warmed her heart, but they made her uneasy. She was always afraid of what they might think, of what they might say, and she avoided *tête-à-tête* and confidential conversations as much as possible.

But still she felt happier there than she had

done for long, and was disappointed when little Claud's illness brought the visit so abruptly to a close.

Yet some things had saddened her. The sight of Maud with her children had roused in her breast many longings and regrets. The motherly love and sympathy evinced towards them in every word and every look often brought a lump into Ruth's throat. Such love and such sympathy she had always thought—till her own sad experience had shown her how entirely she was mistaken—was the birthright of every child.

After a day or two at an hotel, they went to Castle Graham; and this Ruth would have liked the thoughts of but for the feelings of which we spoke just now. And, also, had she not had the uncomfortable knowledge that her mother had asked to go there, and had not been invited *con amore.*

For in these ways the baroness consulted no one's convenience but her own. She arranged her plan of campaign to suit herself, and proposed herself in many cases where she had not been asked to do so.

Ruth had a vague suspicion that they were

not always wanted where they went; and certainly not for so long a time as they stayed, for the baroness's rule was that it was not worth unpacking the boxes under ten days. Ruth was almost sure that her mother often forced herself and her (not to mention two maids and a manservant) on people who were not the least anxious to receive them.

Lady Percy's kind reception, however, put her at her ease. Lady Percy had taken a fancy to the girl, and it was really for her sake that she had so readily acquiesced in the baroness's proposal for a ten days' visit. It was a relief to Ruth to hear Lady Percy say that Colonel Norton was expected the next day. He was, the girl thought, an old friend of her mother's, and one whose society she apparently enjoyed.

CHAPTER II.

COLONEL NORTON AND RUTH ASHLEY.

"And gaze on the old earth, which still grows new,
And see the tranquil heaven's unclouded blue."

MEETING any one you know a little among those you do not know at all gives at once a feeling of greater intimacy than perhaps exists.

Colonel Norton became aware of this directly he arrived at Castle Graham, and, entering the drawing-room, found Ruth Ashley there alone with some of Lady Percy's friends. She came up to him at once, and made some sympathetic inquiries after Lady Manorlands and little Claud, and her manner was more that of a friend than he had ever seen it before.

But hardly had he had time to answer her questions before the door opened and the baroness swept in. After a brief sweeping sentence on the worry of babies, she changed the subject and proceeded to other matters. He found it impossible to shake her off.

Ruth meanwhile retired to her seat, and took no further part in the conversation.

The baroness was delighted to get back her *preux chevalier,* as it was clear to every one, except Colonel Norton himself, she was determined to consider him.

But he, as the reader knows, had come to Castle Graham with the full intention of pursuing the task committed to him by Maud as regarded Ruth, and he was determined not to allow him-

self to be baulked as he had been at Egerton Court, by the baroness or by any one else.

And yet nothing seemed more difficult. All the first evening and the next morning it seemed hopeless. Ruth appeared to be always, as it were, hidden behind her mother, and to get her detached seemed an impossibility. What a nuisance that baroness was, always putting herself in the way!

It was the fashion at Castle Graham to take long walks. Lady Percy was fond of exercise. So also he discovered was Ruth. Now, here he thought he saw an opportunity of getting hold of her without her mother, for the baroness always drove. She could not walk a step.

A slight sprain he had given his wrist formed an excuse for not going out shooting, and he made the most of it, to the great disgust of Philip Mildmay. But Colonel Norton was remorseless. He gave out that he meant to walk with the ladies, and the sportsmen had to go without him.

Accordingly, in the afternoon he, with about half a dozen others, of whom Ruth Ashley was one, started off for a walk. There was the usual little uncertainty at first about pairing off, and

then Lady Percy took the lead, another couple followed suit, and he found himself at little Miss Ashley's side, and a *tête-à-tête* walk before him!

So far, so good. But now that at last the desired opportunity had come, he found it a little difficult to begin. It was evident that she was very reserved, and that to get her to talk about herself would be no easy task. There was no autobiographical element whatever in her conversation, and this very thing, which in an ordinary way he would have so much admired, now rather annoyed him.

Contrary to his usual habit, it was just this kind of talk he wanted. However, it was no use. It was evident that it was not to be. He tried several times to introduce personal topics, but she gave him no encouragement, and the subjects dropped again directly. Moreover, she appeared to him to avoid talking, not only about herself, but about people altogether, and to prefer talking about things. He therefore resigned himself to the inevitable, and turned to topics of more general interest.

He was certainly paid out in his own coin now, for she was, even on abstract subjects, too

free from egotism to suit his present mood. She seemed to think her own opinions not worth mentioning.

But some people have the power of making others talk, almost without they themselves being aware of it. Colonel Norton had this power when he chose to exert it. On this occasion he did choose; and the result was that in a little while Ruth was talking to him quite easy and naturally, and he discovered, as any one was bound to do, who took the trouble to draw the girl out, how thoughtful and intelligent she was.

When they overtook the rest of the party as they neared home, he felt he had had a very pleasant walk, and made up his mind the young girl was well worth cultivating, not only for Maud's sake, but for her own, and he determined to do his best to secure her as a walking companion next day.

Accordingly, the following afternoon he contrived, though not without a little manœuvring, to appropriate her again; and on this second occasion he distinctly felt he was gaining ground. She seemed more at her ease with him, and talked to him more unreservedly. He was still

more favourably impressed. He felt there was something strong about her personality, though she was so very feminine and gentle; and that she *had* opinions of her own he soon discovered, though she was so very modest about expressing them, and seemed to think that what she held and what she thought was of so little importance. She was not the least anxious to force them upon him; and, indeed, he found he had to take her unawares in order to get at them, and to surprise her, as it were, into the expression of them. But still there they were.

She was so natural and unself-conscious too. She never talked for effect, but said what she meant without giving a thought to the impression she was producing. In this, to him, there was a great charm. He was surprised to find how he could talk to her on a par, as it were, and not from a height, considering the difference in age between them.

He also discovered that she was very well read. She showed that the subjects they discussed were not new to her. She had thought them out before, and she was capable, not only of thinking, but of giving what she thought clear

expression. Everything she said was to the point, and her rejoinders to his remarks were not given at random, or even on the spur of the moment, but as if, having considered the things already, she had the answer ready.

Ruth Ashley was his walking companion on the second day, and the third day, and the fourth day. But the fifth he had begun to look upon her as his property, and was quite put out when for the first time some one else stepped in between them, and he lost her.

He had to content himself with another lady, and found his walk quite flat and dull. For by this time an intimacy was slowly but surely growing up, and she was now completely at her ease with him.

The baroness knew nothing about it. She knew, of course, that the party walked every day, but had no idea, and no means of knowing, how constantly the two walked and talked together.

For it was all quite different in the evening. Ruth, being one of the young girls of the house (which received an addition of some sort nearly every day), always went in to dinner with one of the younger men, and sat, as a rule, too far from

Colonel Norton for him to hold any communication with her. He generally fell to the share of a chaperone, or, at any rate, one of the married women.

Then after dinner, in the drawing-room, they did not come much in contact. Colonel Norton had some compunction about monopolizing so young a girl when her own contemporaries were present; and, moreover, he as often as not fell a prey to the baroness herself, who, like the Ancient Mariner, "detained him with her glittering eye," as the men came out from dinner.

Her way of accomplishing her intentions was so subtle, that he did not find out they were of set purpose, and fell into the trap quite unconsciously. She had a natural aptitude for that sort of thing, as well as long experience.

But what he did find out was, how very inferior she was to her daughter. While the baroness was throwing out all her charm and making herself her most agreeable, he was busy making mental comparisons between the two, to the mother's infinite disadvantage. The daughter so well informed, the mother so entirely uncultivated; the daughter so earnest and sincere, the mother so

wholly artificial; the daughter so simple and unconscious, the mother so vain and affected. Every day, as he came to know them better, he realized the difference between them in every respect, until at last he became filled with a boundless pity for the girl.

He felt her life must be one of daily repression and daily forbearance, living as she did continually in an atmosphere which must be most uncongenial to her, and with a companion with whom she was not only out of sympathy, but whose society and conversation must often jar upon her. He felt sure her mother must be a great trial to her, and test to the utmost her patience and forbearance.

Not that it was from anything that Ruth had said, or even allowed or given him the slightest cause to deduce. He had not, in spite of their growing intimacy, been able to dive under the reserve she had from the first maintained, and continued to maintain, on this subject.

And this dignified and filial loyalty and reserve was a trait in her character to which he yielded a sincere admiration—an admiration which daily increased as he realized how very little re-

turn she got for her loyalty and devotion. Indeed, he was rapidly coming to the conclusion that the baroness was not very kind to her daughter, and that she set her aside; for, now that he knew how very different Ruth could be, he was all the more alive to the constraint of her demeanour in her mother's presence.

The baroness seemed to him to exercise a sort of quelling effect upon her, and to force her into a position which she was much too attractive and intelligent to take. This kind of petty persecution made him very indignant, and having once got the fact of it firmly established in his mind, he worked hard to counteract it, with much the same feelings as, in the knightly days of old, any forlorn damosel would have roused his feelings of chivalry.

The baroness all this time was becoming more and more conscious that her *preux chevalier* was very seldom at her feet, and was growing greatly irritated thereby. He never sought her out of his own accord, and there was a certain absent-mindedness about his manner when she was talking to him which indicated a want of appreciation of her and of her conversation, which annoyed

her immensely. What could be the reason of it? She could not see that he was particularly taken up with any one else in the house, as he had been at Egerton Court with Lady Manorlands, but—he was indifferent to *her*.

Now, indifference was a thing she could not stand. Any notice was better than none. She would sooner argue and quarrel with him than this. Her vanity was wounded to the quick when she found she made and continued to make no impression on him, and she was resolved to put an end to this state of things, and to set to work to do so in earnest.

Meantime his own daily increasing intimacy with Ruth was a great pleasure to Colonel Norton —far more so, indeed, than he himself had really any idea of—and all unconsciously he was beginning to look forward to those afternoon walks as the pleasantest bit of the day. The simple and spontaneous delight which the young girl seemed able to gather out of everything she saw attracted him greatly; and her close observance of nature, and her fresh, young enjoyment of the things around her, were very refreshing to him.

She took such unfeigned pleasure in the

beauty of the country through which they walked, and would often pause in her conversation to draw his attention to, and express her own delight in, the lovely autumn colouring and effects, the evening lights, and the glowing sunsets.

Sometimes she would stop for a moment, almost involuntarily, and remain silent, while her eyes roamed over the beautiful country, where the setting sun was shedding a glory on the woods and hills around, or gazed thoughtfully at the clear sky. He would find himself at such times watching her with curiosity and interest, wondering what she was thinking about—and with a feeling that, if he could get behind what she saw as her dreamy eyes gazed westwards, he would find that to her pure young vision—

> "Earth's crammed with heaven,
> And every common bush afire with God."

"As we are, we see," he found himself saying; and "as we are, we are," he would say again when, on his return from these walks, he would find the baroness either walking up and down the terrace or looking out of the drawing-room window on the very same scenes, the very same sunsets he and Ruth had been so lately watching together.

Her vapid remarks and unmeaning observations would bring the lines into his head—

"A primrose on the river's brim
A yellow primrose was to him,
And it was nothing more."

For the sights which were nothing to her were revelations to her young daughter, and as he listened with half an ear to the one, he would be all the time thinking of the other.

The baroness's next visit broke down, and she asked Lady Percy's leave to stay on at Castle Graham.

And Colonel Norton stayed on too. He did not analyze his motive for doing so; nor indeed, contrary to his usual habit, did he analyze his motives just now in any way.

He told himself he was making a "study" of little Miss Ashley, as in his own mind he continued to call her, because Maud had asked him to do so; and he left everything else unthought out.

And so the days went by. More people arrived, and the smaller circle of friends got to

a certain degree swamped in the new arrivals. The walking-party got larger, but still Colonel Norton generally contrived to secure Ruth Ashley as his companion, and, if he failed, found his walk dull and uninteresting.

Philip Mildmay got into despair over his defalcation. Surely that wrist of his must be well enough by this time. It did not prevent him beating them all at billiards at night.

"I can't make it out," he said to his friend Fred Bathurst; "he seems to have lost his keenness quite suddenly. He was keen as could be at Egerton Court."

"Perhaps he's in love," said Fred.

"In love!" exclaimed Philip. "What makes you think that?"

"A man who can 'take walks' like that when he might be having some of the best rough shooting in the north, must either be in love or be a fool," was the answer; "and I know he's not a fool."

The logic was unanswerable. Philip was struck by it.

"I wonder he stays on so long," Lady Percy said to her husband. "He must have any amount

of engagements. What can the attraction be? Sometimes I think it is little Miss Ashley."

CHAPTER III.

COMPLICATIONS.

"The little rift within the lute."

It was about this time that the baroness first noticed a change in her daughter. She fancied she was prettier than she had been. There was a light in her eyes that she had never noticed before, and more life and expression about her face altogether. She smiled more often, laughed more, and till now the baroness had not discovered what a pretty laugh the girl had, so seldom had she heard it. She was more agreeable, too—seemed to have more self-confidence, and held her own at dinner among the other young people in the house.

"Ruth," she said to her one evening, suddenly, "you are wonderfully improved in looks lately. I can't make out what has happened to you."

Ruth flushed with pleasure at the unwonted approval.

"I am very glad you think so, mother," she answered. She had indeed begun not only to look, but to feel happier. She could not tell how it was, but life seemed altogether brighter, and more enjoyable, and, at the same time, deeper and more satisfying. The depressing feeling which had so weighed her down, of never giving satisfaction, and of being a failure, had somehow grown fainter. It had rather faded away. She had become, she did not know how or why, more independent of her mother's opinion, and not so sure that her verdict was final. This was brought home to her very strongly one afternoon, during a walk with Colonel Norton.

He had been referring to one of their first meetings—the Richter concert—and had alluded to the beauty of the music that evening, and to the effect he had observed it had had on her.

"I wondered then," he added, "and have often wondered since, what that overture was expressing to you, and what you were thinking of at that particular moment."

He looked questioningly at her, though he did not actually ask the question. And she turned away her head and remained silent.

But though she gave him no answer, in her own mind her thoughts went back with a curious sort of self-questioning as she remembered (which she did clearly enough) what the overture had said to her that night. Even at this distance of time, the sad message of the music came back upon her memory with a pang.

But it was not that so much which was occupying her thoughts. It was the strange consciousness that the sting of all that was gone; that it did not affect her as it had then done; and that she was somehow or other independent of it. Those old regrets, she realized, seldom assailed her now. She enjoyed, she hardly knew why or how, a new and restful sense of giving entire satisfaction.

Some one, at any rate, seemed to approve of her; seemed to care to talk to her, to know what she felt and thought, and to listen to what she said with a certain appreciation and respectful interest and attention, which was as novel as it was encouraging and delightful. And this now not only in their walks together, but in general society and general conversation.

She felt in his presence what can only be

described as a sense of security. She could not tell how, but any topic she started he managed to prolong, and contrived somehow that it should appear that it was she, and not himself, who was the person worth listening to.

In some covert way, he protected her, and averted anything that was discouraging. Owing to their *tête-à-tête* talks, he began to know her mind and opinions well enough to turn to her for sympathy, or corroboration in what he was saying. He drew her out and led her on to talk; and he succeeded so well in his efforts, that she was getting perfectly at her ease, even in the presence of her mother, though at first it had been only so when the latter was absent.

How did he do it? and what did he do?

She asked herself these questions sometimes as she sat in her room and thought about it.

But she had come to the conclusion that she did not know, and she did not care to know. All she knew, and all she wished to know, was that he did it, and that it gave her this delightful sense of security and self-confidence. It was all very restful, very pleasant, and as time

went on Ruth felt every day more peacefully happy.

What a pleasure this was, this feeling of sympathy and mutual understanding; this saying of things on his part as if meant for every one, but really, she knew, meant only for her—some allusion to some of their conversations, which she alone could understand!

He listened now, she knew by intuition, whenever she was talking, even if it were to somebody else.

By a kind of instinct, she felt rather than saw that he lifted his head and raised his eyes towards her, or even towards the end of the table where she was, when she spoke.

She was learning to associate him in thought with everything, and to test every opinion by his. He was becoming a thought which woke with her and entered into the day with her;—the long happy day when at any time and all day long she might at any moment find herself in his presence;—which was with her the last thing when she went to bed at night, and when she fell asleep, visited her in happy dreams which repeated the joys of the day.

She did not analyze the feeling. All that she knew was that she felt a sense of harmony in her surroundings, and an intense enjoyment of life; that she would have liked to go on like this for ever; and that the thought of the visit coming to an end called up a dull, undefined pain within her.

But there had begun to shine out in her the beauty of happiness, that great beautifier of the human countenance, and it was not only her mother who saw it. The feeling was general.

Things were in this condition when there came a new actor on the scene.

"Erskine comes to-morrow," said Lady Percy one afternoon. And somehow a chill seemed to fall on the walking-party.

"I never saw any one so much improved in looks as Miss Ashley," said Lord Erskine to his hostess, a short time after his arrival at Castle Graham. "I never hardly thought her pretty before, and now, I declare, she is as handsome as her mother, and in some ways carries off the palm. And what a pretty laugh she has! I never observed it before."

"Why, Erskine!" said Lady Percy, laughing;

"I never heard you praise any one so straight on end before. It is quite a refreshing change."

"I never care to praise girls over-much, you know," he said in a confident tone, "for fear reports should get about. You see, I am obliged to be careful. But I don't mind telling you, because I know you will not repeat what I say, so no harm will be done."

"Oh, you need not make yourself uneasy," said Lady Percy, with another laugh. "I don't think Ruth Ashley's thoughts are likely to turn your way."

"Why not?" he asked, rather piqued. "What do you mean?"

Lady Percy looked as if she was rather annoyed with herself for what she had said.

"Oh, I don't know!" she said. "I don't fancy you and she would get on together particularly."

"Oh, but I think we do," he answered. "I think she is so much easier to get on with now than she was. That is just one of the changes I notice so much in her. She is so much brighter and more agreeable, and has so much more to say."

Some one came into the room just then, and interrupted the conversation; but from that moment, such is the perversity of human nature, Lord Erskine, piqued by Lady Percy's remark, was fired with the idea of convincing her that he could get on with Ruth Ashley, and she with him. And he began at once to make up to her.

Needless to say, he did not get much encouragement. Ruth was very kind and civil, but her manner was absolutely indifferent.

He thought he was performing a great act of condescension, and he was much surprised at the way his advances were received. He could not understand it, and the very novelty of the thing rather added a spur. Not that Ruth meant to be unkind. It was not from any intention of snubbing him that, after he had, as he considered, been "taking notice" of her by presenting her with a flower from the hothouse, or some other little attention of the sort, he should find his gift lying on the floor after she had gone out of the room. It was not from *malice propense,* but simply because she valued the attention so little that, from sheer inadvertence, it had fallen off her lap when she rose from her seat.

But, curious to say, all this rather attracted him the more. He admired it from the point of unworldliness, and it roused in his languid breast a desire to inspire her with a personal interest in him. By-and-by, too, he thought he discovered that Colonel Norton's attentions were straying in the same direction, and the wish to eclipse his *bête noir*, and to pay him off for old scores, added zest to the pursuit.

And Colonel Norton himself? Drifting on from day to day, and asking himself no questions at all, he never perceived where he was drifting to, nor considered what was to be the end of it all. If any one had asked him what attracted him in Ruth Ashley, I think he would have said it was the sense of repose he had in her presence. He had felt it first when he saw her sitting at the Richter concert, and it had never deserted him. Easily jarred upon, and sensitively irritable as he was, he enjoyed the feeling with which she inspired him. He felt her restful influence directly she came into the room; equally felt its absence if she got up and left it. (And this, it seemed to him, she was constantly doing, to satisfy the hundred and one wants of the

baroness, who, it appeared to him, could never leave her daughter in peace for a minute, and who, he was beginning to think with a sense of growing indignation, treated Ruth rather like a slave.)

This had been his primary feeling, but it was intensifying and increasing day by day. He got restless now if he was not in her presence. He knew, when he went into a room, whether she was there or not, and was conscious of a definite blank if he did not catch, on entering, the quiet figure of which his eye was in search, or hear, amid the noise of talking in the room, the sound of the soft, low voice in which he took such pleasure, in which his fastidious ear found such satisfaction.

Often, too, he found himself pausing in his own conversation at dinner, to see if from the other end of the table—as it generally was—he could detect the tones of that voice, or the sound of the clear, musical laugh, which somehow or other seemed to him to be more often heard than it had been when he first came, and to have a more joyous ring in it.

But one morning, soon after Lord Erskine's

arrival, he received a letter from Lady Manorlands, the postscript of which contained the following question: "What is the result of your 'study' of little Miss Ashley?"

He was rather staggered. He pondered over the letter for some time, and considered how he should answer it. What was he to say? How was he either to answer, or to avoid answering, that very direct question? What *was* the result?

He put the question aside. He could not answer it even to himself; but the thoughts, once set going in his mind, would not be set aside so easily, and kept suggesting inquiries.

What was this feeling of pleasure, on waking in the morning, that in less than an hour he should go downstairs, and find the little figure at breakfast which had been in his head all night? Why did he muse with such satisfaction, as he dressed, on the possibilities the day contained of walks and talks, of increasing intimacy, of watching the ever-changing but ever-attractive changes in expression of the refined, thoughtful face?

"Pshaw!" he muttered impatiently, "what

nonsense! a child like that! A girl almost young enough to be my own daughter!"

And yet what was it that was now always at the back of his mind but the face of this very "child"? a face he could call up at any moment; nay, which came up of itself without any calling, bringing with it a sense of rest and satisfaction. The very thought of that face exercised a calming influence upon him, and formed a restful background to his thoughts.

And as he realized this, and realized also that this restful thought, and still more restful presence, might go out of his life again at any moment, and assuredly would do so at no very distant period, he felt that the idea was a disagreeable, almost a painful one; and a sort of dull pang seized him as he thought of it, and of the blank its absence would leave behind.

Again the impatient "Pshaw!" and a determined effort to put the thought away.

Well, but to return to that letter of Lady Manorlands. It must be answered. What was he to say? It seemed even more difficult than it had done a few minutes before.

He took it up and read the postscript again.

"What is the result of your 'study' of little Miss Ashley?"

He put the letter away. He would not try to answer the question, even to himself. He felt he could not face the issues in which the true answer to it would involve him—he, Basil Norton, the champion of truth and reality, the man who was so severe upon those who did not face their real motives and force themselves to give true answers as to the springs of motive and conduct.

Verily every one, even Mrs. Harrington and Mrs. Ellis, were avenged that day.

It was not for a very long time that the baroness's eyes began slowly to open to the fact that her daughter's society and conversation were preferred to her own, and at first she could hardly believe it. The very idea of such a thing inspired her with much the same feelings as those experienced by Cinderella's proud sisters, when they saw the girl they despised exalted over their heads to the place where they wished to be, and her vanity would not allow her to own it, even to herself, for a long time.

She tried to persuade herself she was mis-

taken, but this it was now not possible to do. The fact was too patent, too plain. She was obliged, however unwillingly, to recognize the fact, and to realize that herein lay the cause of her own failure.

She was glad, however, to find out that it was such a simple one, and one so easily done away with. For, having fully recognized it, she would soon put a stop to it.

"Ruth," she said, after the ladies had come up to bed, and the girl had as usual stopped in her mother's room on her way to her own, to see if she was wanted for anything, "you are putting yourself much too forward, and talking much too much."

"*I,* mother!" exclaimed Ruth in unfeigned surprise; "why, I thought that was the very thing you wished me to do!"

"You are overdoing it now," the baroness answered. "I don't know what has come to you."

Ruth was too astonished and bewildered to speak, and the baroness tried to think whether she had made her meaning plain enough, or whether she had better be more explicit. But

here her vanity came in the way. She would not for the world let the girl suppose that she had noticed things were as they were.

"You must keep, in society, to those of your own age more than you do," she said at last pettishly. "There are plenty of young men in the house; talk to them. You should not chatter so much to a man of Colonel Norton's age, for instance. He does not care to be always talking to a girl like you. I saw how you bored him this evening. He was trying in vain to get away. He hates young people. I have often heard him say so."

Her tone was one of displeasure, and Ruth went to bed grave and thoughtful.

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT CAN HAVE HAPPENED?

"Where'er a noble deed is wrought,
Whene'er is spoken a noble thought,
Our hearts in glad surprise
To higher levels rise.

"The tidal wave of deeper souls
Into our inmost being rolls,
And lifts us unawares
Out of all meaner cares."

If up to that time the baroness had noticed a change in her daughter, from that time it was Colonel Norton's turn to do so. The very next morning at breakfast, she did not seem to him to be quite so much at her ease with him as usual; and later on in the day, when her mother was present, he was still more aware of a change in her manner. He could not define wherein the difference lay, but that there was one he could not but feel. She seemed to have lost something of her usual graceful self-possession.

He felt disappointed. It was like slipping down a hill after having, with toil and difficulty, climbed to the top. However, he reflected that often at

first she had been thus in her mother's presence, and that it did not necessarily mean anything. She would be her usual self again directly he got her to himself out-of-doors. He therefore looked forward more eagerly even than usual to the walk in the afternoon.

She was so long coming down after luncheon that he was seized with a fear for a moment that the baroness, for some selfish reason or other, was going to keep her daughter at home. She appeared at last, however, looking slightly flurried and apologizing for being late, saying she had been unexpectedly detained.

He breathed a sigh of relief as the party started, and he at once, and with something, all unknown to himself, of an air of proprietorship, attached himself to Ruth. Only just in time, for Lord Erskine was advancing to do the very same thing, and with something of the same air. But something (or perhaps somebody, and that somebody Lady Percy) distracted his attention, and Colonel Norton and Ruth walked on together.

He felt a little hurt, however, for he fancied Ruth herself had not at all seconded Lady Percy's manœuvre and his own attempt. It seemed almost

as if she had passively allowed herself to be disposed of as any one wished. Surely, he asked himself, rather bitterly—surely, she could not have wanted to walk with Lord Erskine?

"I want to go a long way to-day," said Lady Percy to the party generally. "I am going to visit a farmer's wife whose child is ill. The farm is in the middle of a wild and lonely bit of country, and it will be hard walking rather. I hope nobody minds?"

No. Nobody minded; and two of the party, at any rate, were very glad to hear the walk was likely to be prolonged.

Ruth was very silent at first, and she and Colonel Norton walked along almost without speaking. He glanced at her. She looked sad, he thought, but otherwise the compressed little mouth gave no indication of the thoughts that were in her mind; nor did her demeanour give him any encouragement to question her on the subject. On the contrary, it seemed to him the old mantle of reserve, in which she had at the beginning of their acquaintance been wrapped, was round her again.

He felt depressed. What could be the matter?

he wondered. What had wrought this change? What had become of their pleasant and hard-won intimacy? He felt, therefore, little inclined to talk, and remained silent, glancing every now and then furtively at the face by his side. Not, indeed, to much purpose. The eyes were cast down. Nothing was to be seen but the long eyelashes sweeping the cheek.

They were a good deal behind the others now. In fact, the rest had all disappeared in the distance, and they were, to all intents and purposes, quite alone. They had reached the brow of the hill, and stood still for a moment to recover their breath after the long ascent.

It was a wild, lonely spot. There was nothing to be seen all round but wild pasture land, where, here and there, cattle were grazing, who lifted their heads with a startled air at such an unwonted sight as human beings, other than farm-girls, among them in that secluded spot.

Away to the right and the left stretched undulating hills; while, in the far distance, lost in the blue mist, were the heads of a range of mountains. In the foreground close to them, all was bathed in bright sunshine. The tints of a

wood in the near distance were glowing bright as fire, while the clouds over the mountains were dark and lowering.

"It is raining out there," remarked Colonel Norton, as they paused in their walk and looked with silent admiration on the wild and extended view before them.

Ruth assented. She was looking more like herself again. The beauty of nature was exercising its usual effect upon her.

"Oh, look!" she suddenly exclaimed, in a tone of animation; "look! How lovely! There is a rainbow!"

It came from the quarter where the rain was, and, as it hung in mid air, the effect on the landscape was most beautiful. By degrees, as they watched it, it spanned the whole heavens and stretched in an arch right over their heads, till their two figures seemed to be the apex over which it hung.

"I never saw a more perfect arch," said Colonel Norton, as they both stood looking upwards.

Ruth, all her depression gone, was gazing in delight at the beauty of the scene.

"One might never see such a sight again," she said, half to herself.

And now the rain which Colonel Norton had prophesied, and which was the cause of the beauty of the bow, began to come down.

"I think we had better get some shelter, Miss Ashley," he said. "It will be a short shower, but you do not seem to me to be prepared for it."

"No, I am not," answered Ruth. "The last thing I expected to-day was rain."

"Come under this tree," he said. "We can sit down and rest on that fallen bough till the shower is over."

They sat down, and then Ruth's passive state seemed to return upon her, and she sank into silence again.

He felt the necessity come over him so strongly, of trying to move her and rouse her, of associating himself with her by talking of something mutually interesting and beneath the surface, that, swayed by a sudden impulse, and intuitively sure of sympathy and understanding, he began to tell her the story Maud had so recently told him, and which had been more or less in his mind ever since.

He had his reward. As he went on, he saw her interest kindle and grow. Surprised out of her new reserve, she let fall the manner she had adopted, and became her natural self once more. Or rather, she unconsciously forgot herself altogether; the whole expression of her face changed; her lips were parted with breathless interest, and her eyes shone with a new light. In the moving interest of the account, she lifted them full upon him, riveted them on his face; now soft, now sparkling, now kindling with enthusiasm, and now misty with unshed tears.

She was, indeed, deeply stirred by the account. No other subject could have appealed to her more strongly. For the power of self-sacrifice and of lonely acts of heroism, the lives and deaths of such men as John the Baptist and General Gordon had always seemed to her the grandest things in the world.

By the time the recital was finished, she was talking with all her usual earnestness, and more than her usual animation.

"Thank you, Colonel Norton," she said, "for telling me this story. It is a very beautiful one.

Such things do one good to hear about, and seem to raise one into a higher atmosphere."

She gave a deep sigh as she spoke, partly of interest and partly of some inward feeling. It had taken her out of herself and her own immediate troubles, and made them for the moment seem petty and unimportant.

Colonel Norton could not, of course, fathom the meaning of the sigh, but he was glad he had succeeded in exciting her interest; and he wanted to seize the advantage he had gained to prolong and photograph, as it were, the passing moment, before her reserve should overmaster her again. And, moreover, what he had been telling her had fired his own thoughts anew on the subject of the power of self-sacrifice and self-devotion.

Turning to her, he said, "And you, Miss Ashley, should you, do you feel, be ready for some great self-sacrifice were you called upon? I feel as if you were one of those who would; as if you had, or would have, the martyr spirit."

"One can never tell till one is tried," she answered simply, but with great earnestness. "I trust I might be willing to surrender my life for the sake of some one else, or in some great cause,

but one cannot see in what way such a surrender should ever be asked of a woman. I mean a woman's life, and especially one's own, seems so insignificant, and to have so little opportunity for the heroism of self-sacrifice in it."

"True," he said, "death is seldom asked of a woman. But death is not the only self-sacrifice."

"No," she said softly; "I feel even that it might be easier sometimes to die than to live, when life, all that makes life worth living, I mean, is taken away."

"I quite agree with you," he answered. "When the sacrifice of life, in the sense of the sacrifice of happiness, is asked of us, it would often be easier to die."

"We die daily, the Bible says," she said in a low voice. "There must be many who practically experience that."

She was following the course of her own thoughts, and seemed almost to have forgotten she was not alone; and yet she was speaking out of the fulness of her heart, in the enjoyment of the feeling that she would be understood.

And he took up the subject from her point

of view, and talked on in the same strain for some time, while she listened. It was no longer difficult to talk to her as it had been when they first started on their walk.

Words and ideas came quickly enough now on both sides; and he felt he could have talked on for ever, with that gentle presence at his side, to so appreciative and attentive a listener. His spirits rose once more.

The rain was over; the sun shone out. They got up and walked on, while she, as she was wont, looked round her with intense enjoyment of all around, and, turning her glowing face to the sunset, watched everything bathed in golden light.

He made some remark in answer to her appeal for his sympathy in the sight, and there was silence for a few moments while both stood gazing westward.

All of a sudden, he was aware of a subtle change in her manner. Something had crept into it which was not there before. And he could not even remember what he had said. Such a slight thing must have done it; and yet a sort of chill had stolen over her, like a blight coming

over a sunny landscape. Over their intercourse a shadow had crept, over their conversation a cloud had descended. All seemed changed.

He was much disappointed. It was a very fleeting interest he had excited, passing as quickly as it had come. Everything seemed to him to be suddenly different. Even Nature seemed to reflect it. The evening lights had been there a minute ago, the evening lights that Ruth loved, striking the stems of the trees, flickering among the glades of the woods, and making the decaying leaves glow like gold in the sunset. Now suddenly all this was gone; all was gloomy and dull. The sun had set, and dark lowering clouds hung over the line of sky where it had so recently been.

Their conversation, or rather the want of it, seemed to reflect the mood of Nature; or was it Nature that reflected their mood? And, as if to make things worse, they now fell in with the rest of the walking-party, and Lord Erskine, with, as it seemed to Colonel Norton in his irritation and annoyance, an air of right which particularly incensed him, took possession of Ruth—or, at any rate, tried to do so; but Colonel Norton would

not give way, and so the two men walked on, one on each side of her.

And thus they reached home, where the first thing on the terrace was the baroness awaiting them. She, rather more markedly than usual, called Colonel Norton away; but he pretended not to hear, and she was foiled in her attempt.

Had it not been that Ruth disappeared into the house, he would have avoided the baroness altogether, but after that he had no particular object in eluding her. She button-holed him in such a way that he could not escape for some time, and had to remain walking up and down the terrace.

But it was an unfortunate evening for the baroness to have chosen to detain him against his will. His mind was full of Ruth and their late conversation together, and he wanted to think it over, and to think out, too, that sudden and mysterious change in her manner. He was absent and preoccupied. He had hardly patience to listen to the baroness's scraps of empty talk and vapid remarks, and he made his escape at the first opportunity.

CHAPTER V.

PUT TO THE TEST.

"And tasks in hours of insight willed
Must be through hours of gloom fulfilled."

RUTH gained her room with a sigh of relief. As her mother was still out, she would not be wanted, at any rate, for the present. She had a great deal to think over, and the prospect of an undisturbed half-hour alone was a pleasant one.

In the hope of enjoying it, however, she was disappointed. For hardly had she taken off her walking-things and drawn a chair to the fire, than her mother's maid entered with a message from the baroness, to the effect that Ruth was to go to her immediately.

With a sigh, the girl arose from her seat and obeyed the summons. She found her mother walking up and down the room, always a bad sign—a sign, as Ruth knew well, that she was out of temper.

"Ruth," she said sharply, "shut the door. I want to speak to you. I am not at all pleased with you," she went on, with a certain trembling in her voice, which Ruth knew betokened a

gathering storm. "Your behaviour is most unbecoming. Now, don't answer!" she added quickly, as Ruth, astonished at the attack, seemed about to speak. "I hate people who are always on the defensive, and never can see that they are wrong."

Ruth remained silent.

"Surely," she continued, in an aggrieved tone, as if Ruth had answered her argumentatively, "surely I have a right to find fault with my own daughter when I do not approve of her conduct. I spoke to you last night about this, and you have not obeyed me. There you were again to-day, trying to tack yourself on to Colonel Norton, and to monopolize his attention. But I won't have this sort of thing any more; nor allow you any longer to act in so unbecoming a manner."

The baroness paused for breath, and Ruth remained silent still.

"You 'good' people," she went on, in her most disagreeable manner, "as I have always said, are just as worldly as the rest; and are not above taking your share of the good things of this world when they come across your path—the plums of society as well as everything else. (Oh, of course,

I know you are good and religious," she said impatiently, as Ruth looked up for a moment; "don't interrupt me!) But, with all your 'goodness,' you can do your best to attract, and then to try and entirely monopolize, the most agreeable and best-looking man in the house. Now, listen to me. You must keep Colonel Norton at a distance. You must not give him all the encouragement you do to come and talk to you. I won't have it. And you must begin at once; this very evening, if the opportunity offers itself. Every woman knows how to keep a man at a distance, if she wishes to do so; and I will be obeyed. You can go now. That is all I had to say to you."

And Ruth turned and went without a word.

She regained her own room, and sank into a chair by the fire. And for a whole hour the poor girl never moved. As she thought over her mother's unjust and unjustifiable words, a hot flush rose to her brow; the recollection of the things she had accused her of, dyed her cheek with shame.

She had to check herself at last, dismayed at the passion of indignation and rebellion which she felt surging within her. She was rebelling,

not only with shrinking sensitiveness against her mother's accusations, but with all her strength against the commands which she had laid upon her. As it came over her what obedience to them would entail, the tears came into her eyes. "Keep him at a distance! Repay all his goodness and kindness to her by such a return as that!" All the loyal gratitude of her nature rose up at the thought. Why was she to do this? Why was she to sacrifice, and, with her own hand, put an end to this pleasant friendship; to be called upon, and in such a manner, to give up the only thing that had brought any brightness into her hard, disappointing life, a life which had so little, so very little? She *might* have been left this.

And then again she checked herself, startled and shocked at the depth of the angry feeling in her breast. But she knew all the time how it must end, and that this was the mere human rebellion against the inevitable. Even if it were not for her strong sense of the duty of obedience and submission, her own dignity, her own self-respect, demanded it of her; and over and above all that, her mother's concluding taunts would anyhow have decided her. Put before her in

such a light as that, could she for a moment hesitate as to what her line of conduct must be?

After all, she asked herself, why should she care so much? It would, anyhow, have had to come to an end of itself when the visit to Castle Graham was over. Sooner or later, in a few days perhaps, or, at the very outside now, a week, it would have had to come. It was only putting an end to it a little sooner, that was all. So what did it matter?

"It would soon have had to come," she found herself saying out loud in a dull, dreary voice, which fell like a knell on her own ear.

But at the thought a pang struck to her heart, and, to her dismay, she felt a tear fall and trickle slowly down her cheek. As it dawned upon her how deeply she was affected by the thought of this "pleasant friendship" coming to an end, she was startled. And then, all in a moment, the truth became clear to her.

With a burning blush and a fast-beating heart, she covered her face with her hands, and realized at last what it was that had come into her life and transfigured and glorified her existence.

* * * * *

This, then, was why her heart was crying out so in rebellion. This was why she found obedience and self-effacement so much more hard and difficult than she had ever done before.

Softer feelings succeeded, and she let her thoughts dwell unchecked on all her happy recollections. And she reached by degrees the walk they had but just now had together, so constrained and silent at first, so different to their usual intimate companionship, until, as they stood with the rainbow arching over their heads, she had for a time forgotten all about her mother and her disturbing words, and had been just as free and happy, if not happier, than ever, till they suddenly recurred to her mind.

Chiming in with these thoughts came back to her the story she had been listening to only an hour before; the conversation which had followed; *his* questionings to her on the subject of self-sacrifice, and her own (as it seemed to her now) all too-confident answers.

Not death itself, they had agreed, was often asked of a woman; but that there was a sacrifice of life, in the sense of the sacrifice of happiness, which might sometimes make it easier to die.

Such a sacrifice she realized was before her now. The opportunity which came so seldom, the opportunity she had herself said she hoped to be ready for did it ever come, now here it was. Why was she not more ready to meet it?

What had become, she asked herself almost fearfully, of all her theories on this subject, and of her inborn admiration and veneration for the heroism of self-sacrifice, and for lonely lives of silent endurance?

The clock on the mantelpiece struck five—half-past—six; and still Ruth sat motionless, her eyes gazing sadly into the slowly dying fire.

* * * * *

The baroness was in high spirits that evening. She had made her meaning clear, and she felt all was well. She knew Ruth would not dream of disobedience after she had really given her a distinct command. This was one of the occasions when her daughter's high-principled goodness and sense of filial duty came in so conveniently, and when she made full use of it as a propelling power to forward her own plans and wishes.

She placed herself in a prominent place by the drawing-room door when the time approached

for the men to come out from dinner, and, as they began to stream in, she looked away while those who came out first were passing, for fear the wrong man should take the vacant chair near her.

Then, when Colonel Norton's turn came, she looked up with a smile and a jesting remark, while with one hand she swept her skirts away as if to make room for him by her side. In all these little ways she was an adept. For such little manœuvrings she had no match; and she knew, or fancied she knew, she was not likely to be foiled when her mind was made up and her plans laid, now that the obstacle on her path had been brushed like a fly away.

But she had reckoned without her host. On this occasion she was outmatched and outwitted, for Colonel Norton passed her by without a look, and went straight up to Ruth. For his mind was so full of her, that he really did not see the baroness, and, indeed, he saw no one but Ruth in the whole room. His manner was eager, and he seated himself at once by her side.

He was in hopes the last change in her manner just before they reached the house would

have disappeared, and given way to the one she had adopted during their very intimate conversation.

But in this he was disappointed. Her manner was more distant than ever. When he came up to her, her eyes were intent on the piece of work she was engaged with, and she did not lift them from it. She did not look up and greet him with her usual quiet smile. He looked in vain for the soft look of pleasure with which she generally met him, and to which he had grown accustomed.

He sat down by her, however, and began to talk, first on general subjects, hoping to put her at her ease, and also to oblige her to put down that tiresome bit of work, and look up sometimes.

But he did not succeed. There was a still greater change in her, and a change he could not define. She seemed nervous and as if she did not want to talk. Her manner was not natural. She no longer looked at him so fully with her grave earnest eyes, and they rather fell under his searching look, into which he put as much as he could of a questioning expression.

He felt chilled, mortified, and deeply hurt.

It was impossible to go on talking to her under the circumstances, and he thought she seemed relieved when, in obedience to a call from the baroness, he moved away.

The latter chained him to her side for the rest of the evening with chatter, with flashes of wit, and with light rippling laughter.

She wearied and depressed him beyond measure. He found his eyes and his thoughts straying constantly to where Ruth sat talking to Lord Erskine, who, to his annoyance, he saw had taken the seat he had vacated. She appeared, too, to be talking to him with much more animation than she had shown to himself just now.

Puzzled and mortified, he sat where he was for the rest of the evening, and did not make another effort to go near Ruth; but when the ladies went to bed, he tried to get a word with her in the hall.

But neither in this was he successful. He lighted a candle for her, and was just holding it towards her, when Lord Erskine put himself between them and rendered her the same attention.

He was determined to say good night to her

individually, however, and was advancing to do so, when the baroness intercepted him with much effusion, and again held him captive with her talk.

The other ladies now began to ascend the staircase, and Ruth to move along slowly in their wake, and, as it appeared to him, not intending to say good night to him at all.

This put the finishing touch to his powers of endurance, and he broke away from the rest and went towards her, holding out his hand—"Good night, Miss Ashley," he said, and he put purposely a somewhat reproachful accent into his words.

The girl raised her eyes for a moment, and then averted them quickly, at the same time putting a limp little hand into his.

He held it firmly, and tried to meet her eyes again; but they fell beneath his gaze, and her arm dropped listlessly at her side.

He stood watching the ladies trailing up the staircase, looking up till the last bit of her white gown passed out of sight; but, though the winding of the staircase gave her every opportunity, she did not, as he had hoped she might, look back

at him, and it was the baroness who did so, with a light wave of the hand and a laughing "Dormez bien!"

Colonel Norton retired to his room that night feeling profoundly depressed. He could not make it out. Why, it was only a matter of two or three hours since they had had that very interesting and unreserved conversation.

But the sense of how deeply he himself was affected by her demeanour, and how it had the power to distress him as he felt it had, set him thinking, and in thinking his mind reverted to that yet unanswered letter, with its plain direct question. He felt that, whether he answered it to Maud or not, he was bound to answer it to himself. The time had come when the question must be asked and answered, and the consequences involved in the answer faced. And he asked himself firmly now, "What *was* the result of his further acquaintance, his intimate friendship, his 'study,' if Maud chose to call it so, of Ruth Ashley?"

He answered the question as firmly, as the truth dawned clearly on his mind; for what was the use of trying to disguise it from himself any

longer? The result was that life held only one good for him henceforth, and that his whole future happiness was in the hands of a girl hardly twenty-one.

He felt almost ashamed of the exultation with which the thought inspired him, and at the idea that life, hitherto to him so *manquée* and lonely, might hold a great joy still.

But the next moment a chill crept over him, as he remembered how little he knew or could gauge of her feelings, and of how little the pleasant friendship which existed between them could count where so young a girl was concerned. Was he not nearly twice her age? She most likely looked upon him as a kind friend to whom she could talk as if he were her father, which indeed he was almost old enough to be. Was it likely, was it possible, was it even probable, that she cared for him at all, and above all in the way he wished? No. Everything was against him. There was no hope for him—none. He had been a fool to think of such a thing for a moment. He would think of it no more.

And yet, in spite of all this, all unknown to himself, he was even at that moment looking for-

ward with the most intense eagerness to the next day, to the moment when he should get her to himself once more, and when, as he was determining in his own mind, he should ask her plainly and straight out, what was the meaning of that painful change in her manner to him the evening before.

For, whatever her feelings might or might not be, however uncertain he felt about her, on one point there was no sort of doubt. This young thing had been powerful, alas for him! to rouse that strong, deep love of his, which once roused would never sleep again. For it was a love—and he knew it, and had always known it—which had never been really and truly roused before.

CHAPTER VI.

THE VELVET SCABBARD.

"Made to feel
The velvet scabbard held a sword of steel."

THE walking-party was formed as usual next day, but Ruth did not make part of it. For some unexplained reason, Lady Percy found the girl was going to remain at home. She was puzzled

and altogether troubled about it, and could not make out what was going on. She saw that Ruth was out of spirits, and she was afraid something was wrong. However, she could do nothing, and the party started.

Meanwhile Ruth herself was equally puzzled to find her mother appeared not to be going out for her usual drive. For she told her to go down into the little drawing-room and wait for her there, as she had something particular to say to her when every one else should be gone out.

With a sense of something disagreeable impending, Ruth went down. She had not seen her mother in private since the terrible interview of the day before, and much dreaded doing so. Her heart beat rather quickly when she heard her step outside, and the door opened to admit her into the room.

One glance at her, however, showed her that, whatever the coming communication might be, it was not on the same subject as yesterday. For the baroness's whole demeanour was different. She looked excited; her face beamed with pleasure. She was flushed, and she ran more than walked into the room.

"Are we quite alone?" she cried. "Has every one really started?"

Ruth, more and more puzzled, answered in the affirmative.

Then, to her astonishment, her mother threw her arms round her and kissed her repeatedly, first on one cheek and then on the other, with the greatest effusion. She called her her *fille chérie,* and said she was a proud and happy mother that day.

"What is it, mother?" said the girl, surprised at the unusual caress, and with a sense of dawning uneasiness, amounting almost to a presentiment that something disagreeable was coming.

"You are a most fortunate girl, Ruth!" the baroness exclaimed. "What do you think you have done?" And, without waiting for an answer, she continued in a voice of great excitement, "You have captivated one of the greatest *partis* in London. And so quietly, too! No one, not even I myself, conceived anything of the kind, or knew anything about it."

"Oh, what do you mean, mother?" exclaimed the girl, with growing alarm and anxiety.

"What do I mean?" repeated the baroness,

in a tone of joyful excitement, and with another impetuous embrace. "I mean that this very day, not many hours ago, Lord Erskine had asked my permission to 'try and win,' as he modestly expresses it, your hand in marriage."

"Lord Erskine!" gasped Ruth, in a tone of astonishment and dismay. "What can he be thinking about? I have never given him the slightest reason to justify such a request on his part."

"Yes," said the baroness, still in the same triumphant and exultant manner; "I don't wonder you are surprised. It is indeed a wonderful bit of luck. And a quiet, demure little thing like you, too, to carry off such a prize, when I am sure half the girls in London were dying for the chance!"

"Lord Erskine!" reiterated the girl, in a voice which, to any ear but that of her mother, would have conveyed the contempt she felt; "*Lord Erskine!*"

"*Pauvre petite!*" laughed the baroness. "She is quite overcome, and I do not wonder. It took me too some minutes to take in and realize that

Lord Erskine should really mean it when he spoke to me this morning, and——"

"Stop, mother!" said Ruth, suddenly. "Please do not say any more. Lord Erskine would never have the slightest chance with me. He had better be told so at once."

"*What?*" exclaimed the baroness, swooping round, as if she thought she could not have heard aright; "*what* did you say?"

Ruth recoiled for a moment, and then repeated what she had said, adding, "He would never have any sort of attraction for me in any way, and it would be best he should have his answer as soon as possible."

"What on earth do you mean?" said the baroness sharply, and with rising temper. "Chance! Attraction! What are you talking about?"

"I mean," said Ruth, gently, but very firmly, for she was beginning to recover from the confusion and *bouleversement* of thought into which the very sudden announcement had thrown her —"I mean that I could never, never care for Lord Erskine."

"And what has that to do with it?" retorted her mother.

Then as Ruth looked up at her for a moment, too horrified to answer, she perhaps felt she had gone too far, and changed her front.

"And pray," she said, "what is the matter with Lord Erskine? A young man with a most *distingué* air about him, full of *petits soins* for ladies; a man, I should think, any girl might be proud of having made a conquest of."

"He is hardly a man at all," said Ruth, quickly. "I mean there is nothing manly about him."

"Oh yes, I know the sort of man you English girls admire," said the baroness. "A man who must always be killing something; a boor, who prefers the society of grooms and understrappers to that of ladies, and is more at home in the stables and kennels than he is in his wife's drawing-room. Mon Dieu! I know the kind of man! His hands are covered with the bites of rats, and he always has a *cur* of some sort at his heels."

"No," said Ruth, warmly; "I do not mean that kind of man. I should not admire him any more than you do. But I like a man to be a man. What I mean is, a manly Englishman, who rides well and excels in all manly pursuits, if you

like, but who makes these things, not the object of his life, but its relaxation, and has mind and intellect as well."

"You speak as if you had some one in your mind who fulfils all these conditions," said the baroness.

Ruth's eyes fell for a moment; but she answered quietly and steadily, "You asked me, mother, what there was in Lord Erskine which did not attract or please me, and I am telling you. But apart from them even, there is nothing in him that would ever make me give him a thought. I could never care enough for him to contemplate marrying him. Oh, mother, I should have thought you could have understood that!"

"A romantic schoolgirl!" exclaimed the baroness. "Va! romance and marriage! What have they to do with each other? Women marry for a home, a position, an *établissement,* to be settled in life *enfin!*"

"Far better never marry," said Ruth, firmly, "than marry for such reasons as that. I for one would rather remain unmarried all my life."

"Remain unmarried!" almost screamed the baroness. "The thing is an impossibility. It is

an anomaly. An unmarried woman? We have no such thing in France. It is unknown with us."

"But I am not French," said Ruth.

"This girl will drive me mad!" exclaimed the baroness. "Am I to be saddled with an unmarried daughter? No, a thousand times no. I tell you that not only in France, but that everywhere a girl's marriage is more or less arranged. Why should you expect to be different to the rest of the world, pray?"

"I could never marry a man I did not love," said Ruth in a low voice.

"Love!" repeated the baroness. "What, I say, has that to do with marriage?"

"*Everything,*" answered Ruth.

"The girl is a fanatic!" said the baroness, walking up and down the room, and gesticulating with her hands as she always did when excited. "Lord Erskine has *fifteen thousand* a year, and every girl in London was dying for the chance she is ready to throw away!"

"Dear mother," said Ruth, gently and appealingly, "surely you can sympathize with me. *You* were not called upon to make such a sacrifice. *You* married the man of your choice in the

days of your early youth. You, I am sure, would have given the same answer as me to *your* mother, had you not loved my father."

"Bah!" said the baroness. "It was just as much an arranged marriage as any other. He was known to have expectations. My parents were looking out for a husband for me. They plotted for him, and he fell into the trap. . . ."

She stopped, a little dismayed at the effect of her words; for Ruth had buried her face in her hands, as this, her last cherished vision of her mother's history, was thus rudely torn from her.

The girl did not raise her head again, and there was silence in the room for some minutes. It was broken by Ruth.

"Mother," she said, and her voice was very low, but very firm, "it is no use prolonging this very painful conversation. I grieve more than I can say to be such a disappointment to you. I wish, for your sake, I could do this thing, since your heart seems so set upon it; but my whole soul rises against it. I could not, if I would, reconcile it to my conscience, even if I could make up my mind to do such violence to my feelings. Mother! I would do much for your sake, forego

much, sacrifice much"—here her voice trembled a little—"but this I *cannot* do. I cannot marry a man I do not love—a man I do not respect. This is my last word on the subject, and I do implore you it may never be mentioned between us again. For I cannot, and I will not, marry Lord Erskine."

The next moment a bang of the door, which shook the whole apartment, told the poor girl that the interview was over.

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE LITTLE DRAWING-ROOM.

"But the face thou show'st the world is not the face thou show'st to me,
And the look that I have looked in, is of none but me beheld."

COLONEL NORTON did not start for his walk in the best of spirits. Without that gentle presence at his side, everything was dull, dreary, and prosaic. What had become of the beauty of the country, and the brightness of the autumn tints? Surely never had any country been more bare and colourless.

But the pang of disappointment which Ruth's

absence caused him opened his eyes still further to the state of his own feelings.

He had not gone far before he remembered suddenly that he had forgotten to put into the post-box an important letter he had written that morning. He must have left it in the blotting-book of the table at which he had been writing. The letter must not miss the afternoon post. He must go back. He explained to Lady Percy what had happened, and, begging her not to wait for him, as he would soon overtake the party, he turned back and struck across the pleasure-grounds on his way to the house.

He went into the library to look for his letter, but it was not there. He searched in vain; it was nowhere to be found.

All at once he remembered that he had been writing that morning in the little inner drawing-room. He must have left the letter in the blotting-book there. He made straight for the room, opened the door, and went in.

Ruth was still sitting where her mother had left her, in the attitude of utter dejection into which she had thrown herself when her mother had gone, and, thinking herself alone, she was

not trying to repress or conceal the feelings with which she was overcome.

But so quiet, so absolutely still was she, that Colonel Norton did not realize that there was any one in the room; and she, wrapped in her sorrowful thoughts, did not perceive his entrance.

He walked straight up to the writing-table to look for the missing letter, and began to search through the blotting-book. But he suddenly stopped short, arrested by that odd sort of consciousness one has of not being alone in a room. And then his eye, travelling round, fell upon Ruth as she sat.

There is something very expressive in attitude. It tells its own tale. And Colonel Norton was overborne by the pathos of the sight before him; by the utter despair expressed in her whole demeanour. The slight girlish figure bending forwards; the fair young head bowed, supported by her arms on her knee; the small white hands partially covering, and yet not quite concealing, her face:—so she sat motionless, in a stillness of dejection more touching and pathetic than if she had been shaken by a storm of sobs.

It woke up in him a whole world of mixed

feelings; the chivalrous compassion of a man, the deep love of which he had so lately become conscious, and the overshadowing protecting sense; the fatherly element, without which no love is perfect. She looked so young, so forlorn, so helpless and lonely, that an almost irresistible inclination came up over him to lay a comforting hand on the fair bowed head. There arose in his heart such a passion of pity, such a surging of tender compassion, such a longing to help and soothe and comfort, that he had to exercise the greatest self-control to prevent himself doing so.

He felt he must speak, and yet he was afraid of startling her; and had also a feeling of compunction of intruding, as it were, upon the privacy of her sorrow, seeing that she thought herself alone. Words, too, sounded poor and formal; but they came almost before he was aware.

"Dear Miss Ashley," he said softly, almost as if speaking to a child, "you are in trouble, I am afraid. Do let me help you, if I can."

The kind words, the tender sympathy in the voice, thrilled through the poor girl, and came like the cool refreshing rain on a parched and thirsting soil.

But she did not move or look up, and all he saw was a mournful little shake of the head, and all he heard was the sad low answer, "You are very good, but no one can help me."

"No one?" he asked gently and questioningly.

"No one," she answered.

"Ruth, dear little Ruth! let me help you! Give me the right!"

The words trembled on his lips; but he controlled himself, and they remained unspoken.

Ruth steadied herself with an effort; took her hands from her face and looked up.

For a minute their eyes met. There must have been something in his glance that betrayed him, though the words he was framing had not escaped his lips, for she flushed all over, and her eyes glowed and deepened under his gaze. For one moment, a light of joy and glad surprise broke all over her face, and then it all faded away, and left nothing but a quiet, demure little face, with not only no expression painted upon it to which he could provide any key, but with a pained, almost scared look. For at that moment the sharp tones of the

baroness's voice were heard outside, and the dream was over.

Ruth's eyes fell. They had again, moreover, that uncertain, not wholly natural, expression he had noticed once before. She looked nervously at the door. Then she roused herself rather quickly from the attitude in which she had been sitting. The pathos of the pose was gone. The quiet, grave Ruth Ashley was there again, a trifle graver and colder than usual.

"I think my mother will be wanting me, Colonel Norton," she said in her usual manner; and she rose from her seat and left the room.

Colonel Norton slept very little that night. His mind and thoughts were too busy reviewing that scene in the little drawing-room, and trying to extract from the very slender means at his disposal something to go upon.

What was the matter with her? he wondered. What could she have been pondering with such evident and hopeless sorrow when he went into the room? But, above all, what was that sudden light which had broken over her face for a moment, which made her whole expression so radiant,

and gave her face a new beauty? What was that peculiar look which had come into her eyes, a look which he had never seen there before? What did it mean? What could it mean? Did it mean anything, or nothing?

He wearied himself with these questions, and never got nearer to any solution, or to any definite conclusion.

And yet!

And yet, all unknown to himself, something like hope woke up at the bottom of his heart.

CHAPTER VIII.

A CLIMAX.

"He either fears his fate too much,
Or his desire is small,
Who dares not put it to the touch,
To win or lose it all."

SUNDAY morning dawned in a golden glory of autumnal beauty, and Colonel Norton rose early with a desire to get into the fresh air as soon as possible after his restless and wakeful night.

It was not much past eight when he crossed the hall and stepped out into the crisp, bright

morning. Flooded with sunshine were the yellow beeches, clear and blue the sky; the white hoar frost lay thick all over the grass where the sun's warmth had not yet melted and cleared it away.

The autumn was waning. The trees were getting bare rapidly, and their leaves lay in heaps of gold at their feet.

Leaving the gardens to the left, he strolled across the park towards the tiny hamlet which called itself a village, and got into the little foot-path which was the family short-cut to church. There was not a sound to be heard anywhere, for to the autumn stillness was added the sabbath quiet; no busy human life anywhere;

> "No sight nor sound of toil
> The fair-spread peaceful picture comes to soil."

He felt soothed already by the calm all round him. How still, how very still, it was! How distinct the click of the latch of the churchyard gate sounded as he opened it!

He thought there must be an early service going on, for the church door was ajar, and he heard a murmur from within. He passed round to the back of the church, so that he should not meet the people when they came out, and threaded

his way among the graves till he came to the low wall which bounded the churchyard, beneath which the river flowed along. Leaning against it, he looked down upon the water, and stood there wrapped in thought.

His meditations of the night returned upon him, bringing with them a sense of depression. In the garish light of day, things seemed to present themselves more truthfully and ruthlessly.

He faced the position firmly, and, with a sigh and a half-formed wish that he had never come across her, he told himself that he must dismiss, as many a man had to do before, all idea of the realization of that bright picture of earthly joy which had for a brief moment floated before his eyes.

The spot where he was standing was one well calculated to remind him of the vanity of all human hopes and expectations.

All around—

> "Each in his narrow bed for ever laid,
> The rude forefathers of the hamlet slept."

Those who lay beneath those grass-grown heaps, he asked himself, did they not once live and love and suffer as he was doing? Had not

many of them often felt life to be as blank and heavy with disappointment and unfulfilled hopes as he did now?

"Did they love as I love when they lived by the sea?
Did they dream as I dream of the things that should be?"

Doubtless, for "that which hath been is now, and that which is to be hath already been, and there is no new thing under the sun."

And yet now "Their love, and their hate, and their envy, is perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun;" and "There is no remembrance of former things."

So everything, he mused, inevitably ends, and, bright or gloomy, happy or unhappy, life was short and soon over. After all, for so short a time, did anything matter very much?

With a sigh, Basil Norton roused himself from his reverie and moved away.

Making his way round to the front of the church again, he was just in time to see the very small congregation disperse.

As soon as they were out of sight, he walked down the little paved path which led to the door, with the intention of entering. His thoughts, he

felt, needed raising; the aspect under which he had been regarding life was not, he knew, the highest, and he thought the atmosphere of the house of prayer might do something for him.

The "rude forefathers of the hamlet slept" in their narrow beds around, and had no more part in all that was done below; but here Sunday after Sunday their best and highest moments had been spent: here they had learnt what endures for ever—what was enduring still.

He pushed the door gently a little further open, and noiselessly he stepped in. Then with a start he paused, and drew back behind a pillar; for Ruth Ashley was kneeling there.

The light fell upon her bowed head, and touched with gold the knot of fair hair under her hat. Her face was not hidden; it was uplifted, and its expression he could see clearly. It was very troubled, very sad. She looked to him like a kneeling saint, but withal like an innocent child —so pure, so young, so childlike.

What was she praying about so earnestly? he wondered.

Whatever it was, he felt her prayer was answered, for her face grew gradually calmer, the

troubled look passed away. The expression of sorrow seemed to blend with and disappear in one of peace and content. The words came, he knew not why, into his mind, "As He prayed, the fashion of His countenance was altered."

He was turning away, unwilling to intrude, even though she was unconscious of his presence, upon the sacred privacy of her communings, when she moved and rose from her knees.

There was no time for him to go, and, fearful of startling her, he drew back behind a pillar, while she walked down the aisle on her way out of church. She passed so close to him as he stood that he could almost have touched her, and every line of her face was clear to him. The sound of her light footstep died away, and he was alone in the old church.

Inspired by her example, he knelt down for a while, and then he got up and followed her. For, on finding himself in her presence again, all his late thoughts had fled. Back had come to him the hopes and the longings he thought he had silenced; the door he had closed, as he thought so firmly, opened slowly once more.

After all, they had been interrupted yester-

day, and he had had no opportunity of telling her, she no opportunity of hearing, all that he had it in his heart to say.

Faint heart, he told himself, never won anything or anybody. He would try his fate. He would be man enough to—

> "Put his fortune to the touch,
> To win or lose it all."

So he determined to follow her, to make an effort to get her to listen to him, and to speak so plainly that there should be no chance of her mistaking his meaning, no possibility of her evading a reply, and giving him a direct and conclusive answer.

And having thus made up his mind, he was seized with a fear that she might have escaped him—might by this time be far on her road home.

He hurried on, but there was no sign of her all across the park, and she could not have got out of sight yet. She must be in the churchyard still.

He went round to the back of the church, and had not gone far before he spied her. She was standing where he himself had been so

lately, looking down upon the river as it flowed along.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, she looked up. The light which had been shining in her eyes when she left the old church was shining in them still. But as they fell upon him he saw their light diminish.

His heart sank as he saw the troubled look come into them which had not been there before. But he would not be discouraged, and he told his tale.

And all the time he watched her narrowly, very narrowly, to see if that look would come into her face again—that look on which all his slender hopes were built. He knew her so well now, that he realized she must be taken unawares sometimes to find out what she thought and felt, before her habitual reserve and self-control should descend like a mountain and hide everything from view.

So as he spoke and pleaded, he kept his gaze upon her; but her face was, and it remained, immovable. It seemed to be carved in stone. Once, twice, she made a movement with her

hand as if to stop him; but he was determined to have his say out.

Was she putting some tremendous strain upon herself, he wondered, to make herself like marble? or was it really, as it seemed to him in his despair, something like a cold dislike and disapproval which was stamping itself upon her face?

At last he stopped and asked for his answer.

Ruth tried to speak, but a sob rose up in her throat, and no words came. She clenched her small hands tighter and tighter together, and in doing it turned white to the very lips. The tears came into her eyes, and she turned her head away. And, seeing it, hope revived in his breast.

But it was only for a moment that she thus lost her self-control. The next she recovered herself, and, in a voice which sounded in his ears like a knell, she said constrainedly, "I have no answer to give, Colonel Norton, except that what you ask is impossible."

He stood quite still for a moment, like a person trying to steady himself under a heavy blow, and silence reigned around.

Ruth was the first to break it. "Colonel Norton," she said falteringly, "will you let me return to the house first?" She blushed deeply. "Will you let me, I mean, go alone?"

He understood her at once, bowed gravely, and, taking off his hat, he walked away, while she went across the churchyard and into the park.

He turned round after a time and watched, with a sad yearning feeling of love and regret, the slight girlish figure disappearing in the distance. Then he went back into the churchyard, and found his way to the river once more.

Colonel Norton and Ruth met at breakfast as if nothing had happened. The party in the house was fortunately large enough for him to be able to keep away from the side of the table where she was. He stole a glance at her once, and was shocked to see how deadly white she was looking, and how strained was the expression of her face.

The conversation turned upon the sudden departure of Lord Erskine. Every one was ask-

ing why he had gone off so hurriedly, and no one seemed able to give any answer.

Ruth, he could not help observing, grew crimson all over, the colour bringing out into sharper contrast the former paleness of her face; and then as suddenly white to the very lips again. He saw that she was trying to make her escape from the breakfast-table without attracting attention, and that she left the room at the first opportunity.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BARONESS'S COGITATIONS.

"Always there is a black spot in our sunshine; it is . . . the shadow of ourselves."

To say the baroness was surprised at her daughter's conduct as regards her unqualified rejection of Lord Erskine would be a mild form of expression. She was staggered by it. She could not conceive the idea of such unworldliness, even in Ruth. It was quite beyond her, and, it being so, she could not help bestowing upon the girl a kind of half-grudging admiration.

At the same time she was furious with her,

and continued to be so. In short, she had refused to see her since, and had pointedly dismissed her from her bedroom in the evening when she came as usual to wish her good night.

Sunday morning found her very much out of temper, as she lay on the sofa in her bedroom, thinking over various plans for bringing her refractory daughter to submission. The bright autumn day looked to her dark and gloomy enough.

"It was so hard on poor me," she said to herself. She would have so much enjoyed the reflected glory of such a triumph, of a "conquest" so materially great in every respect. She might, after all, have realized her dream of the triumphant mother who brings her daughter's first season to a close by securing the *parti* of the year.

As she reflected how she had been within an ace of attaining her desire, and at the crisis been thwarted, she lashed herself into a fury, and grew more and more angry with Ruth. She had been revolving schemes in her head all night for forcing her into reconsidering her hasty determination; for, observing the general sadness of Ruth's

demeanour, she had begun to hope she might be regretting what she had done. She wondered what was going on in the girl's mind, and was now rather sorry she had refused to see her the night before.

She had told Lord Erskine that her daughter was a strange girl, but that he must not regard her answer as final. She had even tried to persuade him to remain on at Castle Graham and plead his own cause. But in this she had failed. The blow to Lord Erskine's vanity, and the deep mortification he had undergone, were such that nothing would persuade him to stay in the house another hour, and he had departed very hastily that same afternoon.

The baroness had also another annoying subject for thought on hand of a more personal character, which did not help to improve her temper. She had just learnt from her maid—through whom she always kept herself informed of the movements of any one in the house who interested her—that Colonel Norton's valet had received unexpected orders from his master to prepare for leaving Castle Graham almost immediately. So that altogether things were going

very much as she did not wish, and it seemed to her that she was being crossed and thwarted in every direction.

Just at this point in her gloomy cogitations there was a gentle knock at her door.

The tone of the voice which said "Come in" told Ruth what she had to expect before her eyes lighted on her mother's frowning countenance, though she did not, as the girl had half expected, refuse her admission. On the contrary, she seemed anxious to enter into conversation, though Ruth, desirous not to prolong it, soon said she must go and dress for morning church.

Parry and fence as she could, and try to turn off the subject as she might, somehow or other, Ruth hardly knew how, the baroness returned to the charge, and the whole affair of Lord Erskine came to the front again, as if it had never been discussed before.

Ruth had, of course, nothing new to say; she could but repeat what she had already said, or else remain silent. But, whether she answered or not, her mother went on, remonstrated, persuaded, entreated, upbraided, and finally fixed Ruth with a searching glance.

"There is some other reason for your refusal over and above those you have given me," she said, as if some sudden idea had struck her.

Ruth, do what she would, felt a hot blush surging up all over her face.

The baroness was not slow to follow up her advantage.

"Ah!" she said, looking full at her daughter, "*now* I see!"

Her thoughts seemed to be rapidly reviewing matters in a new light and with lightning speed.

"You are like all English women," she said, with a sneer. "You give your love unasked. A French girl would have too much proper pride to do such a thing. She would never dream of giving her heart till her hand had been asked for. But you English have no self-respect in such matters. You know," she continued, as thing after thing occurred to her, "that I am right, and that this is the real reason for your rejection of Lord Erskine. Yes," she concluded, as Ruth still remained silent, "I don't wonder you are ashamed to confess you have given your love unasked and where it is not wanted."

Ruth raised her eyes and looked steadily at

her mother. "I have not done so," she said in a low voice, her dark eyes all aglow with feeling.

"What do you mean?" asked the baroness, looking at her with sudden curiosity. Then she started. "Has Colonel Norton said anything to you?" she asked quickly. Then, as Ruth, too much overcome to answer, bowed her head, "What has he said?" she hastily demanded. "Tell me at once. I insist upon knowing."

"He has asked me to be his wife," came in low tones the girl's answer, "and——"

"And? and?" interrupted the baroness, quickly, and in the most profound and undisguised astonishment, "and——?"

"And I have refused him," said Ruth, in a voice she vainly tried to render steady. And she got up and left the room.

CHAPTER X.

RETROSPECTION.

"For a sorrow's crown of sorrow
Is remembering happier things."

"And of all sad words of book or pen,
The saddest are these—'It might have been.'"

"Miss Ashley is late," said Lady Percy, as the party assembled for church stood in the hall waiting to start; "she is generally so punctual. I think I will just run up to her room and tell her we are all ready."

She was turning towards the staircase, when a footman appeared with a message from Miss Ashley to say she had a headache, and would be obliged to remain at home. And Lady Percy, feeling still further troubled, and wondering more than ever what could be going on, was obliged to go without her.

The truth was that, on regaining her room after leaving her mother, Ruth had felt so exhausted by all she had gone through, that, after sitting still for a time to try and steady her nerves

and the violent throbbing of her head, she saw she must give up all idea of going to church. But, fearful that if she sent down word to Lady Percy she might in her kindness come up to see what was the matter, she waited to the very last moment possible before she rang for her maid and sent down the message.

Then she watched from her window the departure of the church party, in order to satisfy herself that every one was there, so as to be quite sure she would have the house to herself if she went downstairs; for she was afraid to stay where she was, lest her mother should discover and pursue her.

As soon as every one was out of sight, she stole quietly down into the little drawing-room, closed the door carefully behind her, and, drawing a chair to the fire, she sank down upon it. Leaning her head back, she closed her eyes with a sense of thankfulness at being at last quite alone and likely to remain so. She sorely needed a little respite from agitation. She had not had one moment alone since the trying scene of the early morning, and for solitude and quiet leisure for thought her whole being was craving.

There is, perhaps, no such silence as the deep stillness of an empty house on a Sunday morning, or one that brings a more calming sense of solitariness and profound quiet. Ruth felt its influence stealing gradually over her as she sat, and for a time she did not even think, but just remained in a sort of quiescent state; not asleep, for she was conscious all the while of soft sounds outside the open window, but they only helped to bring her a sensation of calm and repose.

There was the sound of the distant lowing of cattle, the twittering of robins, and the cawing of rooks far away over the park. Other sounds succeeded, but they were all more or less soothing. There came by the scraping of the wheels of a perambulator on the gravel of the terrace, and the sounds of infantine prattle and scraps of unplain talk. The baby was passing by on his way to some of his usual haunts and happy hunting-grounds, and he and his nurse together were crooning over all the joys and delights they were on their way to realize.

There was bread for the ducks on the lake in the pleasure-ground, and for the gold and silver fish in the pond; and baby was to try and find

one more pretty flower for mamma in his garden before Jack Frost took them all away. All this mixed with triumphant ejaculations from the occupant of the perambulator. Then even these sounds got fainter and fainter, and finally faded away.

Gradually Ruth's head throbbed less violently, and thought began to resume its power and sway. And as she lay there, slowly there unrolled before her mental vision all the happy scenes of the last three weeks. To all the brief days of her happiness her thoughts floated back, before the evening on which her mother had first spoken to her and disturbed her happy unconsciousness of her own feelings or of anything but the mere joy of the days as they went by.

She lived through again the terrible moment when the rude shock of her mother's accusations and commands had sent her to her room for that long, long struggle by her bedroom fire. Then came the thought of those more recent and more thrilling moments when, as she sat where she was sitting now, the tender voice with the quiver in it had suddenly fallen on her ear; and, looking up,

she had seen for a moment in his eyes what his lips had failed to say.

There followed the thought of the early morning, which already seemed so long ago, when in the old church she had sought and found the strength and resignation she needed.

How peaceful, how almost happy, she had felt when she came out into the still bright morning, upheld and upborne by those higher and holier thoughts which dwarf to their proper value all the joys and sorrows of this world! With her mind full of her grandfather's teaching, on the dedication of the life and the surrender of the will, she had stood looking down upon the river as it flowed along, while her heart re-echoed the brave sailor's words—

> "Do thy duty—that is best;
> Leave unto thy God the rest."

Then, startled by the sound of footsteps, she had looked up, and knew what was before her.

Oh, why had he disturbed the peace so hardly gained? She had braced herself to go through with it bravely, but, oh, how hard it had been! Her mind was made up, her course was resolved upon. She would not be turned back from the

path she had determined to tread. Neither by word nor look would she betray herself, nor allow her secret to be wrested from her.

But how every word he had uttered was stamped upon her memory still! The pang which had seized her had her in its grasp again, as she thought of the grave, reproachful bow with which he had turned back into the churchyard; while she, hurrying across the park, with a long-repressed sob bursting forth the moment she was out of his presence, had felt she was cutting herself adrift from all that life held for her that was bright and beautiful, and going back into a gloom and darkness which would be all the darker for having known what the light could be.

* * * * *

She had reached this stage in her sad retrospection, when the door opened suddenly, and, unclosing her eyes with a start, Ruth saw her mother standing before her.

The baroness had heard from her maid that Ruth had not gone to church. She had been searching for her everywhere, and had now come to know the reason.

Ruth explained that she had a headache; and

her mother, casting a scrutinizing glance at her, was silent for a moment, as if she did not quite know what to say next. Then she spoke suddenly.

"Ruth," she said, "answer me truthfully what I am going to ask you."

The girl looked up wearily. She wondered what could be coming.

"Why did you refuse Colonel Norton?"

Ruth flushed all over, and her heart beat quickly while she strove to keep down the agitation, not unmixed with indignation, which the question roused in her.

"Answer me, Ruth," said the baroness, finding there was no reply to her question. "What made you refuse him?"

Still no answer.

"Ruth, you must answer me. I, your mother, have a right to know."

A feeling of faintness was coming over Ruth, and she struggled vainly against it. Her head throbbed, and she felt the room beginning to go round and round.

"Oh, mother!" she said faintly, "you cannot have forgotten what you said to me. I have

obeyed you, and—and——" Here her voice failed her, and she closed her eyes.

But the baroness perceived nothing of all this. As the girl's meaning dawned upon her, she started; and, throwing up her hands, she moved impetuously away, turning her back on her daughter as she did so.

"Mon Dieu!" she exclaimed under her breath, and the colour rushed all over her face.

A curious gasping sound from the sofa, however, alarmed her, and she turned hastily round again. Only just in time, for in another moment Ruth would have fainted away. As it was, with the aid of smelling-salts and some eau de Cologne which the baroness dashed over her, she recovered in a few minutes, and, when she opened her eyes, found to her surprise that her mother's arms were round her, and that her mother's eyes were gazing at her with a look of real anxiety.

"Pauvre petite!" she said, in a tone of unusual kindness and affection; "are you better now?"

But there was a certain awkwardness, amounting to shyness, in the baroness's manner, which was still more unusual, and Ruth, also made shy

by it, turned her eyes away. Then suddenly she was startled by her mother's laugh—a light jesting laugh.

"Foolish, foolish child," she said, as she bestowed a kiss on Ruth's forehead, "you entirely misunderstood me."

Ruth gazed with the utmost bewilderment into her mother's face. But the baroness bore the amazed and questioning gaze without flinching, and was evidently prepared to ignore everything she had ever said.

"I say it has all been a mistake, and a complete misunderstanding on your part, from first to last, ma fille," she said. "I had no idea, when I spoke to you, that there was anything really serious between you and Colonel Norton. Pas la moindre idée! How should I? How could I imagine such a thing, considering the difference in age between you?"

And she laughed again, a funny, forced sort of laugh, with a curious catch in it.

"But we will not talk about it any more," she added; "and you had better lie quiet, and try and forget all about it."

So saying, she went suddenly and rather un-

accountably straight out of the room, leaving Ruth to think over what she had just heard; and to realize, with a bitter pang and a sharp sense of contrast, that what was a matter of life and death to the one was a mere trifle to the other.

She buried her head in the cushions to shut out, as it were, the sound of the light mocking laugh which still rang in her ears, as she told herself that what to her mother meant "a little misunderstanding," "a little mistake," a thing to laugh over and "to try and forget all about,"—meant to her that she had turned her back on a bright dream of earthly joy; cast away with her own hand the great gift of love which had been laid at her feet; sacrificed a good man's happiness, and shut a door for ever on her own.

CHAPTER XI.

TARDY AMENDS.

"Shall one like me
Judge hearts like yours?"

ONCE, however, out of her daughter's presence, the baroness's demeanour was very different.

She had hurried upstairs again, and now, with her door locked, she was walking up and down her room, crying hysterically, and muttering little disjointed sentences and exclamations.

The tenor of her thoughts, thus escaping her, revealed their direction.

"Ah, mon Dieu! mon Dieu! what have I done? I have spoilt that girl's life, and all to gratify my own self-will and vanity!"

Then she burst out in a fit of self-justification.

"Qu'est-ce que j'ai fait, moi? How was I to know? How could I guess she would care for a man so much older than herself?"

But hardly had the words escaped her, than her conscience told her that, in her own vain and wayward self-will and entire self-engrossment, she

had never once thought of her daughter in the matter at all.

"Oh, these English!" she went on presently. "How they endure, and make no sign! That girl, I believe, is made of the same stuff as the martyrs of old, who went to the stake without flinching for the sake of what they felt to be right. She never flinched, she never said a word. She would have *died,* I believe, and made no sign!"

Up and down she walked, up and down, gesticulating with her hands, and biting her lips fiercely to keep back her tears.

"How can I put things right between them? What can I do? Que faire! que faire! And he is going away immediately. There is not a moment to be lost."

Presently a thought seemed to come into her head, and, impetuous in good as in evil, she made up her mind to at once put her idea into execution.

Without even ringing for her maid, she began hastily to get out her walking-things and to put them on. Then she hurried downstairs, and out into the gardens, with the intention of waylaying

Colonel Norton on his return from church, and trying to get him apart from the rest, and request a private interview.

She accordingly took her way across the park, with pulses slightly throbbing, and nervous at the thought of what lay before her; but determined, for Ruth's sake, to put her own feelings aside, and for once, and for the first time, to think only of her.

She had not to go as far as she expected. The congregation was beginning to stream out in various directions, and in a little while her eye distinguished Colonel Norton's tall figure coming towards her, and quite alone.

The rest of the party had gone for a walk before luncheon, but, feeling disinclined for talk, he had parted from them at the church door and come straight back. His surprise at the sight of the baroness was evidently great, but she could not help observing the cold courtesy with which he took off his hat to her as he approached.

"You are abroad unusually early, baroness," he said drily.

"Colonel Norton," she said impetuously, "I want to speak to you, and where we shall not be

disturbed." Then, as she saw the unmistakable look of impatient annoyance, of *boredom*, which came over his face, she added quickly, though her vanity keenly felt the sharp blow, "I want to speak to you about my daughter."

How his whole expression changed! She could see how interested he was in a moment, how *agitated* even this cold, grave Englishman, who showed his feelings so little.

"I am at your service," he said. "Where shall we go?"

She led the way back into the gardens, and he walked silent by her side.

"Colonel Norton," she said—and, do what she would, her voice was not steady, for she was very uncertain how to set about the task which lay before her—"I am going to take you into my confidence about my daughter. There is something I want to tell you about her."

"Let me speak first," he said hotly, imagining that he was going to be told she wished her daughter to marry Lord Erskine, and that, by subtly pretending to confide in him, she was hoping to induce him to keep out of the way.

"I have a right to do so—the right which love gives."

And he poured forth his tale.

"If," he said, in conclusion—"if, as I suspect very strongly, it is you who have parted us, I demand, as a right and as an act of justice, to know the reason. If I am altogether wrong in my surmise, and it is of your daughter's own free will that she has rejected me, I have only to apologize to you and to leave this house as soon as I can. But I must know the truth."

"Mon Dieu!" the baroness exclaimed to herself, startled at the passion and the intensity of his feeling and manner. "These English! And I have thought them cold! You *shall* know the truth," she answered him; "I am willing to tell it, and to make what reparation I can. I *was* at the bottom of my daughter's refusal. But I have changed my mind about it, and am now as anxious to bring you together as I have been to keep you apart, because——" She hesitated for a minute.

"Because?" he questioned impatiently. "Because what?"

"Because," she said, turning round and look-

ing him full in the face—"because I know that she loves you."

"Then why," he asked hotly—"why did you come between us?"

There was an awkward pause. The baroness felt a flush was rising to her brow, and felt rather shamefaced. But his absolute unconsciousness set her mind at rest, though, with a curious inconsistency, that very unconsciousness was almost as mortifying a blow to her vanity as anything else.

She answered lightly, and in a speech which contained an intended sting, of which he was also unconscious.

"The disparity between you, Colonel Norton, formed my chief objection; and, indeed, prevented me imagining things could be as it seems they were. Are we not told that a woman may not marry her grandfather? However, that is Ruth's affair, and if she does not consider it an objection, nobody else need do so. And, over and above all that, I own I *had* a more brilliant marriage in view for her. Consider, un peu, the feelings of the mother and chaperon!"

Then, as her thoughts reverted to her

daughter, her better nature suddenly re-asserted itself.

"Colonel Norton," she said, with more earnestness than he could have imagined her capable of, "let me tell you that I consider you are indeed a fortunate man to have gained an affection so well worth having. I, Ruth's most unworthy mother, know something of it. And where she once loves she will love always, and with the strong, deep, unchanging love of which so few are capable. Come to her," she added.

And she led the way to the house, and through the hall to the little inner drawing-room, where Ruth was still sitting as she had left her.

"I have brought some one who has something to say to you, ma fille," she said.

And Ruth looked up wondering.

"And," added the baroness, as she kissed the girl lightly on the forehead, and laid a caressing hand for a moment on her hair, "he has my full permission to say anything he likes. I have given my blessing."

Then she slipped away and closed the door

behind her; so that, when Ruth turned her head, she found she was alone with Basil Norton.

"Ruth," he said—and there was a ring in his glad voice which made her heart beat quickly—"do not let us misunderstand one another any more! Nothing—*no one*—shall ever come between us again!"

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

"And you, perhaps, who scoff may yet their glory share,
As the rich spoil of their battle and the captive of their prayer."

THERE is little more to tell. The baroness returned to her foreign home, and she and her daughter met no more in all the years that followed.

But she was never quite the same woman again. Her conscience had been stirred, and her better self roused in a way it had never been roused before. Not, as the reader knows, that Ruth had ever condemned her mother's faults and short-comings, for that would have

been an utter failure. Any sort of fault-finding would have incensed her and made her defiant, and any affectation of superiority, expressed or implied, would have stung her vanity and done more harm than good.

No; her daughter had never in any way condemned her. But what she had done for her was this—she had raised her by her example into such an atmosphere as to lead her to condemn herself.

And of Basil and Ruth Norton, what remains to be said? For "Happiness has no history, and but for sorrow chronicles would cease."

But if there be such a thing as a heaven on earth, it was their home;

"For there are two heavens,
Both made of love: one inconceivable
Even by the other, so divine it is;
The other, far on this side of the stars,
By men called *home*, where some blest pair are met,
. . . Each at its gentle task,
Of book, or household need, or meditation,
By summer noon or curtained fire in frost.
And by degrees there come (not always come,
Yet mostly) other smaller inmates there,
Cherubim-faced, yet growing like these two.

. . . . . .

And so, 'twixt joy,
And love, and tears, and whatsoever pain
Man fitly shares with man, these two grow old."

And in this home, as the years went by, Basil Norton grew less severe in his judgments, and the criticizing faculty well-nigh left him altogether. For in his young wife his ideal was realized, and his search for reality satisfied.

THE END.

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