A CHELSEA HOUSEHOLDER.

"Is it a little thing
To have enjoyed the sun,
To have lived light in the spring,
To have loved, to have thought, to have done?"

M. ARNOLD.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:

SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON, SEARLE & RIVINGTON,

CROWN BUILDINGS, 188, FLEET STREET.

1882.

LONDON:
PRINTED BY WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED,
STAMFORD STREET AND CHARING CROSS.

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CHAPTER I.

THE RETURN OF THE HOUSEHOLDER.

MURIEL felt that her pleasant holiday had indeed come to an end as she drove through the dull streets and dreary squares which lie between Waterloo station and the Chelsea Embankment. It was a dank, drizzling day; Southampton Water, as they passed it in the morning, looked like an indifferent drawing in Indian ink, faint flickers of sunshine here and there touching but hardly lighting its dim grey surface. The nearer they got to London, the closer and denser of course grew the cloud curtain, and by the time they got out

of the train rain was falling heavily, and the air was thick and murky as in November. She had asked her sister-in-law to send the brougham to meet her at the station, but a prolonged survey of the platform showing no signs of one, she and Elizabeth put themselves into a cab and drove off together through the gloom. The street in which Mrs. Prettyman lived came first, so, having deposited her friend on the way, Muriel drove on alone to her own house.

It was not until the cabman had rung three or four times unsuccessfully at the front gate that the bell was at last answered. Then a tall woman, in a white cap, put out her head with an air of suppressed exasperation, which gave way to a broad beam of satisfaction when she espied Muriel.

"Why, if it ain't ever Miss Ellis herself," she exclaimed, running down to fling open the gate.

"Didn't Mrs. Skynner tell you to expect me, Eliza?" our heroine inquired, when at last she stood in her own hall.

"No, miss, not a word. Mrs. Skynner, she went out early this morning in the carriage, she and the other lady that's been stopping here. And she didn't say nothing except that she'd be back to lunch, and Mrs. Hopper was to be sure to have the lamb cutlets ready, and the cold salmon, and cherry pie, and whipped cream, what was ordered, and there they've been since two o'clock, and the cutlets as hard as iron by this, and Mrs. Skynner hasn't never been back, no, nor the other lady either."

"What other lady?" was upon the tip of Muriel's tongue; but she saw from the worthy Eliza's expression that the question would probably unlock a whole volume of pent-up wrath and dissatisfaction, so contented herself with simply begging to have

tea brought to her as soon as possible in the studio, and then went her way upstairs to her own room.

It was rather a dreary sort of home-coming, certainly, she thought, as she took off her hat and cloak. Of course Sophia might have the best of good reasons for not being at home to herself, but it did seem odd not giving the servants a hint of her arrival. Probably, though, it was her own fault, she ought to have written herself to either Mrs. Hopper, or Eliza; and then again, who could this lady be that Eliza said was staying in the house? and why did Sophia have strangers staying there without giving her warning? And having arrived at this point, Muriel began to tax herself with unamiability and selfishness; had she not told Sophia scores of times that she was to consider the house her own, and was she so foolish and unreasonable as to be annoyed simply

because her sister-in-law had taken her at her word?

She went downstairs again to the studio. It felt uncomfortably hot and close, and she hastened to fling open the windows, and let in what little light and air was to be had outside, before looking round her. It was not a particularly large room, being, in fact, merely the ordinary double drawing-room of a London house with the partition knocked down, and the back window somewhat enlarged. As a studio, of course, it was open to many objections; the sunlight on bright days struggling persistently in, while the cross lights were a disadvantage which no amount of screens and curtains were able entirely to obviate. For all that Muriel herself would not have exchanged it for the best constructed studio in London. Whatever else might be wanting, there was always the river to fall back upon. And when her day's

work was over, it was always to her an untold treat and refreshment to fling back the mufflings and step out over the window-sill on to the balcony to look down that long silvery highway, with its ever-varying freight carried swiftly past without noise or bustle. To-day, however, even the Thames itself looked dismal. The trees upon the Battersea side of the river, showed black as ink through the leaden-tinted atmosphere ; the broad mud-coloured expanse was churned into sulky yellow waves by the passage of a steamer; the wet flags, dripping trees, and puddle-starred pavement, looked all inexpressibly dreary; so, turning abruptly away from the window, she walked round to inspect her various possessions, and see how they looked after her month's absence.

For an artist she had not really many properties, but what she had were well disposed. The room was rather low, with

a dark oak floor sparsely scattered over with rugs, a large tiger-skin which had belonged to her brother John occupying the place of honour before the fire-place. The walls up to about eight feet from the floor were covered with a dull orange-coloured matting, against which the brasses and bits of Spanish and Moorish pottery—not valuable, but quaint, and good as to colour—were arranged. Her own paintings, when not actually in progress, were usually set *en pénitence*, with their faces to the wall. There was a whole row of these culprits now awaiting judgment upon the opposite side of the floor, so, crossing the room, Muriel turned over two or three, placing one upon an easel, and stepping back a little, the better to inspect it. It looked extremely bad, she thought; so, indeed, did they all; and she began to wonder whether she would ever again find heart and courage to take up her brush,

and set vigorously to work upon them. Altogether, she felt low and depressed, what with the dreariness of the day, and the home-coming which had so little of home in it; so, leaving the examination of the rest for another time, she drew a chair over to the empty fireplace, and sat down, feeling out of heart and humour with herself, and with all the world besides.

She had sat there, perhaps, for about five minutes when there came a quick tap at the door, so, concluding that it was only Eliza with the tea, she called out, "Come in," without turning, or changing her attitude.

It was a lighter step, however, than that of the excellent Eliza which presently crossed the floor, and a pair of small white hands, which certainly did not belong to Eliza, were laid upon her arm, while a soft cooing voice said in her ear:

"Here you are, you dear thing? How glad I am to have you back!"

Muriel sprang up. "Why, Kitty," she cried, "is that you? How in the world did you know I was home?"

The visitor laughed and kissed her ecstatically. "I saw the cab drive up to the Prettymans', and then, of course, I knew you had come, so I just slipped on a waterproof cloak, and ran off at once through the rain to see you. How well you're looking, Muriel!"

"And so are you, Kitty—better than ever, I think," Muriel answered, holding her visitor at arm's length, and looking admiringly at her from head to foot.

Miss Kitty King undoubtedly was an extremely pretty girl, with a cloud of light yellow hair which she was pleased to brush up into a sort of semi-masculine crop at the side of her head; a complexion of lilies and roses, and a pair of blue eyes as clear and as bright as the corolla of a Speedwell. Perhaps the prettiest thing about Kitty,

however, were her hands, which, as I have just said, were small and white, with the tiniest pointed fingers, and the daintiest little dimples in the world. Strange to say, these hands were anything, however, but sources of unalloyed delight to their owner; indeed, there were moments of exasperation, when, for all their beauty, Kitty could almost have borne to part with them for a more ordinary, but at the same time, serviceable pair. It was the constantly expressed opinion at all the numerous academies and drawing schools she had attended, that Kitty King was physically incapable of drawing a straight line. Whether this really was the case, or not, there certainly was no doubt that her drawing was not what it ought to be, and hitherto all her own efforts, and the efforts of all her various masters had been powerless to make it any better. Her father was a London doctor, a busy, over-worked man,

with a large practice, and a larger family, Miss Kitty herself being the fourth daughter. The Kings were remarkably dull, stereotyped sort of people, always excepting that wayward young lady herself, who had independence and audacity enough in her own small person to have set up a whole houseful. Indeed, it was currently asserted, and that, too, by others besides Elizabeth Prettyman, that Kitty had taken up the career of art student, not because she cared one single button about art, but simply as a sort of cloak under the cover of which she might the better carry out her own emancipation. Of late, however, she had undoubtedly turned over several new leaves in this respect; had devoted herself to Muriel, sat habitually at her feet, and adopted her ways, and under these influences had begun to study with greater diligence, if not as yet with much more conspicuous success

than heretofore. It was upon this subject that she now began to enlarge.

"I'm so longing to see all your new sketches, Muriel darling," she exclaimed. "Mayn't I come first thing to-morrow morning and look at them? I'm sure you've done lovely things down in that forest where you've been such ages. Only trees are so horribly difficult, aren't they? At least, no, I forgot, not to you, because you find nothing difficult, but they are to me. Did I tell you that we went down a sketching party to Richmond Park the other day on purpose to draw them? Such fun! Everybody brought their own luncheon, and we ate it amongst the ferns: and after luncheon Fred Archer and I —you remember my telling you about Fred Archer, who used to be at old Mr. Halliburton's?—we drew caricatures of one another, and every one said mine was *much* the best. It's true anybody

could draw a caricature of Fred Archer, with those extraordinary eyes of his, and his ears sticking out like the handles of that jug up there; still, they all said it really was very clever. I must bring you my sketch-book to-morrow, and you shall see."

"And have you been drawing anything else besides caricatures, Kitty?" Muriel inquired.

"Oh, indeed, yes, Muriel; I've been working terrifically hard—quite terrifically. You just ask them all if I haven't! Why, I've got a great, enormous still life thing on hand now—pieces of armour, you know, and apples, and a dead pigeon, and a red curtain hanging up behind; and I'm so dreadfully sick of it all, only Mr. Malby wants me to finish it and send it in for the competition. I know it's of no use, for they won't give me anything—they never will; but still he wants me to try. And

oh, Muriel, there's one horribly, horribly difficult bit of the armour, just where the lights come in; and though I've tried to do it I don't know how often, I can't get it right. I do so wish you'd come and do it for me. Will you now? There's a dear."

"Very well, Kitty, I'll do my best, but if it's so terribly difficult as you say, probably I shall not be able to manage it either."

"Oh, yes, Muriel, you will. I never knew anything you couldn't do. In fact, if I didn't love you so much I should hate you for doing everything so easily. It does seem so hard, too, when you are so rich, and don't care an atom about making money, whereas to poor me it would be such a great, great matter. And then, I'm always wanting things—clothes and all that, you know—and you never seem as if you wanted anything at all!"

Muriel smiled, and then sighed a little.

"I don't think, after all, you need really envy me so much, Kitty," she said. "I suspect you are decidedly the better off of us two in spite of all your wants."

"Oh, you mean, perhaps, as to relations? Certainly, I wouldn't take that Mrs. Skynner of yours in exchange for daddy, or any of the girls, not even for Arabella, though she is so dreadfully tiresome and proper—more proper even than Elizabeth Prettyman—always making out that what one wants to do isn't correct; as if people had time nowadays to stop and think about the correctness of everything. Still, not one of them, I will say, is nearly as bad as Mrs. Skynner—nasty slimy thing!"

"Now, Kitty, I won't have you talk like that. You shall just walk straight out of the house if you begin to abuse my relations. I won't have it."

Well, but, Muriel, she *is* a slimy thing. I'm sure she's like a slug, or a great leech,

the way she lives on you. And now she has got this other dreadful woman—this Madame Cairioli—she's worse than ever. It made me feel quite ill the other day seeing them both driving about in your carriage. That Madame Cairioli is the most dreadful old woman I ever saw in my life. She's for all the world like a vulture, with that long scraggy neck and those horrible skinny hands!"

Muriel, it must be owned, felt no small curiosity herself about this mysterious Madame Cairioli, who, it would now appear, had been staying for some time in the house, and whose name she then heard for the first time. She did not choose, however, to give Miss Kitty the satisfaction of knowing how entirely she had been kept in the dark, so accordingly hastened to change the subject.

"Have you seen anything of my Uncle Hal lately, Kitty? I thought he would

have been here to meet me. I hope he is not ill."

"Oh, no, Muriel, I'm sure he is not ill, because the other day—the day I went to Richmond—I met him as I was going to the train, and he had a great enormous bunch of keys in his hand, which he told me had belonged to Cardinal Wolsey or Thomas à Becket, I forget which of them. He had just made a great bargain, he said, at some curiosity shop. They ought to have been cheap enough, I'm sure, for they looked to be nothing but rust; but he was quite delighted with them, and I think he said he was going to give them to you."

Muriel laughed. "Uncle Hal is always giving me presents," she said. "I am afraid I shall have to buy a new house soon to put them all away in. But I wonder he has not been here himself. He knew I was to be home to-day."

"Oh, you may be sure those two women have frightened him away. I'm sure Mrs. Skynner's tongue is enough to frighten any one."

"Doesn't it strike you, Miss Kitty, that you're hardly the person to complain of other people's tongues?" Muriel inquired.

"You mean because I'm a chatterbox? But that's quite a different thing. I don't so much mind chatterboxes. Oh, you may laugh, Muriel, but it is *quite* different. What's so dreadful about Mrs. Skynner is that she's so deliberate; you seem to get wrapped up in words as if you had got into the inside of a feather bed, and didn't know the way out again. And now she's got this other dreadful woman to help her I don't know what will happen, or rather, I do. They'll frighten all your friends away, and then when they've got you all to themselves they'll set to work and devour you."

Muriel laughed again, at the same time making a sign to the irrepressible Kitty to hold her tongue, Eliza being at that moment in the act of entering the room with tea.

"Is Mrs. Skynner back yet?" she inquired.

"No, miss, not yet."

"Well, then, Kitty, if you don't mind hurrying over tea a little, I'll walk back with you as far as Uncle Hal's lodging, and see for myself how he is."

"Yes, do, Muriel, for I ought, I know, to be getting home, or there'll be the most tremendous hue and cry after me. They think me capable there of any and every enormity. I'm sure if Arabella finds I'm gone she'll make sure I've eloped with some one! As if one would be so stupid—missing the presents and everything. But that's the way; once you get a bad name they'll believe anything of you—anything."

And Kitty's blue eyes were turned up with an air of unspeakable innocence.

It was raining still a little as the two girls walked down the Embankment, but the sky looked lighter than it had done all day. Muriel's spirits, too, felt all the better for Miss Kitty's company. It was impossible to be long down-hearted in the society of that vivacious small personage, whose brisk little tongue kept up an unceasing chatter the whole time they were together. On arriving at Hal Flack's lodging he was found to be out, so having walked with Miss Kitty far enough to see her safe on her homeward way, Muriel turned back to her own house.

On inquiry she found that her sister-in-law had in the meantime returned, so turned to the downstairs sitting-room, which ever since that lady's arrival had been set aside sacredly for her uses, and knocked at the door.

Mrs. Skynner rose from an armchair as her sister-in-law entered. As she has not yet been formally presented to the reader it may be as well to state that she was a large, fair, full-faced woman, with some pretensions still to looks, a peculiarly self-satisfied smile, and a pair of light blue eyes, which seemed to be perpetually roving in search of something which they as perpetually failed to find.

"How do you do, my dear Muriel? I am delighted to have the pleasure of welcoming you home again," she exclaimed with a sort of measured effusiveness, advancing her cheek at the same time to her sister-in-law's embrace.

"This is not exactly my first coming, though, Sophia," Muriel could not help saying.

"Ah, no, by the way, so the servant told me. I was so sorry, really *extremely* sorry, you should have had to come back

to an empty house; but it was not my fault, Muriel, as I am sure you will believe. In fact, I fully intended being back long before you *could* have arrived, but we were obliged to go off rather suddenly to the Britannia Hall—Madame Cairioli that is, and I. Such a superior woman, Muriel; you will be immensely pleased to make her acquaintance. So philanthropic too; nothing in the least small or petty in *her* philanthropy either, but such large views. She belongs herself to an excellent family; a relation, in fact, of Lord Dhuhallow; but her husband was a foreigner—a Greek, I believe—and had great diplomatic appointments abroad, and in all sorts of out-of-the-way places; and wherever she went she interested herself in the regeneration of the country—its moral and religious regeneration I mean, of course—and has kept up with them ever since. The meeting to-day at the Britannia Hall was

for the evangelization of Bolivia—in South America, you know. M. and Madame Cairioli were stationed there once, at the capital, I forget its name; and it seems the inhabitants are extremely anxious to have a Protestant bishop. Unfortunately, there are difficulties in the way—want of money, and various things—and it was to explain them that the meeting was held. I really was so *extremely* sorry that you were not able to be back in time for it; it was intensely interesting, and so well attended. Lord Caradoc was there, and Sir Thomas Bridgewater, and all the Ladies Catt. Oh, and that reminds me, coming out I saw that friend of yours, Mr. Wygram, the artist, and young Mr. Newmarsh, Lord Newmarsh's son, with him, and I was just upon the point of introducing them to Madame Cairioli, when *your* friend, Muriel, turned away in the very oddest manner; I must say his

behaviour was *most* singular, and I saw that it made an extremely bad impression upon Madame Cairioli."

"You didn't tell me in any of your letters that Madame Cairioli was staying here, Sophia," Muriel said, not feeling called upon to take up the cudgels on Mr. Wygram's behalf.

"Did I not, Muriel? Well, that was really very thoughtless on my part—very thoughtless indeed. I often find that I do leave out the principal thing in my letters. Madame Cairioli was saying the other day that you never ought to judge people by their letters; clever people write such stupid ones, and stupid people write clever; it really is *quite* singular. However, there can be no question about Madame Cairioli. Her abilities, I should say, are quite first-rate, and so you will say when you see her."

"Have you known her long?" Muriel

asked. "I don't think I ever remember hearing her name before."

"No, not at all long; indeed, it was an accident, I may say, her coming to stay here at all. Of course, if I had sent her a regular invitation, I should have been careful to inform you beforehand; for you cannot have failed to observe, Muriel, how extremely particular I always am about that sort of thing, and how careful I am always to explain to *every one* that the house is yours, not mine. Though I'm sure, to people who knew me formerly, when we lived at Cedarville Lodge, and who knew how handsomely everything was done *there*, and how little sign of stint or economy, or anything of *that* sort there was, it must seem very strange indeed that I should not have a house of my own."

"Yes, but about Madame Cairioli?" Muriel said a little impatiently.

"Yes, about Madame Cairioli. Our

original meeting took place at one of old Mrs. Somerton Crawley's afternoon parties. She came, in fact, of her own accord, and sat beside me, and told me a great deal about herself, and about her relationship with the Dhuhallows, and all the different places she had been to. And then she happened to ask me if I knew of any good hotel she could get into, because they seemed to be all so extremely full, on account of it being the Derby week; so, finding what a remarkably agreeable person she was, I naturally offered to take her round in the carriage, and we tried three or four, and it was quite true, there was no room in any of them, and she didn't seem to know what to do, as it happened, so unfortunately, that *all* her friends were just then out of town. So I asked her if she would like to come back with me for the night, and she immediately accepted, and has stayed since.

But she is only staying on quite from day to day, and could go away at *any* time. And, if I had the least *idea*, Muriel, that you would have disliked my asking her, of course I should not have dreamt of doing so; but I have been always so used to exercising hospitality myself that it comes perfectly naturally to me, and it never even *occurred* to me that you could object."

"But I don't at all object, my dear Sophia. On the contrary, I am only too glad that you should have had somebody here to interest and amuse you. I was afraid you'd be so very dull all by yourself."

"Oh, as for amusement, Muriel, that may be all very well for you, but, after what I've suffered and endured, amusement is about the last thing I am likely to think of. And as for Madame Cairioli, I can assure you that she is a woman of far too high a standard to care about mere amusement.

She is devoted to the very highest interests. She—— Madame Cairioli, this is my sister-in-law, Miss Ellis, of whom you have heard me speak."

The object of the above glowing eulogy entered the room with a quick, sliding step, and it was with a rapid courtesy, accompanied by an equally rapid expression of rapture, that she received Miss Ellis's greeting. It having been just intimated that she was English, Muriel was naturally not a little surprised at the decidedly foreign accent with which she spoke, but concluded that she must have acquired it in the course of her long residence abroad. In spite of herself, she could not help calling to mind Kitty King's unflattering comparison as she looked at her sister-in-law's new friend. Undoubtedly the philanthropic Madame Cairioli was extremely like a vulture. She had all the quickness of movement, thinness of neck,

and cold hungry look of eye that one associates with a bird of prey. What her age might be it was difficult to guess, but Muriel decided that it could not well be much under sixty. Madame Cairioli was attired in a high black silk dress, rather skimpy as to the skirt, but particularly smart and well adjusted as to the figure. Her forehead, which was very yellow and wrinkled, was surmounted by numerous clusters of small jet-black curls, rising one above the other in a succession of tiers; these in their turn being surmounted by an elaborate little edifice of lace and artificial flowers, not quite a cap, nor yet a wreath, but partaking to some extent of the nature of both.

At dinner, to which the three ladies almost immediately adjourned, the conversation ran chiefly upon the proceedings of the afternoon, and the high desirability of providing a thoroughly satisfactory and

Sophia was a relation, and as such had a clear claim to such hospitality as it was in her power to dispense. Madame Cairioli, on the other hand, was not a relation, nor did she feel at all disposed to admit such pleas as she might put forward in that direction. It would be extremely unpleasant, of course, to have to hint at anything of the kind; it was unpleasant even to think of, and would be doubly unpleasant to put into execution. At the same time, she privately determined that if the necessity arose, she must not, and would not, allow herself to shrink from it. Meantime, she devoutly trusted that no such necessity ever would arise.

CHAPTER II.

A DOMESTIC CRISIS.

HER thoughts on the same subject next morning were not at all more comfortable than those of the night before. The more she reflected upon Madame Cairioli's peculiarities, the more she felt convinced that she was not a person with whom it would be pleasant to be thrown upon terms of familiarity. This did not in the least arise from any idea of her not being what is called a lady. On such points Muriel was almost culpably indifferent; indeed, for so intelligent a young lady, there were many points connected with the social order of things to which she remained, and seemed likely to remain curiously unalive. It was

something totally different from this. A vague feeling of dislike and even repulsion, which came over her whenever she thought of her sister-in-law's new friend. On the other hand, with this feeling there mingled another, one of profound pity and commiseration. Lying in bed in the morning the image of Madame Cairioli, with her haggard, hungry eyes, and yellow careworn face rose before her like a sort of nightmare. The room to which her guest had been relegated was next door to her own, and every now and then the sound of a low cough reached her through the partition. Muriel had that quick impressionability which comes of a readiness to seize and be influenced by outward impressions, and there was something in the image of this unhappy-faced woman, with her only too transparent assumptions, and her piteous attempts at fashion, which filled her with a vague dis-

quietude, as of something bodeful and uncanny which had alighted at her gate.

Nor were these mingled impressions by any means diminished by the events of the morning. Mrs. Skynner did not appear at breakfast, Muriel and her guest were consequently *tête-à-tête.* Madame Cairioli's appearance was much the same as on the previous evening, only that the artificial flowers in her cap were now replaced by bows of red velvet, the daylight showing also still more unmistakably the lines of age, and of other lines written in a character new to Muriel, and to which she hesitated to give a name. Towards the end of breakfast a card was brought in, and presented to Madame Cairioli, who rose with some appearance of agitation, saying—

"A friend of mine—a gentleman that is, with whom I am extremely intimate—associated with numerous good works.

Might I be permitted? Or is the moment inconvenient? If so——"

"Inconvenient? Not in the least," Muriel said quietly. "Should you like to see him here or in my sister-in-law's sitting-room?"

Madame Cairioli intimated that she would prefer to see him in the sitting-room, and into the sitting-room the gentleman accordingly was shown. Muriel remained behind to finish her own breakfast, and to attend to the wants of Gamaliel, her Persian cat, who for the last ten minutes had been putting forward peremptory claims upon the remains of the fish; after which she went upstairs.

She had just reached the studio door when Madame Cairioli's voice was heard calling to her in deprecating accents—

"Would Miss Ellis be so kind, so very kind, as to come into the sitting-room for a minute—only a minute."

Muriel turned, wondering rather. In the sitting-room she found a stout pompous-looking individual in black, with a large smooth-shaven face, a liberal allowance of waistcoat, and a black satin stock, coming up very close to his chin.

She was bowing distantly, but Madame Cairioli hastened to perform a more elaborate introduction.

"Permit me, my dear young lady, to have the honour of presenting to you Mr. Montmorency Smith, a gentleman whose efforts in the cause of philanthropy are, I may say, *pro*digious. This, Mr. Montmorency Smith, is the young lady to whose generous hospitality is owing my having the pleasure of receiving you under her roof; one whose genius is only equalled by her goodness, and, if I might venture to say so, her great personal attractions!"

If anything could have annoyed Muriel more than this address itself, it would have

been the tone of fulsome and obsequious compliment with which it was delivered. It was impossible, however, for her, she felt, to turn round and walk away immediately, so she simply again bowed slightly, and then stood still, waiting for what was to follow.

There seemed to be some little embarrassment on the part of the other two occupants of the room, the stout gentleman in black glancing interrogatively in the direction of Madame Cairioli, she in her turn looking appealingly towards our heroine. Finally Madame Cairioli cleared her throat.

"Mr. Montmorency Smith has called about a sad, a very sad case," she began, "a case the more distressing because there is a sentiment, a feeling of family pride, I may say a delicacy, which hinders its being approached in the more ordinary manner. There was a time when my own ears were never deaf to such appeals, but that time,

as I have been telling my friend, is past, and I can only refer them to the kind consideration of others, and it is for this that I would venture——"

"The young lady must promise secrecy, though," the gentleman in black interrupted, in a thick, deep voice, which seemed proceeding directly from the region of his waistcoat.

"Oh, but Miss Ellis *will* promise," Madame Cairioli cried enthusiastically.

"I cannot say that I like doing so," Muriel said coldly. "In fact, I should much prefer your not telling me at all, if it is a matter that requires secrecy."

Madame Cairioli clasped her hands, glancing at the same time despairingly in the direction of her companion.

"For the present, then, I am willing to waive the point," he said majestically. "Doubtless, the young lady's own good feeling and sense of propriety will be a

sufficient guarantee. You have heard, I presume, of the Cholmondeleys, of Cholmondeley," he continued, addressing himself directly to Muriel.

"No; I cannot say that I ever have," she answered.

"Indeed!" The "indeed" being uttered in a tone which implied that a person who had *not* heard of the Cholmondeleys of Cholmondeley, was hardly entitled to a hearing upon any subject. "Not even by name?"

"Not even by name, I think," she answered.

"That, if you will forgive my saying so, is singular—very singular."

"Oh, but Miss Ellis has led such a secluded life," exclaimed Madame Cairioli. "She is devoted to Nature—to the *beaux arts*—she is a great *artiste*," with a prolonged emphasis on the "*r*" in the last word.

"Is it about these people that you wish to speak to me?" Muriel inquired with some impatience.

"No; that is, not directly. The fact is, that the lady for whom I would wish to appeal to your benevolence is nearly related by marriage to the present head of the Cholmondeleys of Cholmondeley, a fact which alone is enough to denote her high social standing, the wealth and distinction of that family being—if you will again excuse my saying so—world-renowned. By a combination of circumstances, the relation of which would at present delay me too long, this lady, her name is Jones—Mrs. Jellaby Jones—has been reduced to a condition of extreme penury. In fact, I may say that at the present moment she is in—Want;" and Mr. Montmorency Smith paused to give effect to his words.

"Yes?" Muriel said inquiringly.

"Yes," Mr. Montmorency Smith said authoritatively, "the circumstances are most pressing." And again he paused.

"But has she appealed to her relations?" Muriel not unnaturally demanded. "If they are as rich as you say, surely they would be anxious to relieve her?"

"Doubtless they would, but this is precisely what she refuses to do. The object of myself and of those interested in the circumstances is to make up a purse, without her knowledge, you understand, entirely without her knowledge, to be presented as a gift—no names being assigned. This we conceive to be the most delicate way of approaching the matter." And Mr. Montmorency Smith expanded his waistcoat with the air of a man warranted to speak upon a point of delicacy.

"I cannot say that I see it in that light," Muriel said gravely. "If I was in want myself, I should much prefer being

relieved by my own relations than by strangers, and so, I think, would most people."

Mr. Montmorency Smith smiled disdainfully.

"Oh, but surely, surely not," exclaimed Madame Cairioli. "Indeed, my dear young lady, you cannot judge, you cannot, indeed; how should you? Besides, a trifle," she added, with sudden insistance, "a leetle, *leetle* trifle! You would never miss it."

Thus adjured, Muriel put her hand into her pocket. "I have not got my purse here, but I will send you down something by my maid," she said. "It can, I fear, be only a trifle, as I have had a good many calls lately. You will excuse me, please, now, as I have some work to do upstairs;" and so saying she left the room.

As she retraced her steps, Muriel could not help feeling that the scene in which

she had just borne a part, had been an unexpectedly disagreeable one. To turn a deaf ear in a case, which, after all, *might* be one of real need, was in any case painful, yet on the other hand, to give at all under the circumstances, was, she could not help feeling, an act of extreme folly and weakness. What did she know of these people? These Cholmondeleys of Cholmondeley? this fat Mr. Montmorency Smith? What did she even know of Madame Cairioli herself, except that her sister-in-law had made her acquaintance at the house of Mrs. Somerton Crawley, an old lady whose good-nature had long made her the prey of that not inconsiderable portion of the community which thrives upon the commiseration of others? Muriel, of course, had not herself had for more than twelve months the disposal of her own fortunes without having to run the gauntlet of a good deal of indis-

criminate alms-begging ; still, this she could not help feeling to be an aggravated case of the kind. Did Mr. Montmorency Smith go round to every house in the neighbourhood, she wondered? or why was she specially honoured? And was there, or was there not, any Mrs. Jellaby Jones at all? And if not, what was she to think of her sister-in-law's friend, Madame Cairioli ?

She was glad (her donation dispatched in an envelope by Eliza) to be able to turn from these disquieting considerations to the serener atmosphere of her studio ; those very difficulties, which yesterday appeared so formidable, now, on the contrary, presenting themselves rather as incentives than otherwise to progress. She was not destined, however, to make any very rapid advance that morning. Hardly had she seated herself and collected her materials, before a knock came at the door, and Mrs.

Hopper, the cook, entered, bearing a small bundle of books, at sight of which Muriel inwardly shuddered.

"These are the house books, Miss Ellis, as you said I was to bring you this morning," she said apologetically.

"Thank you, Mrs. Hopper, will you kindly put them upon that table."

The books deposited, Mrs. Hopper still lingered. "And I'm sure I hope, miss, as you won't think it was I was to blame," she said, smoothing down her apron, and glancing apprehensively in their direction. "But Mrs. Skynner, she really was so very particular, and wouldn't hear of nothing but the best of everything, and as to cold meat, or the likes of that, why, I couldn't so much as breathe it to her, I couldn't indeed—not even on Sundays."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hopper; I am sure you have done your best," Muriel said kindly, if a trifle impatiently. "Leave the

books there, please, and I will come and talk to you about them presently."

Mrs. Hopper gone, she once more turned back to her easel. It was useless, however, she found, attempting to do anything with those odious little documents staring her in the face; better look them over at once, and make an end of them. Drawing her chair over, therefore, to the table, she sat down doggedly to her task. It proved to be a longer as well as an even less pleasant one than she had anticipated; indeed, a very short perusal convinced her that for that morning, at all events, her fate was sealed, and that palettes and paint-brushes would have to rest unused where they were.

Muriel's housewifely instincts were by nature, it must be owned, but very slightly developed; indeed, she would any day of the week have infinitely preferred going without her dinner to having to go through the pre-

liminary ordeal of ordering it. In this, however, as in other respects, she owed much to Mrs. Prettyman's good offices. Of course, as long as she remained under her friend's roof, her personal experience in the matter had been *nil*, but from the moment that the positions were reversed, and that she herself became the householder, Mrs. Prettyman had rigidly insisted upon her taking the management into her own hands, so far, at least, as the giving of orders were concerned. The actual practical trouble, it is needless to say, had still been Mrs. Prettyman's, but at least the nominal authority had rested with the young mistress of the house. One advantage of this was that when the second change came, and Mrs. Prettyman left, Muriel was to some extent equal to the task of regulating her own expenditure, Mrs. Skynner having fortunately neither genius nor inclination in that direction. On leaving

home for the New Forest, she had deposited a sum with the worthy Mrs. Hopper, sufficient, so she flattered herself, to tide over the interval. That, as a matter of fact, it had not done so, she had now to learn, expenses, trifling in themselves, having amounted in the aggregate to a sum not very far short of double that laid out for the purpose. One result of this discovery was that the attention of our heedless young lady was thus perforce turned to the state of her own exchequer, with results not a little startling. Fifteen hundred a year is, undoubtedly, a very comfortable little income; still, the resources of fifteen hundred a year are not, as most people are aware, inexhaustible. In short, a review of the whole financial position soon convinced Muriel that unless she was prepared to exceed, and pretty considerably exceed her income, it would be necessary forthwith to retrench—a word which she

strongly suspected of having an extremely ill-omened sound in Mrs. Skynner's ears. Before taking any definite step, however, she determined to go and talk the whole matter over with Mrs. Prettyman—always her refuge in times of need. Putting the books away, therefore, into a drawer, she put on her hat and cloak and walked briskly off to call upon her friends.

Mrs. Prettyman's house was semi-detached, with a tiny gravelled yard in front of it, the gravel ending in a narrow border of flowers, such easily satisfied flowers as are good enough to bloom in the dull air of our most unflowery metropolis. It was a pretty, modest-looking little house, with a couple of small neatly finished bow windows, ornamented with two rows of flower-pots, beyond which Mrs. Prettyman's white-capped head, and the top of Elizabeth's easel were generally to be seen. One thing, however, there was about it which

certainly could not be called modest, and that was its name—Casa Manfredonia—which sprawled itself in an audacious and unmeaning fashion across both sides of the small green-painted doorpost. For this piece of extravagance the present occupants, however, were plainly not responsible; indeed, Italian names—the offspring of some builder with a turn for the sonorous—predominated largely in the vicinity; the house next door to Mrs. Prettyman, which was occupied by Dr. King, being not unsuggestively styled Qui-si-sano, and beyond that again there was a Sorrento Lodge, and a San Severino Villa a little further down. Mrs. Prettyman's house, however, was the smallest, as well as admittedly the prettiest of the whole row, with a certain air of frugal trimness, and *propreté*, peculiarly characteristic of the inmates. To-day, however, this aspect was less conspicuous than usual; nor was it,

as our heroine soon found, by any means a propitious moment for securing that undivided attention which her own affairs needed. The threatened invasion of Indian grandchildren had taken place that morning, and the effect, for the moment at all events, was chaos. Looking round her, Muriel could not help being amused by the change which those three or four hours had already sufficed to make. Indian children are not, as a rule, exuberant, and these appeared to be peculiarly limp and colourless specimens of their kind; still the mere fact of there being children in the house at all, seemed forthwith to revolutionize the *ménage*. A dusky-faced ayah was shaking her bangles upon a rug in the little outer hall; cups of milk stood about on all the drawing-room tables; toys, and broken pieces of rusk and biscuit were scattered over the hitherto spotless carpets; the whole house had a disorganized, nursery-ridden

aspect which seemed wholly to change its character. As Muriel had foreseen, the chief sufferer from the invasion was evidently poor Elizabeth, whose face already wore an expression of resolutely suppressed disturbance. Mrs. Prettyman, on the contrary, was radiant; whole vistas of new and hitherto unforeseen activities rising vividly before her in the future. Seizing an opportunity of whispering to the former that for the future she must look upon the Cheyne Walk studio as her own, Muriel hastened away, feeling that whatever ordeals might be in store for the newly-amalgamated household were not at all likely to be lessened by the presence even of the most sympathizing of outsiders.

Her next visit was to her Uncle Hal, who occupied rooms in a house midway between the Prettymans' and her own. On inquiry she was told that he was

at home, so hastened upstairs to see him. He was not in the sitting-room, however, when she entered, and she had time to look around her before he appeared.

Hal Flack's own artistic aspirations had long since died a natural death; but on another, and in many people's opinion a scarcely less important branch of art, he still retained a hold. He was an assiduous collector, an avocation for which a well-filled purse is generally held an indispensable requisite. In this case, however, the hindrance did not appear to have acted disadvantageously. Hal attended every sale, and if he seldom bought anything, he, at all events, always believed himself to be on the point of buying, or only deterred by some want of absolute perfection in the article in question—by anything and everything, in fact, except a want of the necessary ready money. He

did not by any means confine himself, however, to what are commonly regarded as works of art, his tastes in this respect being larger and more catholic, and anything which struck him as odd, novel, or curious was admitted without hesitation amongst the miscellaneous lumber which covered his walls and floor. Queer looking pebbles, to which the caprice of the waves had imparted an unusual, or what appeared to Hal an unusual, appearance; pieces of wood, dropped by vessels on their way up or down the Thames; bits of metal, melted and twisted at the foundry; bottles containing snakes; fragments of tapa or cocoanut; lumps of vitrified glass; old keys; Turkish slippers; broken toys—these and thousands of other things, which it would take a week to describe, all found a place on his shelves, and were all duly ticketed and catalogued. In early days he had been an assiduous collector of birds'

eggs, peacocks' feathers, dried grasses, and such like spoil of the fields, not in the least from any turn for natural history, but simply for the sake of the things themselves. In short, he was a born collector, as other men are born actors or born orators. He had no ulterior object; he never for an instant dreamt of making money by his various possessions; he simply hoarded his trash as a miser hoards his gold, in obedience to some vague, mysterious impulse of acquisitiveness. Of late he had taken to collecting, not for himself, but for his niece, somewhat to the dismay of the latter, whose studio and passages threatened to become the receptacles of a perfect avalanche of such miscellaneous and heterogeneous objects of interest.

While she was still looking round the walls, and inwardly wondering which of their various adornments would next be tendered for her own acceptance, the

bedroom door opened, and her uncle entered.

Poor Hal Flack had never been handsome, and time had certainly not improved him in this respect. He was a thin, wizened-looking little man, with pale, watery-blue eyes, and hair once fair, now fast becoming white, without, however, entirely losing its original flaxen tints. His clothes, too, had a bleached, battered, dust-laden air, as if he and they had been alike exposed to some parching, dessicating influence, which had left them the mere ghosts and mummies of what they once were.

Muriel, with a sudden impulse of pity and affection, got up and went to meet him. It seemed to her as if he had grown perceptibly whiter and older in the month that had passed since they met.

"Why, Uncle Hal, you're not half such a dandy as you used to be," she said

caressingly. "I see I shall have to come and overhaul your wardrobe if you let yourself get out of repair. Look here!" brushing away a big clot of dust which had adhered to his sleeve.

The little man smiled—a smile bringing all his wrinkles into sudden play. "Ah, my dear, you see I've not been having visitors; I've not had any beautiful young ladies coming to see me since you left," he said admiringly. "Besides, I've been busy, Muriel—very busy. I've secured treasures—such treasures!" waving his arms exultingly towards the shelves.

"Well, but Uncle Hal, you must really make yourself nice and spruce this afternoon," his niece persisted, "for I'm coming in the carriage to pick you up and take you off for a drive. We'll go to the park and see all the fine people, and you shall tell me their names; and after that, if you like, we'll go to some of the picture

galleries, and then you must come back and dine with me."

He laughed, nodding his head and rubbing his hands together with childish delight. "We will, Muriel; we will. But you'll take a look at the things now, won't you?" he added, with sudden piteousness, seeing that his niece was preparing to depart.

"Not to-day, Uncle Hal," she said soothingly. "Another time I will come early on purpose, but to-day I really must hurry back; and don't forget three o'clock; and mind that I shall expect you to make yourself very smart!"

As she was coming out of the house, Muriel heard her name called, and, turning round, saw a gentleman making his way across the street towards her—a tall, strikingly handsome man—a curious contrast in all respects to the little being she had just left.

"Miss Ellis, this is indeed a pleasure!"

he exclaimed, as he lifted his hat. "When did you return to town?"

"Only last night. I hope you are quite well, Mr. Wygram?"

For an artist Mr. Wygram had certainly effectually succeeded in divesting himself of anything distinctively artistic in his outward man, his appearance suggesting rather that of some important official or local dignitary; indeed, in country parts it was said that he was apt to be instinctively addressed by appreciativc rustics as "my lord." His age was forty, or perhaps a trifle more, but not a tinge of grey had as yet assailed the magnificence of his auburn beard—a beard asserted by connoisseurs to be without its equal in London.

"May I walk with you as far as your house?" he said deferentially. "There is a subject, indeed, I may say, there are two subjects, on which I particularly want to speak to you. In fact, I had thought

of writing this afternoon had I not been so fortunate as to meet you."

Muriel assented, outwardly readily, inwardly, however, not without some little trepidation. For some time Mr. Wygram confined himself, however, to generalities; spoke of the Academy, and bemoaned the falling off which in certain quarters had of late befallen its walls; praised her own modest contribution, pointing out, at the same time, one or two details to which she would do well in future to direct her attention. It was not, indeed, until they were nearing Muriel's house that he suddenly interrupted himself in the midst of his disquisitions to say—

"You will not, I am sure, think me intrusive, Miss Ellis, if I venture to ask you a question. Is there not a person calling herself Madame Cairioli at present staying in your house?"

"Madame Cairioli? Oh, yes," she an-

prise. "Why, what doubt can there be? Of course she must leave your house at once," he said.

"Well, but, you see, as I told you, she is my sister-in-law's guest, not mine."

"But your sister-in-law would surely not wish to keep her once she was made acquainted with her history?"

"Oh no, of course not. Only that it is such an extremely painful thing to have to tell—in one's own house especially."

"Then let me do it for you," he said eagerly. "I would take any step rather than that you should be exposed to annoyance. Shall I call this afternoon and explain the whole matter to your sister in-law? Do allow me."

"Thank you; that would be very kind," she answered, still, however, with a little hesitation.

"Not at all; I should be delighted. Surely you know, Miss Ellis, that I would

do more than that for you?" he added emphatically. "Or, stay, what do you think of my sending my cousin Newmarsh? Perhaps that would be even better under the circumstances. He knows more about it than I do; in fact, it was he that first put me upon the scent. It seems that this woman was once in his mother's service, and has been an untold source of annoyance to them ever since."

"Thank you; I believe that would, perhaps, be the best plan," Muriel answered in a tone of relief. "And yet it seems hard on the poor woman, too," she added in another moment. "After all, begging is not a crime."

Mr. Wygram smiled—almost as a man smiles at the amiability of a child. "You are too charitable, Miss Ellis; you are, indeed," he said. "Not that one would wish you otherwise," he added hastily. "Only that you ought to have some one

at hand to see that your goodness and amiability are not imposed upon. I am afraid after what has happened your sister-in-law cannot be called a very efficient guardian."

"Thank you; but I do not see that I require any particular guardianship," Muriel answered in rather an offended tone of voice. "I am much obliged to you all the same for your suggestion," she added. "I believe my sister-in-law will be at home all this afternoon if your cousin is kind enough to call."

She stopped and offered him her hand, and he had no resource but to leave her; nor was it until nearly five minutes later that she remembered that there were to have been two special subjects of conversation, and that so far only one had been touched upon. On the whole, however, she decided that she was just as well contented that the other should remain unsaid.

CHAPTER III.

THE FLIGHT OF THE VULTURE.

It was with no little satisfaction that Muriel learned on entering the house that Madame Cairioli was not expected back to luncheon, so, as she herself would be out the whole of the afternoon, there would be little or no danger of their meeting. When she returned about six o'clock, having first deposited Hal Flack at his own lodgings with injunctions shortly to follow, she found that the bolt had sped. Mrs. Skynner came to meet her in a high state of excitement and indignation.

"Conceive, Muriel, only conceive!" she said, when she had drawn her into her

own sitting-room, and shut the door. "That creature, that woman, that Madame Cairioli, whom I took in, and was so kind to, believing her to be a relation of the Dhuhallows, and married to a man in the diplomatic service, it seems now that she was nothing of the kind. Young Mr. Newmarsh, Lord Newmarsh's son, has been here this afternoon—such a charming young man, Muriel, and so considerate, so anxious that I should not be deceived, that my kindness, as he says, should not be imposed on—he has told me all about her, and it seems that she was nothing better than a *bonne*, a French *bonne*, or nursery governess, or something of that kind, and married to a courier—only imagine, a common courier!—and since he died she has had nothing to live upon, and has taken to going about and imposing upon people—I am not the first, Mr. Newmarsh says, by many, she has

taken in—and always mixing herself up with charitable things, and pretending to collect money for good ends when all the time it was really for herself. A professional beggar, that's what he called her. A *professional* beggar! Can you conceive anything more dreadful?"

"Well, she might have been a professional thief; that would have been worse still, would it not?" Muriel said a little maliciously.

"Muriel! I am surprised at you, I am indeed! Worse? I don't see that anything can be worse. How you can excuse such conduct? And as for that Mrs. Somerton Crawley, I really think there ought to be an action taken against her. Imagine her having people like that in her house and imposing them upon others!"

"Perhaps she may have been imposed upon herself," suggested Muriel.

"Imposed upon? I dare say she was;

any one I'm sure could impose upon such a foolish, vain old creature as that! You may be certain the woman got round her by flattering all her foibles. And when I think how kind I've been—having her staying here nearly a whole week, and driving her about in the carriage, and introducing her to people! Now I shall have to go round first thing to-morrow and tell them all about it. It really is *too* trying. She shall go at once, however, this very minute, that I am resolved; in fact, I'm only waiting till she comes in to tell her so. Fortunately, there's no luggage, so that it won't even be necessary to send for a cab. And I, too, that never suspected anything, because she assured me that her luggage was all waiting for her at the Paddington station! But it's exactly what poor dear Theodore always said, I'm far too charitable and unsuspecting; I am, indeed!"

"Don't you think it is rather late for her to go to-night, Sophia?" Muriel said doubtfully. "I don't see that there would be any harm in letting her remain until the morning."

"No harm! Muriel, you shock me; you perfectly shock and horrify me! What your poor brother would say if he were alive to hear you I cannot think—he, too, that had such an insuperable objection to beggars! Are you aware that at Cedarville Lodge no beggar was ever allowed so much as to come near the door. He used to keep that big dog, Nelson—I dare say you may remember Nelson, for it always ran after the carriage, and you may have seen it when we went to call at that horrid place, I forget its ridiculous name, that you used to live in near the Fulham road—Theodore kept that dog for nothing but to frighten beggars away, and if he could have heard

you, Muriel, excusing a woman whom you know to be a professional beggar—a common professional beggar!—I don't know what he would have said; I really don't."

"But I'm not excusing her, Sophia," Muriel said somewhat impatiently. "I am only saying that it is rather late to turn her out of the house. Probably she would have a difficulty in finding lodgings at this hour."

"And as if it was any business of ours, Muriel, where she sleeps, or what she does with herself! One would think you did it for nothing but to annoy me! Have you no feeling or consideration for the way in which I have been treated? And as to allowing her to remain another night, I must beg and insist that you will do nothing of the kind. I couldn't sleep a wink if I knew she was in the house, now that I know what she is. Who knows but what——"

At that moment there came a sudden ring at the hall-door bell, and Mrs. Skynner flew to her own door, so as to be in readiness to pounce upon the culprit the instant she appeared. Muriel hesitated a moment, and then decided that on the whole it would be just as well for her to be out of the way. To defend Madame Cairioli under the circumstances was of course impossible, while on the other hand she had no desire at all to assist Mrs. Skynner in pouring out vials of wrath upon that devoted woman's head.

The encounter, whatever occurred at it, did not last long. Hardly had Muriel reached her studio when a loud confused medley of tongues arose in the hall. Two minutes after steps were heard flying nimbly past; yet another, and an upstairs door shut with a resounding bang.

She waited a little longer, and then went up to her own room to get ready for

dinner. Upon reaching the landing an odd choking, gurgling sound was heard proceeding from the room in which Madame Cairioli slept. Deciding that it was wisest to take no notice she went on to her own room, but after a while, finding that the sound continued, a feeling of humanity prompted her to go and knock at the door. Possibly Madame Cairioli might be ill.

Receiving no answer to her summons, and the sound continuing, she turned the handle of the door and walked in. Madame Cairioli was sitting bolt upright upon a chair in the middle of the room, her feet stuck out before her, her hands clenched, her face distorted with passion. On the floor beside her lay her bag, her bonnet, her parasol, her beautiful bunches of jet black hair; if she looked like a vulture before she certainly looked a good deal more like one now; her yellow wrinkled

neck was uncovered; her head bare of all covering, its thin hair wildly disordered, as if it had just been violently clutched at. At Muriel's entrance she started fiercely to her feet.

"Ah, so you have come to turn me out! It is well, it is well, I go!" she cried furiously.

"But, indeed, I have not come for anything of the kind," Muriel said earnestly. "I came because I thought you were ill. Are you ill? If so, you need not go to-night."

Madame Cairioli stood and stared at her. "I need not go?" she repeated. "You have *not* come then to turn me out? You are not then like that other—that cat, that fool, that mean, false, hideous Madame Skynner. She ordered me straight into the road—then, that minute. She spoke to me like a dog; before that woman, too, that insolent Eliza. She called me liar,

beggar, thief. *Mon Dieu*, I am not a thief! How dared she call me thief?"

"She ought not certainly to have called you that," Muriel said gravely; "but you must remember that she is naturally extremely angry. You have deceived her. You came here under false pretences. You cannot expect her not to be angry."

"False, false! Ah, yes, it is so easy to talk; so easy, *mon Dieu*, for you who want nothing. How is it for me who want everything? How is it to wander about; to ask and not to get; to go from door to door; to be hungry; to be ill; to be dying, and have no home, no food? *Mon Dieu*, at my age is it right; is it fair? This very night—this very night probably I shall not eat!" And Madame Cairioli flung herself back into the chair.

"No, no, do not think that; on the contrary, I am going to send up some dinner to you here at once," Muriel cried,

a sudden pity for the woman springing up within her. "You need not leave to-night, either, indeed you need not if you have nowhere else to go. I have told my sister-in-law so already. To-morrow you must go, but not to-night," and she turned to leave the room.

Madame Cairioli sprang suddenly after her, and seized her hand. "Ah, you are good, you are good; you are an angel!" she cried. "You feel pity; you are not like that other—that horrible one—that Skynner. But no, I will not stay. I will not sleep under the same roof with that woman. I might murder her!" she added suddenly dropping her voice into a melodramatic whisper.

Muriel drew her hand away. "Do not talk like that," she said coldly. "Sit down, and I will send some dinner to you," and so saying she left the room.

Going downstairs to the studio, she

found that Hal Flack had meantime arrived, and was sitting nursing a huge and appallingly ugly Chinese image, himself by no means unlike another image, with his small wizened face, and pale dust-coloured hair. Begging him to wait until she returned, Muriel went down to the dining-room, and rang the bell for Eliza.

While she was still giving orders to that reluctant damsel about the dinner that was to be taken to Madame Cairioli, Mrs. Skynner issued from her own room.

"Surely, Muriel, you are not allowing that creature to remain in the house?" she exclaimed wrathfully. "If she does, I warn you that I shall go—I shall indeed. What possesses you, I cannot imagine; unless it is for the express purpose of annoying *me*."

"I don't think she will stay, but I have told her that she may if she has nowhere

else to go, Sophia," Muriel said firmly. "I am sending her up some dinner now. Whatever else she is," she added, lowering her voice, "remember she is poor, and old, and ill. It would be brutal to turn her out hungry into the street at this hour."

"Brutal, Muriel! Really, what language you use! Am I a person likely to be brutal, do you think? And as for sending her up any dinner, I must beg that you will do nothing of the kind. I beg and insist that you will let her leave at once."

"I cannot, Sophia; I really cannot. I wonder you do not see it yourself," Muriel said, in a tone of distress; while Eliza, whose brow had hitherto remained clouded, suddenly brightened up, and sped away to the kitchen to execute her young mistress's behests.

Mrs. Skynner flung herself indignantly into a chair. "Really, Muriel, I don't see how I *am* to go on living with you if you

set yourself to oppose me in every way," she cried wrathfully. "As if I was not a thousand times more likely to know what was fit and proper to do than a girl like you, even if your brother *was* Lord Dumbelton. I come and stay with you, and put myself to every kind of inconvenience, on purpose to do my duty by you, and take you out into society, and hinder you from being lonely, and this is the way you repay me—setting yourself against me in every way, and teaching your servants to disobey my orders. I must say it is extremely wicked and ungrateful!" and Mrs. Skynner dissolved into tears.

Muriel turned rather pale. "If you are not happy here, I hope and trust that you will not remain upon my account, Sophia," she said gravely. "I should be exceedingly grieved to think of your doing so. As for my being lonely, Uncle Hal would always be ready to come and keep me

company. Meanwhile, I have left him alone upstairs in the studio, so I must go back."

Left to herself, Mrs. Skynner felt not a little scared at the effect of her own words. The last thing in the world she desired was to leave Chelsea, or give up living with Muriel. Where else could she secure either a position equally desirable, or those physical comforts even more immediately dear to her heart? On the other hand, she had so often assured herself and others, that she remained entirely upon her sister-in-law's account, that her presence there was an incalculable blessing and benefit to Muriel, that to come down suddenly from that pedestal, to descend from the high ground of benefiting, to the low ground of one who receives benefits, was a derogation to which it was impossible she felt to submit. One thing, however, she did determine, and that was that no matter

how annoyed she might be by Muriel's extraordinary and most unaccountable ways of behaving, nothing should again tempt her to hold out a threat of departure—one which might, she now perceived, be attended with extremely inconvenient consequences to herself. One result of this determination was that when Muriel and her uncle came down to dinner half an hour later, Mrs. Skynner had completely recovered her serenity, extending her graciousness even to poor Hal, whose presence she generally treated with the most sovereign contempt. She was not destined, however, to get through that meal without another and an even more violent assault upon her equanimity. Just as the dessert was placed upon the table, the door was suddenly thrown open, and Madame Cairioli sailed in, her parasol in her hand, the bag containing her worldly goods slung over her arm; her hair was once more arranged in all its

pristine elegance; her mantle disposed with true Parisian grace over her shoulder; the jet drops and artificial flowers in her bonnet twinkled resplendent in the candle-light. Sweeping a magnificent courtesy to the room she addressed herself to Muriel.

"Believe me, my dear young lady, I most deeply regret being unable to avail myself of your so kindly expressed invitation," she said with elaborate graciousness. "To do so, I assure you, would have afforded me the very highest satisfaction. Unhappily it is impossible. Charming and delightful as you are yourself, you have the misfortune to possess a relative so *grossière*, so *mal-élevée*, so inexpressibly shocking to every delicate taste and perception, that even your entreaties could not induce me further to overlook it. You will, therefore, kindly permit me to wish you adieu."

Mrs. Skynner started to her feet. "Leave

the house at once, you impertinent woman," she exclaimed. "How dare you stand there before me!—a detected impostor, a beggar, a low creature out of the streets! Leave the house at once, I say. Muriel, send her away."

Madame Cairioli only continued to smile with redoubled graciousness. "*Ah, comme je vous plains!*" she cried, still addressing herself to Muriel, "*Chère demoiselle*, believe me you have my truest sympathy. Let me, then, before I go, offer you but one leetle piece of advice, only one—send her away. *Faites la filer!*" And, kissing the tips of her fingers with airy grace, she again vanished from the room; the next instant the hall door shut, and she was gone.

"Muriel, this is *your* doing!" Mrs. Skynner exclaimed, crimson with passion. "You invited that creature to remain here on purpose that she might have the satisfac-

tion of insulting and triumphing over me. You plotted together to humiliate me, you know you did; you have always disliked and been jealous of me, and this—this is how you have revenged yourself!" And gathering her draperies around her, Mrs. Skynner, too, swept from the room, and Muriel and her uncle were left to finish their gooseberries and cracknels with such relish as the events of the evening might have spared them.

CHAPTER IV.

ART VERSUS PHILISTIA.

MISS ELLIS had a cousin on her father's side, a certain Lady Rushton, whose name has been once before mentioned in this history. This Lady Rushton was a widow —rich, good-natured, middle-aged—very fond of society, particularly fond of the society of what she called artists, by which she meant anybody who could be induced to play, or sing, or act, or otherwise amuse her. It must be owned that in that society she was not invariably popular, being accused, whether truly or not, of adopting people with immense zest and enthusiasm, clasping them, as it were,

to her very heart and home, and then, when the novelty had a little subsided, or the first gloss of their accomplishments a trifle waned, calmly and dispassionately dropping them again. Whatever amount of truth there was in this allegation, it is at all events certain that she had never dropped Muriel; indeed, of all that Ellis kith and kin which for a time had gyrated so busily about the little house in Thistle Street, Lady Rushton may be said to have been the only one who had never failed to keep up friendly relations with our heroine.

Since Muriel had gone to live in Chelsea she had more than once been invited to stay with her cousin, but hitherto had invariably declined. Now and then, however, she lunched, or drove out, or took tea with Lady Rushton, always in response to an urgent appeal to that effect. Such an appeal had reached her a few days after the events recorded in the

last chapter, and in compliance with it she started one afternoon to walk from her own house to that other and much more sumptuous abode in Queen's Gate, wherein Lady Rushton had established herself for the season.

Matters had not been progressing very comfortably in the interval. Mrs. Skynner's anger at the part Muriel had taken with regard to Madame Cairioli had by no means diminished as the days went on; rather it seemed to increase. A certain garnet brooch belonging to that lady was found to have disappeared next morning, and this, it need hardly be said, was at once set down to the agency of that unfortunate delinquent. This Muriel did not believe, alleging—certainly with some plausibility—that had Madame Cairioli been desirous of stealing, she could easily have laid hands upon something of considerably greater value than a garnet brooch. Mrs.

Skynner was indignant at this suggestion; indeed her indignation at the doubt cast upon her suspicions appeared to be even greater than her indignation at the theft itself. If it was not Madame Cairioli, she declared, why then it must be one of the servants of the house; in any case she must and would have her property. The brooch was a peculiar one, of particular value to herself—in short, irreplaceable. A policeman accordingly was sent for; everything and everybody in the house examined, and the whole establishment turned completely upside down from garret to basement.

Muriel was particularly worried and disturbed about this affair. She did not in the least believe that Madame Cairioli had had anything to say to the disappearance of the brooch, and thought it therefore extremely hard that the police should have been set upon her track. As for the ser-

vants, she had known them all a long time, and it was perfectly ridiculous, she considered, to suppose that they could have anything at all to say to it. Added to this, the whole atmosphere of distrust and suspicion was particularly abhorrent to her, so abhorrent that it was with a perfect feeling of thankfulness that she escaped that afternoon, even for a few hours, into the fresh air, away from the incessant recriminations, the endless provings and disprovings, assertions and counter-assertions which for the last few days had almost incessantly assailed her ears.

Strictly speaking it was not, however, particularly fresh out of doors that afternoon. It was a dull, sunless day, the sort of day which appears peculiarly dull and sunless in London, when nothing we see seems to present any definite outline, and no one we meet to have any distinguishing trait by which it would ever be

possible to recognize them again. Perhaps it was owing to this unattractive quality of the atmosphere, or possibly to the still less attractive state of things which she had left behind her, that Muriel found herself walking along in what is commonly called a brown study; a state of abstraction from which she was only roused by finding herself brought up short at a crossing—a phaeton, drawn by a tall horse and driven by a small gentleman in pale lavender kid gloves, having come suddenly towards her round a corner.

Glancing up, she saw that the impetuous driver was no other than her late acquaintance, Mr. Roger Hyde. He too perceived her, and sprang instantly down, flinging the reins to a groom as he did so.

"How do you do, Miss Ellis? Welcome back to London. I am afraid I nearly inaugurated our meeting by running over you," he exclaimed breathlessly.

"No, no; not quite so bad as that," she answered smiling. "I was only startled for the moment. How funny, though, that it should just happen to be you."

"It wouldn't have been a bit funny for me, I assure you, if I had run over you!"

"No, nor for me either. I don't think, though, that there was really any particular danger. In any case, it was nobody's fault but my own."

"It is very generous of you to say so," he answered.

Roger Hyde was looking radiant. The gardenia in his button-hole appeared to have been freshly gathered that very instant; his boots, his hat, his horse, his phaeton, his groom—all might have served as perfect models of their kind. He appeared unfeignedly delighted, moreover, at meeting Miss Ellis.

"And how long have you been back?" he inquired.

"Only since last Tuesday."

"Did you see poor old Halliday again?" was the next question.

"Yes, I saw Mr. Halliday the very day before I left."

"And how was he looking?"

She glanced at him. "Do you mean as to health?" she inquired.

"Health? bless him, no, he never had a day's illness in his life. I mean as to spirits. Didn't he strike you as deplorably out of sorts?"

Muriel hesitated. "I did not think Mr. Halliday appeared particularly cheerful, certainly," she replied gravely.

"Of course not. You think me a heathen I know, Miss Ellis, but I wish to goodness he had never gone into the Church!"

She glanced at him again. "Do you suppose that he wishes it himself?" she asked.

"I don't know what he wishes. Halliday's wishes are inscrutable. Anybody can see, however, that it doesn't suit him. Doesn't it strike you so?"

"I am not sure," she answered slowly. "You see, I know him so little. But isn't he—surely he is very—very conscientious?"

Hyde laughed. "Conscientious! I should think he was. The most conscientious man alive! That's exactly it; that's precisely why I wish he wasn't a parson."

"Your motives must be very profound, then," Muriel said, smiling; "for superficially, you know, that seems to me rather a good reason for his being one."

"Not a bit of it, Miss Ellis. Don't you see, if he had been anything else there would have been a chance some day or other of his being satisfied with himself—with his own performances, I mean. As

it is, he'll always be dissatisfied. He'll always to the end of time think that he might be doing better; might, in some way or other, be making himself or some one else a little more uncomfortable, that is."

"All the same that doesn't seem to me a sufficient reason," she answered, shaking her head.

"Doesn't it? Well, it does to me. However, I mustn't keep you talking here in the middle of the street, particularly as if we talked from now till midnight it wouldn't do the smallest iota of good. Are you on your way home?"

"No; I am going to pay a visit in South Kensington."

"Ah! yes, and your house is in Chelsea; so I remember you told me that day in the forest. May I come and see you? Do let me. I was going to ask you once before, but something interfered."

"Certainly. My sister-in-law and I will be delighted to see you."

"Does that mean that I am bound to ask for your sister-in-law?" Hyde inquired, with an air of tragi-comical dismay. "Why, how upon earth can I? I don't even know her name!"

"Her name is Mrs. Skynner. I don't know about being bound. I shall be very glad to see you in the studio, and I can introduce you to her afterwards."

"Do, and to your pictures too. What I have seen of them has simply whetted my appetite for the rest. We must settle about Miss Prettyboy's miniatures, too. How is Miss Prettyboy, by the way?"

"Very well. Her name is Prettyman, as it happens."

"Prettyman, of course, yes; I meant Prettyman. Don't, for heaven's sake, go and tell her I called her Prettyboy!" With this they parted, and Muriel pursued her way to Queen's Gate.

Lady Rushton had said something about a recitation which it was to be her privilege to listen to that afternoon, but her note had hardly prepared Muriel to find the door literally besieged with guests, and a long line of carriages extending right across the middle of the street. She would have turned back, but that she had actually promised to present herself that afternoon; as it was, it was a good ten minutes at least before she made her way into the drawing-room, so dense was the crowd at the doorway. When she did, the first thing she beheld was a tall young lady in a long white garment, reciting something upon a platform in the middle of the room. The recitation was in French, and appeared to consist of selections from Corneille, delivered with a good deal of tragic emphasis, and a tremendous rolling of the *r*'s. Muriel's attention, however, was not a little diverted from the performance by the

extraordinary pallor, not to say cadaverousness, of the performer herself, who, with her trailing garments, hollow eyes, and ghostly complexion, might fairly have posed as the very genius and impersonification of tragedy.

During the interval and buzz of talk which succeeded this effort, Lady Rushton bustled over to her.

"So delighted that you were able to come this afternoon, dear; I really thought I was never going to see you again. Isn't she a wonderful creature?" pointing to the young lady in white, who had just sunk in apparent exhaustion upon a sofa.

"Who is she?" Muriel inquired.

"Mademoiselle Grigorovitch—a Russian. She recites in three languages, and speaks two more. They call her the female Mezzofanti. That fat man there is her father."

"She looks very ill."

"Yes, doesn't she? but I don't think she is really; at least, it never seems to interfere with her recitations. And how are you yourself, Muriel? As handsome as ever, I see; only I expected you to bring back a redder pair of cheeks than those. What is the use of going and burying yourself alive in a forest in the middle of the season, if you can't do better than that?"

"My cheeks never were very brilliant, were they?" Muriel said, smiling.

"No, and I believe myself it's all that painting. You work too hard, Muriel; you really do. No one, I'm sure, can accuse me of not sympathizing with art and all that sort of thing; but upon my word you overdo it; you do, indeed. Of course for professionals it's all very right and proper; how else are they to make a living? But for you, with your fortune and appearance and everything, I call it

ridiculous; and if you had had any one to look after you, it would have been put a stop to long ago."

Muriel only smiled. She was used to being lectured upon the subject by Lady Rushton, and was just upon the point of putting another question to that lady with regard to the mysterious Mademoiselle Grigorovitch, when there came a movement in the group about the platform, and the mistress of the house jumped up suddenly from her chair.

"Oh, there's Mr. Fitzwilliam Griggs!" she exclaimed. "He has promised to recite his Scandinavian war-song for me. So kind of him, for he suffers dreadfully from nervousness. Last time, do you know, I had to give him two whole glasses of brandy-and-water, before I could bring him up to the point."

Mr. Fitzwilliam Griggs was a very short gentleman, with a round, freckled

face, and an extremely nervous manner; the very last man in the world one would have selected as likely to put himself forward for the amusement of other people. The poem in question appeared to require a prodigious amount of action. Now Mr. Fitzwilliam Griggs sprang forward, and shook his fist in the audience's face; again he flung himself violently on to a chair, as if in the act of springing astride of some mettlesome charger; throughout the whole exhibition, however, the frightened expression never for an instant left his face, suggesting the idea of a person constrained by some superior power to perform against his will. Muriel pitied him extremely, and was very glad when at length this recitation, too, came to an end.

After this, she thought she had heard enough for the present, so, having sought out her hostess, and escaped with some difficulty from her amiability, she was

making her way towards the entrance, when she suddenly encountered Mr. Wygram.

His face brightened at the sight of her.

"Miss Ellis, this is fortunate! It struck me as possible that you might be here this afternoon," he exclaimed.

"I have been here some little time, and am just going," she answered.

"Going?" in a tone of disappointment. "And I have only just come. Let me, at least, see you to your carriage, and give you an ice on the way," he added offering her his arm.

"You may give me an ice if you will, but I have no carriage," she answered. "I am walking."

"Alone?"

"Yes, all alone. Does that shock you?"

"Shock me, no. Why should you suppose for a moment that it would shock me?"

"I don't know; I fancied you spoke in

rather a scandalized tone. The truth is, I believe I am a little thin-skinned on the subject; I am so used to being lectured about my lack of decorum. If Lady Rushton realized that I was setting off by myself, she would probably think it necessary to send a footman or a couple of maids flying after me down the street."

"Oh, but I'm not at all like that," he answered quickly. "On the contrary, I think an artist—a true artist, like yourself, Miss Ellis—cannot too soon learn habits of independence. How else is she to study nature? How else to acquire that thorough and intimate knowledge of action and expression which is so pre-eminently essential? A true artist ought to be always studying—when she is walking, talking—whatever she may be doing."

"When she is eating ices and listening to Scandinavian war-songs?" Muriel inquired, smiling.

"Yes, always," he answered seriously. "Will you do me a favour?" he added abruptly.

"Certainly, if I can," she replied.

"I want you to come and pay me a visit at my studio. You have not been there for ages, and I have a picture now on hand about which I particularly want your opinion. You really would gratify me extremely if you would do so," he added emphatically.

Muriel hesitated.

"If you dislike—if you have any scruple about coming alone, I can easily ask my sister, Mrs. Boldero, to come and meet you," he continued, "or you could bring Mrs. Skynner with you."

"Thank you, but I don't think that would be at all necessary," she answered, smiling. "As I told you just now, my conscience upon these sort of points is a very easy one. I should like to bring my

friend, Miss King, though, if I may? She is a devout admirer of yours, and would immensely enjoy seeing your pictures."

"Pray do. I shall be delighted, of course, to see Miss King," he answered, without, however, evincing any particular delight in his tone. "What day would suit you? Could you come to-morrow? Not in the morning, as I have sitters, but in the afternoon—say about five o'clock?"

"Yes, I think so."

They were now in the tea-room, so he left her for a minute to go in pursuit of an ice.

"You have not told me yet how you got through your difficulties the other day," he said, as he returned. "Newmarsh seemed to think that your sister-in-law was properly impressed; so I hope that you got rid of your impostor without any trouble?"

"Oh, yes, poor woman, she was got rid of easily enough," Muriel said, with a sigh.

"You speak as if you were sorry. Surely you cannot regret such a creature?"

"No, not that exactly. Still I feel as if I ought not to have let her go without ascertaining her address. She seemed so ill and destitute, poor thing! After turning her out of the house like that, I think I was bound to see after her a little more."

Mr. Wygram looked disturbed—more than that, he looked positively annoyed. "I do hope and trust, Miss Ellis, that you have not got infected by any of those new-fangled, philanthropic crazes?" he exclaimed irritably. "Forgive me, if I seem to dictate," he added immediately; "but it does seem to me that it would be such an error of judgment—excusable, of course, but still a very great one—if you allow yourself to be taken from your own proper sphere by anything of the kind. There are women enough, plenty of women, believe me, in London, to visit poor people

and nurse sick ones without your being drawn into that vortex. Art cannot spare you; it cannot, indeed."

A few weeks earlier the speech would have delighted Muriel. To be told, and to be told, too, by so competent an authority as Mr. Wygram, that art could not spare her—that she was one of those whose achievements were waited for, and whose success was believed in—would have given her the very keenest possible satisfaction. Now, however, strange to say, she listened to it not only without pleasure, but even with a distinct feeling of *dis*pleasure—a feeling as if, not her powers, but her limitations were thus somehow or other being forced home to her. Why should she not be allowed to make herself useful like other women? she thought resentfully.

"I don't think there is the slightest danger of my being drawn into any philanthropic vortex," she said coldly. "I wish

there was. Unfortunately, I am a great deal too lazy and self-indulgent."

She had by this time finished her ice, and drawn on her gloves, and now made a decided movement to depart.

"Won't you come upstairs again?" Mr. Wygram said persuasively.

"I thank you, no; I have said good-bye to my cousin already," she answered, moving resolutely on towards the door, an ungrateful desire to escape from her only too amiable companion coming suddenly over her.

As she walked back through the silver-grey atmosphere her thoughts ran a good deal, however, upon the subject of Mr. Wygram. Her momentary resentment over, she felt disposed to take herself to task, to accuse herself of inconsistency, and even of ingratitude on his account. Ever since the beginning of their acquaintance-ship, she had been in the habit of looking

up to him as a great authority—on art, of course, in the first instance, but indirectly upon other subjects. His friendship for her had been a source of no small pride and satisfaction to her. She liked knowing that he regarded her as worthier of a reasonable man's attention than the generality of young ladies. Nothing—at all events until quite lately—could possibly have been less lover-like than his behaviour. His manner had been kindly, authoritative, almost paternal. He had talked to her chiefly about art, occasionally even lecturing her gently upon the subject, and she had always been glad that he should do so. There was a certain recklessness, a random confidence in her own powers, and a harum-scarum style of art which had given her friend a good deal of uneasiness. He wished her to take art seriously—as he took it himself; to look upon it as a grave responsibility, an endowment to be culti-

home. Her studio, generally the resort of all her moods and fancies, was too intimately bound up with the present question to offer itself as an acceptable refuge, and except the studio she did not feel as if there was so much as a single corner in the house which she could call her own.

She walked slowly on along the Embankment, glancing from time to time across the dun-coloured expanse of water. Where she was, was comparatively deserted, but upon the opposite side the grass and towing-path seemed to be populous with idlers. A procession of charity children passed, their blue frocks and white tippets forming a conspicuous feature in the landscape. The grey pall had lifted a little, and the clouds were banked in big slumberous masses above the slow rise of country beyond Sydenham. Turning away from her own house, she passed the bridge, and stood for a few minutes beside the parapet

of the Embankment. A big ugly coal barge was slipping down towards Westminster on the current, its black clumsy hull well defined against the pale satiny curves below. Next followed a steamer, heading up against the tide, the water running in tiny wavelets against its side. Muriel waited to see it discharge its burden at the pier, and then, crossing the road, paused a moment beside the iron gates leading to the Botanic Gardens. A gardener had just gone in, leaving one of them ajar, so she entered, and strolled to and fro amongst the mouldering flower-beds. Except the gardener and herself, there was not a soul in the place; the solitary cedar, grim with nearly two centuries of London dust and smuts, appearing to preside sadly over the deserted-looking enclosure. Often as she had passed it before, Muriel had never previously been inside, and now she felt pleased with the place,

and glad of the chance which had admitted her. Grim and unattractive as it was in some aspects, there was yet a dim indefinable flavour of antiquity, a certain secluded charm which just then fitted into her mood. Odd, disjointed fragments of sound reached her from beyond the railings; sounds from the road, from the river, from the great encompassing ocean of humanity. Her own thoughts, as she wandered up and down, seemed to her not very much more coherent or connected. She had got away from the art problem now, and was busying herself about other and more immediately personal troubles, turning them over and over with that strange but by no means unusual ingenuity which makes us so often select the subjects of all others which we least like dwelling on, to be our continual guests, the sharers of our bed and hearth and board.

Like every nature which is at once strong

and feminine, Muriel had a keen, almost a passionate need of loving and being loved, and with the best intentions possible in that direction she could not certainly love her sister-in-law, Mrs. Skynner. More than this, she knew very well that her sister-in-law did not love her. If she had ever cherished any illusions on that subject the last few days would have been sufficient to dispel them. Mrs. Skynner had all the easily-aroused, hard-to-be-appeased resentfulness of a small, self-centred nature, and it was evident that the incidents which had just taken place had strongly aroused that resentfulness. Nor had other causes since been wanting. Partly on Mrs. Prettyman's advice, partly from her own sense of the utter folly and madness of indebtedness, Muriel had resolved to cut the knot of her financial difficulties in a vigorous fashion, and amongst other obvious economies had determined, for the present at all events, to

dispense with a carriage—a resolution which, as she herself justly anticipated, had given mortal offence to Mrs. Skynner. That economy, or any motive except a wish still further to slight and annoy herself, had been at work in the matter, that lady utterly declined to believe. She did not reproach Muriel; she did not again hold out any threat of her own departure; she did not even allude to the matter, except indirectly; but it rankled steadily; it went to swell a small pent-up stream of bitterness which for months past had been slowly but surely gathering within her. As they sat at luncheon or dinner together, Muriel, looking suddenly up from her plate, would catch her sister-in-law's eyes fixed upon her with a sort of stony aggressiveness. Mrs. Skynner had not particularly expressive eyes, but there was something in the cold irresponsive gaze of those light prominent orbs which affected Muriel with

extreme discomfort. She was beginning to dread those meals, to hail any interruption—no matter how little otherwise welcome—which broke in upon that inevitable *tête-à-tête*. Would Mrs. Skynner ever be induced to select some other place of abode? she was beginning secretly to ask herself. Unfortunately, it was impossible for her to move in the matter. If such a suggestion would only have emanated from the other side, she for her own part would have hailed it with something very little short of rapture, but it was impossible for her to take the initiative; her hands were tied, and tied—short of some as yet unforeseen intervention—they must inevitably, she felt, remain.

Casting back to the beginning of their joint companionship, Muriel used to try sometimes examine herself as to whether —apart from those later offences—she had done anything, or left undone anything,

the omission or doing of which would help to account for the present uncomfortable state of things; whether, in short, Mrs. Skynner really had any just and reasonable grounds of complaint against her. That Mrs. Skynner conceived herself to have such grounds she, at all events, knew unfortunately only too well. Apart even from the later offences, there had long been a rankling sense of wrong and injustice. Why should Muriel have money, and servants, and a house, and she have none? that was the recurrent burden of her thoughts. True, Mrs. Skynner had not been made any the poorer by Muriel having money—quite the contrary; but then this argument was probably the very last that could have been brought forward with effect.

Sometimes it used to strike our heroine with a sort of amused self-wonder that she did not more seriously resent Mrs.

Skynner's too evident and really very unreasonable animosity. She was not generally so meek or inapt to resent injury. Why, then, was she so meek now? Whether or not she succeeded in discovering the clue to the enigma herself, it may be permitted to her biographer to surmise that this remissness came partly from a sense of obligation which, as we know, had always been largely exercised on Mrs. Skynner's behalf; partly from the fact that she did not weigh that lady's sayings and doings in exactly the same scales, or with the same precision of measurement, as she might have weighed the sayings and doings of another. People come to meet us upon different levels, and we instinctively accept them upon their own and not upon any other level. There was an amount of fatuity about Mrs. Skynner which really at times amounted to sublimity—which seemed to open up

new and surprising vistas as to the capacity of human nature in this direction. How object to being misprized, or how seriously demand generous or even just appraisement where all, or nearly all, the avenues of sense and perception appeared to be hermetically shut and sealed? As well insist upon a fine ear for music or a delicate perception of harmony from a man who has had the misfortune to be born deaf! I do not mean to say that Muriel exactly originated this estimate herself, but it, or something very like it, lay undoubtedly at the root of that large, if hardly flattering, tolerance which she instinctively extended, not merely to all Mrs. Skynner's present sayings and doings, but to anything which that lady might be moved to say or to do in the future.

Meanwhile, the afternoon was getting on, and it was time for her to be going homeward. She felt a whimsical disin-

clination to leave the place—a feeling as if all those troubles and worries she had escaped from were standing ready to pounce upon her the instant she set foot outside that spiked and barred enclosure. If she could only get away to the forest and go mothing again with Partridge! she thought, smiling to herself as she stood looking up into the big cedar stretching its dust-coated network of twigs hither and thither above her head. How bright it looked, that New Forest episode, looking back at it now out of the midst of her present embroglio. Her thoughts flew to that last day—the day she had stood with Halliday in the churchyard—it seemed as if she could almost smell again the scent of the flowers, and see the shadows made by the passing birds. Where was Mr. Halliday? she wondered. Was he back again in London, and toiling away in the midst of those briers and thorny squeaches

which he expected to find so dense and so uninviting? Well, at least, if he was, he had a definite purpose, a clear goal before him, and, moreover, an unselfish one; he might fail, but even to fail under such circumstances would be better, she thought, than a good deal of the rather equivocal success which she saw about her. Mr. Hyde had called him a Philistine, and doubtless the epithet was not undeserved. On the other hand, the artistic and æsthetic side of things had latterly been so pressed upon Muriel as a solemn responsibility that she was beginning from sheer opposition to feel as if it might be possible to make out a case for its opposite. If art was to fail her—and she was conscious that art was not quite the be-all and end-all, the one utterly sufficing refuge and resource that it had seemed in her younger and more enthusiastic days—what remained? To what else was she to

turn? Could she, too, she wondered, so use her life that even her very failures, like Halliday's, might redound to some one's advantage? True, she was shackled by certain obvious disabilities from which he was free; but then, on the other hand, she was very much less shackled with those disabilities than most of her own sex and standing. Not only had she health and strength, youth and vigour, but she had a certain command of means, and absolute, or pretty nearly absolute, independence; surely, then, it must be her own fault if, with all those advantages, she failed to extract anything out of life beyond what she now saw immediately around her? And yet, scan the horizon up and down as she would, she could see nothing—nothing, that is, but pictures; more pictures, and then beyond those again other pictures still—with herself, too, always as the principal figure in every

canvas! It was all very delightful, doubtless, but still surely, surely, she thought, it was not enough? surely life must hold something else, more vital, more real, more binding than pictures? Yet where, or in what direction even, she was to look for that something was what as yet she entirely failed to discover.

From these somewhat futile debatings she aroused herself at last with a start. It really was late now. The light was beginning to fail, and there was a tint of sunset over the trailing smoke-coloured clouds above Battersea. The gardener, too, had finished whatever had brought him to the place, and was standing in amicable conversation with a one-armed Chelsea pensioner, who stood smoking his pipe by the railings. Muriel passed out, bestowing a gratuity upon the former as she did so; then she wended her way at last to her own house.

It need hardly be said of a young lady so independent as Miss Ellis that she possessed a latch-key. This latch-key she now made use of to enter the house without disturbing the rest of the inmates. Pausing an instant to put her umbrella into the stand, she heard the slow, monotonous tones of Mrs. Skynner's voice proceeding from the depths of her own apartment. Not a syllable was actually audible, still it did not require any great stretch of ingenuity to perceive that it was the tale of her late wrongs and injuries which was thus being poured out into some sympathizing visitor's ear. Hurrying past, Muriel betook herself to her own room to take off her walking things. This done, she felt somewhat puzzled where to bestow herself. She did not want to paint, or even to look at her paintings; something seemed to have come between them and her; a vague some-

thing, hardly a shadow, but still sufficient to make her feel that their company just then would be likely to prove very much the reverse of soothing.

Turning away, therefore, from the studio, she entered a small room off the staircase, where there were a few book-cases, and where she was in the habit of seeing such tradesmen or men of business as might happen to call to see her. It was an ugly little room, and a noisy one to boot. She could still hear the measured tones of Mrs. Skynner's voice, as well as the more boisterous accents of Eliza and her compeers coming up from the servants' region below the area steps. She took up a book, and then laid it down again; wandered round the room, and, finally, stood gazing out of the smut-stained window, which commanded a view over a couple of neighbouring mews. It wanted a full hour yet of dinner time, and out

on the river side the light still lay bright and warm; but here, amongst the back walls and chimney-pots, everything was dull, grey, and smoke-saturated. Muriel, too, felt dull and grey herself. She was not, as a rule, addicted to the folly of self-pity, but at this moment she certainly did feel as if her own position in the house was a somewhat anomalous and unsatisfactory one. If Kitty King or Elizabeth Prettyman, or any friend, would only come and see her, she thought, how gladly, how very, very gladly she would have welcomed them! Yet, after all, kind as they were, and fond as they were of her, they had their own duties and interests, and she had no right to lay any more claims upon them, she felt, than they were willing of themselves to concede.

Presently, however, her solitude was broken in upon by a visitor. The door, which was slightly ajar, was suddenly

pushed open, and Gamaliel entered, his white tail curling proudly over his back. Gamaliel was an extremely *posé* and dignified animal, quite above kittenish ways, and not at all demonstrative. Still, in his way, he had a lurking if a somewhat supercilious sort of regard for his mistress, and now he proceeded to evince his satisfaction at finding her there and alone by first rubbing himself to and fro against her dress, and then, finding these demonstrations acceptable, by leaping up, and thrusting his white head and ridiculous pink nose into her face, arching his back, stretching out his claws, and purring with unmistakable feline enjoyment.

Muriel stooped down and stroked him, laying her hand caressingly against his soft yielding fur. Even Gamaliel, she thought, was better than nobody. He was a trifle egotistical and self-absorbed, perhaps; even now it was just possible

that his attentions were not wholly devoid of a faint flavour of interested motives. She was not, however, in a mood to scan too closely anything that looked like affection. If Gamaliel liked her, why, then, so much the better for herself, she felt, as well as for Gamaliel. What, however, she really wanted was not so much something to like, or even to love her, as something or somebody that she herself could care for—really, stringently, vitally. She had better never have been born at all, she told herself bitterly, if she was never going to have any more vital, less selfish, less lukewarm interests than she had at present. Could it be that she was incapable of anything warmer? she wondered; there were souls so faint and flaccid as to be unable to take more than a tepid interest in anything or anybody. But then, again, she remembered how passionately she had loved her mother and

John; how even now, though such years had passed since their loss, that loss still throbbed with a dull, retentive ache within her. No, it was not that. It was simply that she had not yet found her niche. It must be to be found. Somewhere in this big, ugly world of London there must be that corner or that duty which called upon her, and her in particular, to fill it. Charity? The word looked as dead and dried up as a parchment code—a mere abstraction; no more binding or living than a problem in Euclid. And yet it was certainly something of this kind she wanted—some living, and yet at the same time, if possible, impersonal interest. No amount of personal achievement (even had the road to such achievement lain open before her) would have fed this particular craving which ached within her. Why should such cravings, in fact, be given at all, she asked herself, but that somehow or other

they were meant to be fulfilled? And yet again, she thought with a sudden revulsion, as she turned, and slowly wended her way upstairs to her own room, such cravings and hankerings as these were, after all, the very commonest things in the whole world. Were there not probably at that moment some thousands, nay, some hundreds of thousands of women in much the same sort of plight, with much the same sort of disquieting visions, and much the same sort of vague dissatisfied yearning. And was it, could it, after all, be honestly said to be such a very, very serious matter that she, Muriel Ellis, should be called on to make one of those thousands?

CHAPTER V.

MR. WYGRAM AT HOME.

MR. WYGRAM'S house was almost large enough to be called a mansion. It was a big, red-fronted edifice standing in one of the streets which lie at right-angles to the river. He had built it himself, but at present it was altogether too large for his own requirements. Even after the most liberal deductions for sitting-rooms, studios, and bedrooms, there still remained a considerable space to be disposed of, and this space had been allotted by him into studios for some of the less fortunately domiciled of his artistic brethren. Amongst the younger artists there was, indeed, a brisk competi-

tion for these studios, partly for their own merits, which were super-excellent, but still more on account of the exalted reputation borne by Mr. Wygram as a landlord. Not only was he reputed to be extremely lenient as regards the payment of rent, but on more than one occasion he had been known to dispense with that ceremony altogether. What wonder, then, if his studios were never vacant? These supplemental studios were in a different part of the house, and approached by a totally different entrance and staircase to that occupied by the owner himself, so that it was perfectly possible to visit the latter without being even so much as aware of the existence of the former.

Nothing could be less fantastic, or less tainted with the taint of prevailing affectations than Mr. Wygram's house and studio. High art, in the modern sense of the word, he detested. He had inherited a few

good pictures, and had purchased for himself a few more. A couple of Cuyps, radiant in all the glow of their aerial perspective, hung to right and left of his studio mantelpiece. There were two or three Romneys and Gainsboroughs in the dining-room, and at least one indisputable Van Ostade in the hall. Look where you would, you saw none of those surprising embellishments which in the last few years have so lavishly overflowed our houses. No Japanese fans, or kaleidoscopic parasols; no sad-coloured stuffs, no preposterous wall-papers, and no sunflowers. Everything was solid, substantial, workmanlike; stamped, as all possessions ought to be, and as, alas! so few of our possessions are, with the character and impress of their owner.

Mr. Wygram was one of those men whose reputation seems to stand at even a higher level than any of their actual achievements. Amongst the men of his

own standing, as well as with many both older and younger than himself, he enjoyed a very unusual degree of consideration; partly, no doubt, for his talents, which were considerable, but still more for a certain weightiness and solidity which attended everything that he said and did. He was indeed emphatically a solid man —practical, clear-headed, self-centred—full to the very brim of that "large, sound, roundabout sense," which Locke has stamped for us with his most emphatic approval. Though a sociable man, he was not by any means one that invited familiarity; indeed, even those who knew him best, to the last were a little in awe of him, an assertion which may be tested by the simple fact that, although his name was John, no human being had ever yet been heard to call him Jack! If genial, too, to the point of good-nature as regards his neighbour's interest, on his own affairs

he was almost invariably taciturn and uncommunicative. Even this, however, gained him prestige. "Wygram was a deal a richer fellow than any one supposed," men were wont to declare to one another; an assertion which may or may not have been based on fact, but of which the reputation, at all events, it is safe to say, did him no harm.

For so successful a man it was wonderful, too, how little Mr. Wygram seemed to offend by his success, the more so that his manner was certainly not devoid of a certain clearly-definable touch of self-importance. It was not offensive self-importance, however, not that most odious of all kinds which finds its own aliment in wounding the self-love and importance of others; still less of that carping, smirking, uneasy variety which, finding the world's estimate to be below its own merit, seeks by perpetual posing to repair that injustice.

Rather it partook of the easy insouciant self-importance of some pleasant-mannered chief or head of department, with a whole world of underlings to keep in order and good humour. It shone out of his broad complacent physiognomy, and spoke in his easy imperturbability, which nothing seemed ever to ruffle or displace. Mr. Wygram was not one of those painters, either, who can do nothing but paint; on the contrary, he possessed a variety of the gifts which tend to give a man weight and prestige in the world of men. He was a good shot, and a fair billiard-player; rode well to hounds, and was reported to play an excellent game of whist at his club. True, there were whole realms and regions of which he knew nothing, but then of these he kept discreetly clear, never committing himself by any inopportune or ill-advised judgments. Poetry, for instance, and what is commonly classed

as light literature generally, he abjured; indeed, he was seldom known to take up a book of any kind for the mere frivolous purpose of entertainment. On the other hand, he was an assiduous reader of the newspapers, and was understood to hold clear and well-considered views upon politics, inclining to a somewhat high and dry type of Whiggism. Why Wygram had never married was a question much debated in his own circle; all sorts of different and generally wholly hypothetic reasons being assigned. That it was not due to any rooted or morbid dislike to the sex in the abstract was at any rate perfectly clear; on the contrary, he both enjoyed ladies' society, and was extremely popular in that society; his studio, large as it was, being often even inconveniently crowded on the days set apart by him for receiving his friends.

The afternoon upon which Muriel and

Miss King appeared by appointment was not, however, one of these—only three persons being, in fact, in it when they entered;—the artist himself, who came forward with much *empressement* to meet them; a stout elderly gentleman in spectacles, who looked at his watch and vanished as they entered; and a tall strongly-built youth, with a closely-cropped head, and an extremely ruddy complexion, which latter became ruddier still at sight of Miss Ellis's companion.

"How do you do, Miss Ellis? How do you do, Miss King?—What, Mackalister, are you off?" this to the gentleman who was making for the door. "Let me introduce you to Mr. Archer, Miss Ellis. Miss King, I think you and Mr. Archer are acquainted already."

"Yes, I know Mr. Archer," Kitty King replied demurely. "He and I painted one another's portraits the other day."

"Indeed? You did not show me Miss King's portrait, Archer. I generally am privileged to see all your doings."

"Oh, it was nothing—a horrible thing; not a bit like—in fact, I tore it up," that gentleman mumbled apologetically.

"That wasn't at all nice of you. I didn't tear up your picture, I assure you, Mr. Archer; I have it quite safe still in my sketch book," Kitty King said meaningly.

"It was a very cruel one, I know," poor Mr. Archer responded, blushing.

"I don't know about being cruel. It was very like. I suppose if one paints a person's portrait, it ought to be like; oughtn't it?"

While this unequal war of wits was going on, Mr. Wygram had drawn Muriel to the opposite side of the studio, and in front of a large canvas which stood propped upon an easel.

"See, Miss Ellis, this is the picture I spoke to you about yesterday," he said, turning it round so as to bring it into a better light. "I have a favour to ask you in connection with it. Look at it and see if you can tell me what it is."

Muriel obeyed. The picture apparently represented a trial for witchcraft; a semi-circle of hard-faced men, seated about a table; to the left a crowd of witnesses; in the centre the victim—her head erect, and arms extended—the latter's face was barely indicated, but the attitude was vigorous, and not wanting in a certain promise of beauty. "You see what it is, don't you?" continued the artist. "I want you to sit to me for my sorceress."

"The compliment sounds a dubious one," Muriel said, smiling.

"Dubious? Not in the least. I want a face that can tell its own story—can announce its own innocence without my having to put it into the catalogue."

Miss Ellis blushed a little. "I should not have thought that mine was particularly suitable for that purpose," she said gravely. The words might have sounded coquettish, but the tone certainly was not.

Mr. Wygram appeared amused. "Why? Do you think you look as if you are likely to commit deeds of darkness?" he inquired.

"Not exactly that, perhaps, but still one has an idea of the type, and I do not think mine at all corresponds to it. Kitty King's face, now," she added, glancing across the room; "that I should say came very much nearer to your ideal."

Mr. Wygram followed the glance to where that young lady was standing under one of the large windows, her white dress, with its coquettish touches of blue, setting off her trim little figure and fresh, flower-like face. "Miss King looks a great deal too artless for my purpose," he said, smiling. "Any one can see that there

must be an infinity of guile behind such an assumption of innocence as that. In one sense, however, she certainly is a sorceress," he added, lowering his voice. "She has fairly bewitched that poor lad Archer. I am not, of course, supposed to know anything of it personally, but he has one of the studios here, and I hear from some of the other men that he is simply crazed about that little golden-haired friend of yours."

"Indeed!" Muriel said eagerly.

"You had heard nothing of it before?"

"No; and I generally hear of all Kitty's achievements in that line. What is Mr. Archer like?" she added.

"An excellent lad. Not clever, but I think he will make a painter in time; that is, if he sticks to it. I hear, though, that there is an uncle in the air—I mean in the city—a stockbroker, or something of that sort, who is anxious to provide our

friend with a stool in his office, which, doubtless, would be the best thing that could happen for his pecuniary interest."

"I like his looks," Muriel said thoughtfully. "He is ugly, but it is a face that one could trust."

"Yes, he is an excellent lad," Mr. Wygram repeated, this time however carelessly, as if the subject of Mr. Archer's merits might in time become monotonous. "So you won't give me an answer about my sorceress, Miss Ellis? Well, I must only wait, and hope to find you in a more complacent mood. Meanwhile, come and let me give you some tea," he continued, drawing back a curtain, and leading the way into a small room or alcove off the studio, lined with brown leather stamped in relief, a small table, temptingly heaped up with fruit and flowers, standing in the centre. "Archer, come and get some tea for Miss King," he called back as he entered.

As the young man thus summoned appeared at the entrance of the alcove, Muriel turned to look at him with some attention. He possessed what is generally called a very Anglo-Saxon face, furnished with a rudimentary moustache, his round, closely-cropped head being flanked with a pair of cruelly prominent ears; his hands and wrists, too, were remarkably large and red; but for all that there was a certain straightness and soldierliness about his bearing which won her approval, despite his present undeniable air of sheepishness and depression. He brightened up somewhat when sent to summon Miss King to tea, but presently returned, looking more woebegone than ever, to say that she would come soon, but that at present she was too much absorbed in looking at the pictures. "She wants you to go and explain something to her, Mr. Wygram," he added gloomily.

Mr. Wygram obeyed, with an amused glance at Muriel as he did so.

Left *tête-à-tête* with Mr. Archer, Miss Ellis tried to exchange some remarks with that melancholy young gentleman, but he was so evidently *distrait* that she soon desisted from the attempt, and contented herself with watching the proceedings of the other two as seen through the doorway of the alcove.

Miss King appeared to be actuated with the strongest curiosity about the highest and consequently the least accessible portions of Mr. Wygram's pictures. There was a set of steps at hand, which the artist used in painting, and up and down these she kept incessantly flitting, now pausing on one step, and now on another, as she turned to appeal to her host. Muriel at last began to wish that Kitty would not go up and down those steps quite so often. Her feet were extremely pretty—

quite as pretty as her hands—and were set off to-day by the most bewitching little pair of high-heeled shoes, admitting occasional glimpses of sky-blue stockings above. These glimpses, however, kept on recurring with a greater frequency than appeared essential; moreover, it was evident, even to her indulgent perceptions, that Kitty's new-born enthusiasm for the fine arts was largely attempered by another and a somewhat less laudable sentiment. At last, however, that enthusiasm appeared appeased, and she and Mr. Wygram returned to the alcove.

"I do so love a studio; I should like to live in one always!" Kitty exclaimed rapturously, as she seated herself on the sofa beside Muriel.

"There is only one thing to be done, then, Miss King—you must marry an artist," Mr. Wygram said, with his semi-paternal air of gallantry, heaping up her

plate with strawberries and cream as he spoke.

At this Miss Kitty, however, only tossed her head and pouted her lips, as much as to say that that was a contingency for which she was entirely unprepared.

After she had eaten up her strawberries, and the tea was all finished, they again wandered about among the pictures. There were a good many portraits amongst them, and these especially attracted Muriel's attention. As a painter of what are called "fancy" subjects, she privately thought Mr. Wygram a trifle hard and realistic—too realistic, at least, for her taste; that broad streak of prose, which showed in everything he said and did, coming out particularly strongly in such matters. His portraits, on the other hand, particularly his portraits of men, were admirable; full of vigour, and stamped with an indefinable stamp of truth and reality. One especially

—that of an old man, a professor of some abstruse science or other—particularly attracted her attention. It had much of that harmony and strongly marked individuality which we look for in a Rembrandt or a Gerard Dow; indeed, it was not at all unlike one of those delightful old doctors or burgomasters that look down at us with wrinkled eyes from the walls of so many a Dutch and Flemish picture gallery. Kitty, on the other hand, could not for her part conceive how Muriel could care to go on looking at that stupid old man when there were such quantities of other and more interesting pictures about. Of course, it was beautifully painted—all Mr. Wygram's pictures were—but then the old gentleman himself was so dreadfully snuffy and ugly. She couldn't herself imagine how people could possibly wish to have their portraits painted when they came to be as old and ugly as that.

"Possibly his relations may wish to have it, even if he doesn't himself," Muriel suggested.

"I'm quite sure *I* shouldn't wish for a portrait of any one belonging to me who looked like that," Kitty declared positively. "Should you, Mr. Archer?"

Mr. Archer did not appear to be prepared with a reply, and it was left to Mr. Wygram to explain that the portrait in question had been ordered by the college to which the learned professor belonged, being destined to be in due time hung in a place of honour upon one of the walls of their dining hall.

After this, Muriel announced that they must be going, the two gentlemen accompanying them to the door. On opening it, it was found, however, to be raining, so a servant was despatched for a cab. He returned shortly, however, saying that no cabs were to be found in the

neighbourhood, but that if the ladies liked he would fetch one from Knightsbridge. This Muriel declared to be quite unnecessary, as they were perfectly able to walk. Finally it was agreed that they should do so, under the shelter of the two gentlemen's umbrellas, an arrangement the more desirable seeing that Miss King's provision against the weather was found to consist of a white lace parasol, ornamented with two bunches of flowers to match the ribbons on her dress.

They set forth accordingly, Muriel and Mr. Wygram first, Miss King and Mr. Archer bringing up the rear. Just as they were nearing Muriel's house, Kitty—who had hitherto lingered some distance behind—suddenly came up, followed breathlessly by Mr. Archer and the umbrella, and insisted upon walking abreast of the others for the remainder of the way, to the no small inconvenience of other pedes-

trians. Arrived at the house, she refused, moreover, to be escorted further, alleging her intention of remaining. No sooner, however, had the two gentlemen departed, than she snatched up an umbrella, and declared that she must be off.

"But, my dear Kitty, what in the world possesses you?" Muriel said, in a tone of amazement. "A minute ago you said you were going to stay."

"I know I did, Muriel; but I can't. I only said it to get rid of them—of him, I mean."

"Of them?—of him? Does that mean Mr. Wygram and Mr. Archer? What have they done that you should be so desperately anxious to fly them?"

"Mr. Wygram has done nothing—nothing, at least, that I know of; but Mr. Archer has done everything!" Kitty replied, succinctly.

"Everything? That is a sweeping

accusation! He seemed to me to be very harmless. Do tell me, Kitty, what he has done," Muriel said, smiling.

"I can't, Muriel—not now, at any rate. I'll come to-morrow, if you like, and tell you; but I must go home now."

"This is all very mysterious, Kitty," Muriel said, unable to help laughing at the portentous air of gravity assumed by her generally volatile and inconsequent little friend.

"I don't know what you call mysterious, Muriel," that young lady answered in an offended tone. "I call it simply idiotic. That Fred Archer is the very greatest booby I ever came across in my whole life!"

"Poor young man! Really, Kitty, you have quite aroused my curiosity. Pray tell me what this is all about."

"I can't indeed, Muriel."

"If you don't, I warn you that I shall

probably think it a great deal more serious than it really is."

"You *can't* think it more serious than it is—in one sense, at least, I mean."

"In one sense? In what sense? Does all this mean that I am shortly to have the honour of congratulating you, Miss King?" Muriel inquired, smiling.

Kitty's blue eyes expanded in fierce disdain. "Indeed, Muriel, you are to do nothing of the sort!" she cried indignantly. "Quite the contrary!" And, snatching up the umbrella, she flew out of the house and down the street, turning rapidly in the direction of her own home.

CHAPTER VI.

AN IMPENDING ORDEAL.

MURIEL awoke next morning with a vague impression of something bright and pleasant in the immediate past; that odd, undefined, unlocalized impression of something pleasurable—or too often of something extremely the reverse—which is such a familiar experience to most of us. In this case it did not take her very long to localize the impression. Certainly it did not refer to anything in her own home, where matters of late had been about as little enjoyable as could well be conceived. No, that bright streak which lay like a gleam across her memory, referred to the pleasant hour which she and Kitty King

had spent the day before in Mr. Wygram's studio. What had particularly remained on her mind as comforting and satisfactory had been the artist's own manner, and especially his manner to herself. Poor Muriel had all her life been so stinted and starved in the matter of real ties that she was apt to cling with more than common tenacity to those friendships which had either come to her accidentally, or which she had made for herself; and amongst these self-made friendships Mr. Wygram's had been chief. He had been extremely kind to her, and she had thoroughly appreciated his kindness; he had liked her, and she had reciprocated his liking. She had come to look upon this friendship of his as a sort of possession—a bond of freemasonry which she owned, and by no means one of the least pleasant consequences which she owed to her art. Of course she had not entirely

escaped innuendoes as to the probability of that bond being some day or other exchanged for a warmer one; but these she had been able hitherto honestly to disregard. Mr. Wygram had never himself, she thought, given any countenance to such a notion, and certainly it was the last thing which she desired herself. Besides, though still to all intents and purposes a young man, the difference of age between them — nearly twenty years — was undoubtedly great; almost great enough to entitle him, if he chose, to regard her as a daughter. Not that, of course, she supposed for a moment that he did regard her as a daughter. He was both too young for his age, and she too old for hers, for anything of the sort to be possible. Still she really did conscientiously believe that he looked upon her simply as a friend—a very near and dear friend; one in whose welfare he would always take the warmest

interest, as he might take in that of a sister or of a favourite cousin—but nothing more. Of late, however, especially since her return from Hampshire, this confidence had been somewhat shaken. Not that Mr. Wygram had said anything that could be construed even by the most hypersensitive of ears into a declaration of love, but there had been a certain emphasis and eagerness in his manner of which she could not help being conscious, and which had filled her with vague uneasiness. She liked him so very, very much; she valued his friendship so highly, that it troubled her to think that she could ever lose that friendship. Since she did not certainly wish him to be more than a friend, every change in this direction must plainly be a loss. Yesterday, however, at the studio, it seemed to her as if all the old pleasant footing had been regained. Mr. Wygram had been friendly, but he

had certainly not been anything more than friendly. In his disquisitions about art, in his amused perception of Kitty King's very evident coquetry, in everything he had said or done, he had been exactly his old self — kind, thoughtful, considerate, authoritative. She was able, therefore, to make up her mind that whatever had seemed different in his manner had been purely the result of accident, and that for the future, in short, she might safely dismiss all idea of danger in this direction as utterly and entirely chimerical.

It was just while she was dwelling on, and inwardly congratulating herself upon this result, that a note was put into her hand by Eliza. It contained but a few lines, and ran as follows :—

"DEAR MISS ELLIS,

"Could you see me to-day at three o'clock? Pray do not refuse. It

is of very particular importance to my happiness that I should see you.

"Yours in any case devotedly,

"JOHN PHILLPOTS WYGRAM."

To say that Muriel was disturbed at the receipt of this letter is to say little. She was appalled, aghast, consternated. The whole fabric she had just been so carefully rearing in her mind seemed to come toppling about her, like a house of cards, and in its place seemed to arise a new one—that of Mr. Wygram, angry, disappointed, perhaps alienated from her for ever. What could he possibly have to say, that required such a serious, nay, such a solemn preamble, except the one thing of all others which she had hoped never to hear from his lips? Should she refuse to see him at all, she thought, and so escape the dilemma? A little reflection, however, convinced her that that would be simply

useless, nay, ridiculous—a mere postponement of the evil day. If Mr. Wygram had made up his mind to speak, speak he would, whatever she might say or do. She took up the letter again, trying to extract some other and less formidable meaning from the words. But no, in its brevity, and conciseness, in its very abstinence from all the usual social forms, she could only read one meaning—the very last she desired to discover there. Meantime, the messenger was waiting, and it was obviously necessary to return some answer; the question was what was that answer to be? At length, though not until after considerable hesitation, she despatched a note to the effect that she *would* be at home at the hour named, and then went down to breakfast, feeling as if some sort of cataclysm or moral earthquake had suddenly opened across her path.

After breakfast she went upstairs again to her studio. The rain had continued all night, and still fell heavily, dropping down from every roof, and turning the whole road into a perfect labyrinth of puddles. It was just the day of all others for settling down to some steady regular indoor work, but Muriel felt incapable of settling steadily to anything. Her mind was in a perfect whirl, disorganized, restless, full of that vague sense of expectancy, the most antagonistic, perhaps, of all others to steady effort. She took down all the carefully arranged mufflings from the window, and stood looking out across the dripping bushes, at the black shiny railings, spongy trees, and yellow river rolling so sleepily and sullenly by. A big timber-barge was coming slowly down upon the current; so slowly, indeed, that it was only by measuring its progress against the opposite shore that she was able to see that it

moved at all. A single figure, armed with a long black pole, stood at the prow, tugging it back into the current, whenever the big, overladen thing seemed disposed to sway towards the one bank or the other. Hours must have elapsed since he left his moorings a few miles up the river, and hours would yet elapse before he reached his destination a few miles lower down. Muriel found herself watching that man, and speculating about his life, and what he thought of as he plied his way up and down that grim, smoke-enveloped water-way. After the timber-barge came a long train of coal-boats, under the conveyance of a tug, looking black enough and lugubrious enough in that murky grey atmosphere, to serve for some funeral procession adown the fated Styx. Then these, too, passed on, and the river for a while was left tenantless.

Presently there came a ring at the outer

bell, and, looking out, Muriel saw that a cab was standing at the entrance. Was it Kitty King, she wondered, come back to explain her mysterious conduct of the evening before? A second glance, however, showed that the cab had not brought any one, but was waiting for some one from the house; indeed, a minute later the door opened, and Mrs. Skynner appeared in full visiting attire, sailing down under the shelter of an umbrella held over her by Eliza. At the same moment the bell rang again, and this time it really was Kitty who stood, umbrella in hand, at the gate. Muriel could not help wondering whether these two very antagonistic spirits would meet, and if so with what result Before long it became apparent that they had met, and that the concussion must have been even a more violent one than usual, for Kitty came into the room literally dancing with rage.

"That horrible, nasty, ill-tempered old cat!" she exclaimed.

"Kitty, be silent," Muriel cried angrily.

Miss King obeyed this injunction by turning round and staring at her interlocutrix with all the power of her widely opened blue eyes.

"Well, Kitty, what now? What are you looking at?" inquired the latter.

"I'm looking at you, Muriel," she replied calmly. "I'm trying to make you out."

"Trying to make out what, Kitty?"

"*You*, I tell you, you; I'm trying to make you out."

"I should say that you had a very easy task there," Muriel said, smiling.

"Easy? Not a bit of it—very difficult, quite as difficult as any of those nasty problems in perspective Mr. Malby is always setting me, and the more I look the less I understand."

Miss Ellis turned away towards the writing-table. "You seem to have developed a new talent for mysteries, Kitty; perhaps in time you'll kindly explain yourself," she said, taking up a pen, and beginning to write a note.

Kitty followed and stood in front of her. "Now, Muriel, listen to me; I want you to answer my question," she said. "You're very proud; you know you are, you can't deny it; in fact, I don't know anybody prouder in their own way than you are, and yet you let that horrible vulgar woman bully you, and tyrannize over you, and insult your guests just for all the world as if you liked it. What do you do it for? that's what I want to discover. No one can oblige you to have her here if you don't like; then why *do* you? Is it for a penance, or what? Do now please tell me, there's a dear, and I'll promise never to repeat."

Muriel threw down her pen impatiently. "Once for all, Kitty, you will really make me extremely angry if you go on like this," she said in a tone of annoyance. "How often must I tell you that I cannot and will not sit still and hear my nearest relations abused?"

"Your nearest relations! The widow of a half-brother whom you have told me yourself you hardly knew!"

"That doesn't prevent her from being one of my nearest relations."

"You poor dear! I'm sure I wish with all my heart you had any number of relations—'Not in ones or twos, but in dozens—fathers and mothers, aunts, sisters, and cousins,'" the inconsequent Kitty exclaimed effusively.

Muriel could not help laughing. "I don't think that would suit me, at all," she said. "I should feel smothered under such a weight of kindred as all that."

"Then why keep that odious woman living with you?" the other responded promptly. "Besides, that's not all, Muriel. I've something else to tell you, something really very serious."

Muriel smiled.

"No, don't smile, Muriel. It is, I tell you, very serious; and what's more, it will make you furious."

"Then probably, Kitty, you had better not tell me."

"Oh, but I must. I've kept it bottled up so long, that I should burst if I didn't. Now, will you promise not to be angry?"

"That entirely depends upon what it is?"

"Oh, it's something that I know *will* make you angry. You will declare it is all my nonsense and spite, and wicked imagination. But I *know* it's true. I've been suspecting it this long time, and now I'm certain—quite, quite certain."

"And what is it all about, this terrible something, Kitty?"

"About? Why, of course, it is about Mrs. Skynner."

"Still about Mrs. Skynner? I really thought that you had at last exhausted everything that even your powers of vituperation could find to say upon that score."

"Not a bit of it, Muriel. This is something quite new; something that I've never even hinted at before. In fact, I've only felt certain of it the last few days myself. It is that she—now don't be angry—that she—that I think—that I'm sure, she—doesn't like you. There! Now it's out, and I feel ever so much better."

Muriel smiled. "So this is your mighty mystery, is it, my poor Kitty?" she said.

"Muriel! You don't mean to say that you suspected it yourself?"

"Well, yes, Kitty. I suppose I did suspect it."

"You mean that you knew it—you *knew* she didn't like you?"

"I don't know about not liking. I don't fancy she is exactly fond of me, and after all, why in the world should she be? She is not in the least bound to be that I can see; and if she were even, we can't always regulate our likings and dislikings. I have disliked people myself without any particular reason. Not that I mean to say that Mrs. Skynner has no particular reason —very likely she has—but I mean that I do not think she is to be blamed. It is not a crime disliking me. Probably she would prefer to like me if she could."

Kitty's face was a picture. "Well, Muriel, I never heard such a thing in my life," she exclaimed. "Keeping a woman living in your house, and at your expense, who hates you!"

"Once for all, Kitty, you are not to go on repeating that nonsense," Muriel said

angrily. "As for its being *my* house, as long as it suits Sophia Skynner to live here it is as much hers as mine. She is my brother's widow, and when I was poor they helped me, and if she likes to stay here, why, stay she shall till the end of time, as far as I am concerned."

"Even if she hates you?"

"Whether she hates me, or whether she loves me; I don't see what that has got to say to it. And now, please, Kitty, have the goodness to leave the subject of Mrs. Skynner alone, and talk of something else. Remember that you have still to account for your mysterious conduct last night, and you have not yet told me what it was that poor unfortunate Mr. Archer said which so infuriated you?"

It was now Kitty's turn to assume an air of reticence.

"I don't see that there is anything in particular to tell you, Muriel," she said,

taking up a pencil and beginning to balance it nonchalantly upon her finger.

"Nothing particular? Not after expressly promising to come and tell me all about it this morning?"

"Oh, as far as that goes, it doesn't require a conjuror, I suppose, to guess what he *did* say," Kitty replied poutingly.

Muriel smiled. "Well, if you put it like that, I suppose I can only guess one thing," she said. "I can only conclude that he asked you to marry him."

Miss King nodded.

"And what answer did you give him?"

"I gave him no answer at all. I simply ran away and left him there."

"But, Kitty, you will have to give him an answer sooner or later. Every man expects an answer to that question."

"Oh! if that's all he wants, Muriel, I can easily give him an answer. I'll give him a 'No' as big as this house."

"Probably he would prefer a 'Yes.'"

"I dare say he would, but he won't get it. In fact, I don't think that he deserves any answer at all. What right had he to torment me?—taking advantage of my having to walk under his umbrella, too—I call it very dishonourable!"

"Perhaps he was afraid of not getting another opportunity," Muriel suggested.

"I'll take very good care he never does get another," Kitty responded tartly.

"Do you know, Kitty, I think you're really extremely unkind and unfair to that poor young man," Muriel said. "What greater compliment, after all, could he or any man pay you than to ask you to be his wife?"

"I don't want such compliments—at any rate, not from him."

"Well, but, Kitty, I think you used to like him. I remember you used to tell me a great deal about him when you first

went to that drawing school. How good-natured he was, and how he used to help you with your drawings, and see that you were not put to sit in a draught. Have you forgotten all that?"

"No, Muriel, I haven't forgotten it, only you must remember that I was little better than a child then, so of course I liked anybody that was the least bit civil or kind to me. Besides, he has got worse—ever so much worse since then. He never was to say bright, but he wasn't nearly—not half—so stupid then as he is now."

"But, indeed, Kitty, Mr. Wygram says that he is not stupid at all. On the contrary, that he paints, or will paint, extremely well; and in any case it's evident that he has cared for you a long time, so that I really think he deserves a little more courtesy and consideration at your hands than you seem disposed to show him."

Kitty's face assumed an expression well known to her relations—an expression which meant that she was not going to be coerced into doing anything that she didn't choose.

"Oh! it's all very fine for you, Muriel!" she exclaimed resentfully. "You're not asked to marry a lout of a creature, with ears like a barn-door owl, who blushes whenever he is spoken to. Mr. Wygram is a very different thing. Nobody need be ashamed of *him!*"

Muriel, who was putting away some drawings in a portfolio, turned round at this.

"Mr. Wygram?" she repeated. "What has he got to say to it? Why do you talk to me about him, Kitty?"

Kitty stared. "Why, Muriel, I did not know that it was a secret," she said.

"You did not know that what was a secret?"

"That you were going to marry him."

"It certainly is a secret from me. I never heard of it before."

This time Kitty's face expressed genuine amazement.

"You're *not?*" she exclaimed.

"Certainly not."

"But everybody *says* you are."

"Everybody knows nothing about it. Besides, everybody says nothing of the kind."

"But indeed, indeed, I assure you, Muriel, they do. Why, even that stupid Fred Archer asked me yesterday when it was to be, and whether it hadn't been going on a long time."

Muriel coloured angrily. "People are extremely kind to concern themselves with my affairs," she said haughtily.

"Then have you refused him, Muriel?" Kitty inquired, in rather awestricken tones. To refuse a personage of Mr. Wygram's

calibre seemed to her a very different matter from refusing a mere beardless nobody like the hapless Archer.

"Certainly not. There has been no necessity. Mr. Wygram has never said anything of the kind to me."

"But he *will*, Muriel; you know perfectly well that he means to. You can't deny that," Kitty persisted triumphantly.

Muriel hesitated. Yesterday—this morning, even—she would have denied it, and that too emphatically, but now, with that letter in her pocket and this dreadful interview hanging over her, a denial was not so easy. She would not prevaricate; there was nothing for it, therefore, but to put a summary stop to Miss Kitty's loquacity.

"I know nothing about Mr. Wygram, or his intentions," she said coldly. "And if I did, it would be the last thing I should talk about. So, please, oblige me, Kitty, by finding some other subject of conversation."

if he came home and found that it was gone.

Muriel was quite ready not only to forgive her, but further, to press her to stay for luncheon, as their own would probably be over before she returned.

"Now, isn't that just my family all over?" Kitty exclaimed indignantly. "They can't so much as mislay a key, but they must instantly rush to the conclusion that *I* have taken it. So likely that I would go out visiting with a great hulking key sticking out of my pocket! I wonder that they don't say I've pawned it, or sold it to the tinkers for old iron!"

"Arabella only thought you *might* have taken it, Kitty," her sister said deprecatingly. "You know you do sometimes put your things in there when you are in a hurry."

This second Miss King was a plain, stolid-looking girl, very unlike her more

brilliant and versatile sister, whom she, for her part, appeared to regard with the sort of wonder, not unmixed with awe, which some honest brahmin or dorking might be supposed to feel for the more dazzling-hued peacock or silver pheasant which fate had allotted to the same poultry-yard. Indeed, Kitty, it must be said, enjoyed to the full that peculiar sort of prestige which attaches to the one brilliant and attractive member of a somewhat dull and uninteresting family. Her sisters, even while actually suffering under her flightiness and capricious humours, being not unalive to the lustre which this very flightiness and capriciousness lent to their own more sterling and unequivocal qualities—qualities which, without some such foil as this, might, in so unappreciative a world, have possibly passed without recognition altogether!

CHAPTER VII.

THE ORDEAL IS PAST.

LUNCHEON over, the two sisters still lingered. The elder Miss King had never been in the studio before, and accordingly Kitty took upon herself to act as show woman, pulling out portfolios and expounding upon their contents with much gusto and satisfaction. As three o'clock drew near, Muriel began to feel extremely nervous. The thought of this impending interview weighed upon her like a nightmare. What would Mr. Wygram say? she wondered. Could she by any art or ingenuity so contrive as to ward off this most terribly unwelcome declaration which seemed impending? Or was it possible—

thrice blessed possibility—that she could, after all, have mistaken the drift of his meaning, and that nothing could be further from his intention than to make any such declaration at all? In that case she would have, she felt, to blush for her own vanity and folly, but surely any amount of such blushing would be better than what at present seemed awaiting her? Should she keep her present guests all through his visit, she thought, or would it be better to hurry them off at once, and so leave the stage clear for what was to follow?

All this and a good deal more went on in her mind under the cover of Kitty's volubility, every knock that came to the door set her heart throbbing excitedly. When, however, punctual to the moment, Mr. Wygram appeared, she felt herself, on the contrary, getting cold with nervousness, and could hardly go through the

ordinary form of receiving him. She got up for a minute, and then sat down again, a sense of guilt seeming to pervade her entire being. Mr. Wygram, however, did not sit down. He stood, with his hat in his hand, looking about him with his usual air of suave superiority, a suavity slightly clouded at present by an evident impression that matters might have arranged themselves on this occasion in better accordance with his wishes.

This air of his had such an effect upon the elder of the two Miss Kings that she presently got up, and declared that she must be going; Kitty could follow if she liked. That latter young lady, however, whose blue eyes had been twinkling maliciously ever since Mr. Wygram's arrival on the scene, declared positively that nothing earthly would induce her to remain an instant; an assertion which she qualified by explaining that what she

meant was that nothing would induce her to be out of the way when the investigation as regards the whereabouts of the key came off; if she did, her family, she knew, would inevitably give it against her.

The sisters departed, Muriel prepared herself for the worst. Mr. Wygram did not, however, appear to be in any particular hurry to avail himself of their absence. He even left his place, and moved a little about the room, looking at one thing and another. Presently he took up a portrait of Mrs. Prettyman, which Muriel had begun a few days before, and turned it round, so that the light might fall upon it.

"Admirable!" he exclaimed. "How well you have caught the look—that small fine smile, and the alert look about those old eyes! Now, do you know, I couldn't have done that. I shouldn't have seen it," he continued, turning round to her.

Muriel smiled, and shook her head, feeling rather mystified.

"No, upon my honour; a man's eyes are duller. And the painting, too, is good —round and firm and solid. You should take to portraits, Miss Ellis; you should indeed; you have it all there," tapping the stretcher of the canvas.

"Take to portraits?" she repeated vaguely. "Do you mean have people coming here to sit to me?"

"Yes; why not? Should you dislike that?"

"Well, yes, I think I should dislike it rather."

"But why? Do tell me why?"

"Well, for several reasons. I like painting my own friends and choosing my own types. Rich people, who pay for having their portraits painted, are generally very ugly types."

"Not all. Look at Lady Hermione

Dalrymple; I showed you her portrait yesterday. Where could you find a better model?"

"I did not mean all, of course; still, if once I began, I suppose I should have to paint them all, ugly or not, and I think I should prefer not."

Mr. Wygram put back the picture against the wall, not impatiently, but as much as to say that there was an end of that matter; then, coming back, he stood in front of Muriel, looking down on her as she sat at work.

"You don't care for art as you did," he said, with a sort of mild reproachfulness. "You are getting tired of it. You don't mean to stick to it—not seriously." Then, as Muriel attempted a denial, "No, no, do not deny it. I have seen it coming on a long time," he continued. "You are getting sick of it; you have had enough. It bores you."

A sudden inspiration seized Muriel. If she could only get into an argument with him, she thought, and even quarrel a little, the dreaded interview might pass safely by, and all would be well.

"Really, Mr. Wygram, I don't think that is fair; I don't see that you have any right to reproach me," she exclaimed in a tone of spirited remonstrance. "You yourself are not by any means such a slave to your brush. In fact, I suspect that you take many more holidays, and go about a great deal more than I do, if the truth was only known."

"Very likely, but still that is different, you know it is." He changed his position slightly, still, however, standing and looking down at her. "I used to think, Miss Ellis, that you were made to be an artist's wife," he then said slowly.

Muriel started, and involuntarily looked up.

"Yes, that was my hope—I may say my conviction," he continued in the same level, unaccentuated tone; "but now—now I begin to doubt."

He paused, as if to allow her to speak; but Muriel remained dumb. What was she expected to say? she wondered. Was that meant for a declaration or was it not? or did it possibly mean that he had once intended to make her such a declaration, but that further acquaintance had convinced him of her unfitness for it? Certainly his words admitted of either interpretation.

Mr. Wygram did not, however, leave her long in doubt.

"Yes, that was my hope," he repeated. "It has always seemed to me that it would be a perfect life—two people working together—caring for the same things, enjoying their own work, and yet each at the same time proud of the other's suc-

cesses. I fancied you thought so too—until lately."

He paused again, but she still said nothing. "Could you, do you think, be happy as an artist's wife?" he then inquired; and this time there was an ardour and an emphasis in his voice which gave unmistakable point to the question.

Muriel felt that the dreaded moment had indeed come; still she was not without some hope of passing the whole thing off easily. It was quite true that she had often thought that the life here sketched would, in the abstract, be a very delightful one. More than that, she had even thought that, if she herself ever married, she should certainly prefer her husband—in the abstract—to be a painter. Now, however, the question was by no means in the abstract; on the contrary, extremely concrete—standing there in remarkably substantial flesh and blood before her. If

she now said "Yes" therefore would it not be equivalent to a formal acceptation, unless, of course, she was discourteous enough to add that, though she would marry *an* artist, she would *not* marry this particular artist here present! There was nothing for it therefore but to say "No."

"I am afraid that it would not suit me to be an artist's wife," she said gravely.

To her surprise, Mr. Wygram, far from looking discomfited, or abruptly changing the conversation, appeared rather relieved than otherwise by her answer. He took a chair and sat down, looking more alert and like himself than he had done yet.

"That was what I thought; that, in fact, was what chiefly brought me here to-day," he said eagerly. Then he paused, and began again in a different tone. "I need not, I am sure, Miss Ellis, tell you what my feeling for you is; you must have seen it—every one, I think, has seen it. If

I have hesitated to put it into words it was because I feared to startle you. I hoped that time might stand my friend; that you would grow used to me, and that growing used to me you might come to feel that I was a man whom you might trust. No, do not answer yet," he added hastily. "Let me say my say; it will not be a very long one. What I came to-day to tell you was, that if you would prefer my not being an artist, I am ready to give up even that. I would give up art altogether, if you wished. You could live where you liked, and how you liked; I would take a place in the country or anywhere you preferred; I have money enough, as far as that goes, apart from anything I earn." He paused a little, and then said, very slowly and deliberately, "I am fond of my art, as you know, Muriel; but I care more, very much more for you."

Muriel, whatever her previous determination, could not but be deeply touched with those concluding words. It was no light sacrifice that was being offered her. Mr. Wygram's devotion to his art was almost a by-word; a rich man, without the usual spur and incentive of necessity, no allurements or temptations had hitherto succeeded in weaning him from his brush. She could judge, therefore, of the cost and value of what was here offered her.

"Oh, Mr. Wygram, I am so sorry, so very sorry," she said tremulously, "but indeed it is impossible; quite impossible."

He drew back a little. "What is impossible?" he asked.

"What you wish."

"Impossible that you can marry me?"

"Yes."

He stood still, looking steadily at her a moment without speaking.

"Why?" he said at last.

"Oh, but for so many, many reasons."

"Tell me one." Then, as she hesitated, "Is it on account of the difference of our ages?"

"Oh no, no, not that, indeed—but——"

"Well?"

"Because, well, because—because I do not love you; that is the chief reason," she cried, driven to desperation.

"Oh, but that is not a sufficient reason; it is not, indeed," he said eagerly. "I mean that I did not expect it; I never flattered myself that you were what people call in love with me. Many things—my age, the difference of our tastes, a variety of circumstances might prevent that." He returned and stood in front of her. "If you will only confide yourself to me, Muriel," he said ardently; "if you will only trust me, I know that I can make you happy; I feel certain, absolutely

certain of that. I have studied your tastes, your feelings, your disposition. I know you thoroughly—even your faults. Indeed, you may trust yourself to me. You will never repent it—never, never."

Muriel felt that the task before her was not less difficult than she anticipated, but, on the contrary, ten thousand times more so. What was she to say to a suitor who offered so much and asked so little? who was so kind, so patient, so confiding?

"Oh do not please be angry with me," she cried. "Be generous—be like yourself. Believe me when I say that it cannot be—never—never. Indeed, I would not wound you if I could help it. Believe me that it is impossible—quite, quite impossible."

"I cannot believe that," he said slowly. "I may have been misled by my hopes, but certainly I thought you liked me—once. You have changed, Muriel—

changed about other things besides painting. A month ago you would not have dismissed me so summarily. Something has changed you. What is it? Tell me."

"But, indeed, indeed I have not changed," she said earnestly. "It would have been impossible always—just as impossible as it is to-day."

He shook his head.

"No, it would not," he replied. "You may say it, you may even think it, but it is not so. I know you better than you know yourself. I have felt the difference every time we have met lately. I feel it now."

He walked away towards the door, then turned hastily back.

"All the same, I cannot give it up like this," he cried, and there was a passion in his voice now that there had not been yet. "I am not a boy, Muriel, to

take things lightly—to choose and to change again. I have thought of this for so long—ever since I first knew you. I cannot give it up. But I will wait," he added hastily, "wait as long as ever you like—only tell me that I may hope."

"But I cannot—indeed I cannot!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands. "It is impossible."

His face darkened. "At least, then, tell me what has changed you?" he said sternly. "Something has. What is it?"

"Indeed, no. Nothing."

"Do not say so; you have always been truthful, Muriel; be truthful now. Dismiss me, of course, if you choose; but at least tell me why—tell me who——"

He stopped, and looked towards the door. Steps were heard approaching. It opened, and Eliza entered to announce a visitor, followed the next moment by—Mr. Roger Hyde.

Muriel, of course, expected that her late suitor would forthwith seize an early opportunity of departing, but apparently this was not the course which commended itself to him. He and Hyde were slightly acquainted, but, after the first minute, Mr. Wygram contributed nothing to the conversation, which indeed was entirely sustained by the new comer, Muriel herself throwing in an occasional yes or no at random, her mind in a perfect whirl, unable to detach itself from the scene in which she had just been bearing a part.

Whether any perception of something feverish and electric in the air did or did not convey itself to that astute little gentleman's perceptions, he, at all events, proved himself as usual fully equal to the emergency. Selecting the lowest chair in the room, he seated himself in the easiest of conversational attitudes, and proceeded to pour forth a succession of such small

social particulars as happily required little or no response upon Muriel's part. Had Miss Ellis heard, he inquired, of the prince that had just arrived? the blackest prince ever yet seen in London. He was at Lady Hatherton's ball last night, and nobody else had a chance beside him. As for Lady Hildegarde St. Vincent, she was so struck that her mother, the duchess, thought it advisable to take her away before the cotillon, for it would be a pity, of course, if her engagement to her cousin, Lord Seldon, was disturbed in consequence; particularly as the prince (Miss Ellis must really excuse his not attempting his name) had already four wives, so that it was extremely improbable he would be willing to embark upon a fifth, even if the Daleshires would consent to the alliance, which very likely they would not. Though indeed nowadays, when dukes' daughters

married tallow-chandlers, and worse, there was nothing so very outrageous in one of them marrying a prince, whatever might be the colour of his skin.

To all this, and a good deal more, of the same kind, Muriel listened, feeling as if the voice was coming to her out of the middle of a dream. Would he ever go? she wondered. How extraordinarily stupid it was of her not to have taken the precaution of forbidding any other visitor being admitted while Mr. Wygram was there. Once she ventured to look in the latter's direction, but his head was turned away, and she could not see his face. A yellow railway novel happened to be lying on the table, which Kitty King had left the day before with an entreaty that Muriel would read it. Outside this work was adorned with one of those portentous designs against which the wave of æstheticism has hitherto broken in vain. A gentleman, arrayed in

a green cut-away coat and a pair of remarkably tight trousers of the lightest possible shade of blue, was apparently swooning in the arms of a lady, described inside as a miracle of beauty and elegance, but whose portrait depicted her in a costume of red and yellow bed-curtains, surmounted by a waving edifice of ostrich feathers. This engaging design Mr. Wygram had taken up, and was now poring over it as if entranced with its loveliness; nor did he so much as once raise his head or change his position all the time that the visitor remained.

Muriel's already tolerably acute remorse became naturally deepened and widened tenfold at seeing him thus. Mr. Wygram had always stood to her so completely as the ideal of imperturbability and social success, that to see him thus *hors de combat*, unable to rally or take part in the passing moment, gave her a shock

greater than the apparent cause. It seemed to show that the barb which her hand so unwittingly had launched must have gone deeper than she had even feared. What was she, she thought, with a sudden pang of self-abasement, that such a man, so good, so kind, so gallant a gentleman, should be thus mortified and made miserable upon her account?

At last, after an interval which to her perceptions seemed endless, but which had really barely lasted ten minutes, Hyde got up, and prepared to take his leave, still, however, discoursing volubly. Had Miss Ellis seen anything of Halliday since his return? he inquired. Probably not. He was the worst visitor in the world. He himself had made one effort to go and see him, but even friendship had its limits, and he drew the line at Whitechapel. Extraordinary piece of perverted conscientiousness, certainly, that notion of

Halliday's that duty required him to live in such a place, and spend the best years of his life coddling old women and washing charity children's faces, when there was that father of his, too, whose only request had been that he would spend as much money as he liked, and live like a gentleman. True, old Halliday's notion of living like a gentleman was probably of a very *roturière* order, but still the son ought to have had no difficulty in modifying that to his own taste. And, after all, the old fellow was really perfectly right. Nothing would suit Halliday so well as to be a country squire, unless, of course, he could go off to the ends of the earth as a Franklin, or a Livingstone, or something of that sort. In any case, could anything be more preposterous than his own notion of going and settling himself amongst a pack of curates and district visitors, whose wildest idea of adventure was a tea-party

or a mothers' meeting?—a man with a physique like that! He was the best fellow in the world, but he had clearly mistaken his vocation. He was not a St. Vincent de Paul, or a St. Augustine, or anything even remotely resembling them. What nature really intended him to be was a sort of idealized Squire Western, a pattern of all the manly accomplishments, and the great patron of field sports in his neighbourhood, not a parson whose cloth forbids him even to hunt or to shoot!

At another time all this would have interested Muriel extremely. She had often wondered what Halliday's relations with his own family really were, and whether those relations could have anything to say to that depression and self-dissatisfaction which so evidently weighed upon him. At present, however, her feeling was that it was a sort of treason to

Mr. Wygram to allow herself even to think of any one else, her one desire being that Hyde would go, and that the situation—the tension of which was beginning to tell upon her own nerves—should, somehow or other, come to an end.

At last that desirable consummation came to pass, and she and Wygram were alone. The instant the door closed, Muriel crossed the space dividing them, and laid her hand timidly upon his sleeve.

"Mr. Wygram," she said, "do speak to me; do tell me you will forgive me. I feel so dreadfully conscience-stricken at having grieved you—you, too, who have always been so good to me. Say that you do not blame me—that you will not cease to be my friend?" She paused, and stood looking appealingly at him.

He looked up. "Blame you? no, I don't blame you exactly," he said slowly.

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At last, after an interval which to her perceptions seemed endless, but which had really barely lasted ten minutes, Hyde got up, and prepared to take his leave, still, however, discoursing volubly. Had Miss Ellis seen anything of Halliday since his return? he inquired. Probably not. He was the worst visitor in the world. He himself had made one effort to go and see him, but even friendship had its limits, and he drew the line at Whitechapel. Extraordinary piece of perverted conscientiousness, certainly, that notion of

Halliday's that duty required him to live in such a place, and spend the best years of his life coddling old women and washing charity children's faces, when there was that father of his, too, whose only request had been that he would spend as much money as he liked, and live like a gentleman. True, old Halliday's notion of living like a gentleman was probably of a very *roturière* order, but still the son ought to have had no difficulty in modifying that to his own taste. And, after all, the old fellow was really perfectly right. Nothing would suit Halliday so well as to be a country squire, unless, of course, he could go off to the ends of the earth as a Franklin, or a Livingstone, or something of that sort. In any case, could anything be more preposterous than his own notion of going and settling himself amongst a pack of curates and district visitors, whose wildest idea of adventure was a tea-party

or a mothers' meeting?—a man with a physique like that! He was the best fellow in the world, but he had clearly mistaken his vocation. He was not a St. Vincent de Paul, or a St. Augustine, or anything even remotely resembling them. What nature really intended him to be was a sort of idealized Squire Western, a pattern of all the manly accomplishments, and the great patron of field sports in his neighbourhood, not a parson whose cloth forbids him even to hunt or to shoot!

At another time all this would have interested Muriel extremely. She had often wondered what Halliday's relations with his own family really were, and whether those relations could have anything to say to that depression and self-dissatisfaction which so evidently weighed upon him. At present, however, her feeling was that it was a sort of treason to

Mr. Wygram to allow herself even to think of any one else, her one desire being that Hyde would go, and that the situation—the tension of which was beginning to tell upon her own nerves—should, somehow or other, come to an end.

At last that desirable consummation came to pass, and she and Wygram were alone. The instant the door closed, Muriel crossed the space dividing them, and laid her hand timidly upon his sleeve.

"Mr. Wygram," she said, "do speak to me; do tell me you will forgive me. I feel so dreadfully conscience-stricken at having grieved you—you, too, who have always been so good to me. Say that you do not blame me—that you will not cease to be my friend?" She paused, and stood looking appealingly at him.

He looked up. "Blame you? no, I don't blame you exactly," he said slowly.

"I *am* unhappy, and it *is* your doing, but it is hardly your fault. You gave me no right to think that you were likely to give me any better hearing, though somehow or other I *did* think it—masculine vanity, I suppose you will say?" He got up and stood looking down at her. "You are positively certain, Muriel, that this is all quite impossible?" he then said quietly.

"Indeed, yes, quite," she answered sadly.

"Very well, then, there is an end of it;" —he gave himself a sort of shake. "I have been thinking what I will do all the time that little rattlepate has been here. I will go abroad. I will go"—he paused an instant—"to America."

"To America?" she repeated in a tone of dismay.

"Yes. I have often thought of going there. I should like to see the country —Niagara, you know, and all that sort of

thing. They are a wonderful people, too; and I hear they are making great efforts in the direction of getting up a good school of art. Very likely I shall go on then to Japan; I should rather like to see those potteries of theirs at home." He held out his hand, and she gave him both hers, and he held them in a tight grasp. "You see, not having cared for any one else—at all events, since I was a boy—makes it seem worse to me than it would to another," he said in a sort of half apologetic tone. "Never mind, Muriel; I'll get over it, so don't you worry yourself."

Muriel, of course, felt a thousandfold more conscience-stricken by this magnanimous abstention from reproach, than she would have been by the wildest and bitterest invectives. Oh, why could she not do as he wished? she thought. Where else could she find any one so good, so

kind, so true? What fatality was it urged her into sending him away from her?

"Indeed, indeed you will," she cried eagerly. "You will see some one else, too, better—far better and worthier of you than I am!"

He smiled rather ruefully. "Perhaps I shall," he answered. "In Japan, who knows? At any rate, don't you blame yourself. It was to be, as the fatalists say, and so it is, and there's an end of it."

He let go her hand, and moved towards the door. "All the same you have changed, you know," he added in another tone.

Then he opened the door and went out, and Muriel remained alone.

CHAPTER VIII.

STRAINED RELATIONS.

MRS. SKYNNER—or Mrs. Theodore Skynner as she herself preferred being called—has not hitherto come in for any very large share of attention or consideration at our hands. It may, therefore, serve as some slight reparation for past neglect if I hasten to say that her position in the present juncture of affairs between herself and her sister-in-law merits our warmest and most candid commiseration. To be obliged to live in close companionship with a person whose tastes and sympathies are utterly at variance with yours, and against whom you yourself are conscious of cherishing an

antipathy, cannot under any circumstances be said to be comfortable. When, however, in addition to this original source of discomfort it further happens that the individual in question stands to you in the relation of a benefactor—is the medium to which you are indebted for the bread you eat, for that roof under whose shelter you sleep—then the discomfort of the situation may be said to have reached its height. True, it may be retorted that no one need voluntarily remain in that position, but should, on the contrary, make up their minds either to the one course or the other —to forswear namely either their antipathy or their obligation. Mrs. Skynner, however, did not see the matter at all in that light. Little as she liked Muriel, and little as she relished the hospitality which she received under her roof, she relished the idea of leaving that roof and facing such discomforts as might be in wait for her

outside very considerably less. What had remained to her after the crash of her husband's fortunes, and the dispersing of their properties, constituted, it must be owned, but an extremely meagre income; enough to enable her with strict economy to live by herself in a very small way. Now, Mrs. Skynner, as it happened, had a particular objection to living in a small way. Muriel's establishment was certainly by no means luxurious—utterly wanting, in fact, in thousands of things which she herself considered indispensable—still, as far as it went, it was a liberal one. There were no cheese-parings; no pinchings to-day in order to make an effect to-morrow. Personally, had the establishment been her own, she would have preferred a little more such private pinching in order to have a wider margin for greater external brilliancy; this, however, was not the way of the house, and as the brilliancy

would not have redounded particularly to her own credit, Mrs. Skynner was content to leave things as they were, and to reap the benefit of the opposite system. As to the idea that any return could be expected upon her part, such a notion never for an instant crossed her mind. The benefits, in fact, she considered were all the other way. It stood to reason that a mere unmarried girl like Muriel could not by any possibility live alone without the countenance and chaperonage of some experienced matron, and where could she find any one of larger experience, or whose countenance would confer wider or greater lustre than Mrs. Skynner herself? It was indeed only part of Muriel's obstinacy and her unaccountable way of looking at things which had caused her to fail in reaping the full benefit of that companionship. When she had first come to Chelsea she had offered repeatedly to

introduce her into society, and to take her out into that circle which she herself had formerly so adorned; but this Muriel had declined, alleging that she did not care for evening parties, and that going about in the daytime hindered her from getting on with her painting. Mrs. Skynner resented this as a slight. Little as she herself admired Muriel, she was aware that by the outer world she was considered handsome and attractive, and was not, therefore, averse to such advantages as might accrue from her companionship —the more desirable, seeing that her relations with her own former friends had not, perhaps, of late been altogether so cordial as might have been wished.

During the month which Muriel had spent in Hampshire, matters in this respect had somewhat mended; indeed, several of the later comers had failed to realize that the house in Chelsea had any

other proprietor or occupier than herself. This desirable state of things had, however, received a severe check, in consequence both of the episode of Madame Cairioli with its unfortunate ending, and still more (so, at least, she herself considered), in consequence of the deprivation she had sustained in the matter of a suitable equipage, both which misfortunes stood charged in equal measure at Muriel's door. It was, indeed, a not uninstructive instance of the ease with which an antipathy can provide its own aliment, that Mrs. Skynner really and honestly did believe that most of the misfortunes which had come to her in the course of her life were somehow or other attributable to Muriel. Had not the husband who had ruined and deserted her been the latter's brother? and had not she herself originally been rich, and Muriel poor, whereas now she was poor and Muriel

rich—comparatively so, at least? What clearer proof could be wanted that the one had in some way or other battened and prospered at the expense of the other?

People are apt to talk largely of the beneficial effects of what is vaguely termed the discipline of life, as well as of the softening and humanizing results which spring from a community of woes, but they fail sometimes to take into consideration that these, like most other natural effects, depend largely, if not entirely, for their results upon the nature against which they are directed. There are mental and moral shallows which nothing seems able to affect; where all the winds of adversity may blow and blow in vain. Mrs. Skynner had had her share, and, as she herself not unwarrantably considered, more than her fair share of troubles. Children had been born to her and had died; she had lost her home, her husband, and her fortune;

but nothing had made the smallest difference; whole seas and cataracts of misfortune might, indeed, have washed over her, and it would have been all the same—the same, that is, as far as the smallest capacity of sympathy, or anything approaching sympathy, was concerned. Many women, whom the larger joys and interests of their neighbours find unmoved, make it up in care and zeal for the lesser ones, but Mrs. Skynner was not one of these. You might have gone to see her, after having succeeded to a fortune, led a forlorn hope, or found your lost umbrella, and you would alike have found yourself coming away again without having once touched, or even thought of touching, upon any of these various sources of elation. As for your troubles, they were things that had no business to exist—that is, in her presence; indeed, one of her chief grievances against Muriel was the per-

sistency with which the latter insisted upon dragging forward other people's affairs and other people's foolish or uninteresting troubles—people too, who, as Mrs. Skynner often pointed out, had really, many of them, no social position at all.

One not unnatural result of the state of things I have been depicting was that the two relations at this time saw but little of one another—as little, indeed, as was compatible with the fact of their both living under the same roof. They took their meals, that is, together, but at all other times they were apart—one in the studio, the other in her own apartments at the bottom of the house. As the summer wore on, Muriel began to feel a little lonely, a little dispirited. She had of late renewed her attendance at the Academy, and this was an immense resource. Still there were many hours when she could not paint, and when even painting itself seemed but a

folly and a weariness, an objectless toiling after something of no kind of serious importance either to herself or to anybody else.

Of Mr. Wygram since they parted, as described in the last chapter, she had heard nothing; not even whether he had actually carried out his proposed intention and sailed for America. Well as she had known him, she had known but few of his friends, and none of his relations, so that her opportunities of information were scanty. Hyde, too, had only called once, when he came to make some final arrangement with regard to the miniatures. Halliday never. Why was this? she sometimes wondered. He must know her address; at all events, the information was not unattainable, and, after the acquaintanceship that had sprung up between them in Hampshire, it was hardly courteous, not to say friendly, not once even to take the trouble of coming to

inquire after her. Altogether, what with one thing and another, she felt, as I say, a trifle lonely and dejected. Her independence she certainly still possessed, but even her independence seemed to have fewer charms for her than heretofore. Lady Rushton had gone out of town, so that that source of recreation and improvement was cut off; her artistic friends, too, seemed somehow to have deserted her; even Kitty King—her staunchest and truest ally—was less with her than formerly. Partly, no doubt, in obedience to her own trouble-hating instincts, but still more—so at least she herself intimated—with the object of snubbing the only too readily daunted Mr. Archer, Kitty had of late forsworn her short-lived artistic ardour, and had given herself up without reserve to such limited distractions and dissipations as lay within her reach. Occasionally Muriel used to inquire after that misprized

young gentleman, but always with the same results. As, however, she heard of parties to the plays and expeditions to Richmond and Greenwich, in all of which he seemed to bear a part, she came to the conclusion that he was not altogether so despondent with regard to his own ultimate success as the language of his fickle fair one might seem to warrant. Another Miss King, the youngest but one of the sisters, had engaged herself to a Mr. Gosling, a thriving young stock-broker, much to the joy and satisfaction of all her belongings, with the exception, indeed, of Kitty, who declared that if she had ever been tempted to engage herself to any man, the sight of that ridiculous Amelia billing and cooing with her preposterous, carrotty-haired Gosling, would alone have been enough to put her off for ever from that idea.

Thus of all Muriel's inmost circle of

intimates only the Prettymans remained, and of them, indeed, she saw something almost every day. One of the little Indian grandchildren had fulfilled Elizabeth's forebodings by falling seriously ill shortly after its arrival, and Mrs. Prettyman's whole thoughts and energies seemed now to be concentrated upon nursing and caring for it. It was a tiny, little, waxen-faced creature, with the most perilously precarious hold upon life, and Muriel could not but tremble for the effect on her old friend whenever that all-too-fragile thread was at length snapped. The brown ayah and her bangles had long since returned to a happier clime, and the remaining children were almost more than Elizabeth could manage, her forte, as she herself readily acknowledged, not by any means lying in that direction. Accordingly, Muriel got into the habit of going down every day and seeing what could be done in her overtaxed friend's

behalf. An act of heroism which generally ended in her carrying off the eldest of the group, a boy of about eight, so as to leave the latter's hands freer for the rest.

This master Gaspar Prettyman was a sallow-faced lanky young gentleman, with that peculiarly languid, insouciant manner which Indian children seem to be born to. It was anything, therefore, but a particularly easy task to cater for his amusement, even the accumulated treasures of Hal Flack's lodging failing to afford him the smallest gratification, everything great and small being referred to some mysterious Indian standard, to which nothing in his present surroundings seemed able to attain. Once in despair Muriel carried him off to the gardens in the Regent's Park, in hopes that the inmates of the monkey house would prove too much for his stolidity, but while there he walked about amongst the cages of the tigers and hyenas with an air of

such supercilious acquaintanceship—the air of one called on to notice objects familiar to him from his earliest infancy—that she did not feel at all disposed to repeat that experiment. One thing, however, the young gentleman fortunately did condescend to like, and that was the river, and the sight of the boats and boat-building below Battersea bridge. Muriel had an old friend, a boatman with a good safe boat, and in this she and Master Gaspar used to take long rows, coming back in the cool of the evening upon the returning tide. She herself had always been fond of the river, and in the loneliness of her present life she seemed to grow fonder of it than ever. For its sake alone she would not have exchanged her house, remote as many people called it, for all the palaces of Pimlico and Belgravia. Often in the evening, after coming back from one of these innocent expeditions, she would lean

long from her window, looking out at the dusky town, with its faintly dotted lines of light, following the slow swelling curvatures of the Embankment. Now and then a far-off whistle, or the heavy stertorous breathing of some passing tug, would reach her from the river; sparkles and flashes, the reflection from fast moving lights above, glancing along the black surface; an occasional footfall or sound of voices under her windows serving only to intensify the stillness of the place, a stillness which seemed to deepen and deepen as the summer days stole slowly by.

Despite the hand of the renovator, which of late has been laid rather heavily upon it, Chelsea yet retains not a few haunts where a fairly active imagination may still conjure up pictures of a past, not very remote, perhaps, as regards time, but very remote indeed as regards everything that we see and hear around us.

Muriel's imagination was of a decidedly active order, and she got to know and care for all of these. She got, too, into the commendable habit of attending the various services of her parish church, that church whose tower of blackened brickwork was visible from her bedroom window. She liked its monuments for one thing; those quaint mural tablets, with their cruelly defaced edges and half obliterated lettering. There was one in particular to a "Compleat gentleman," who died somewhere about the year 1720, towards which she used to find her eyes straying when they ought to have been otherwise occupied. Near it was another and a smaller one to three infants, who, had they now been alive, would have been considerably more than centenarians. The legs and noses of these latter effigies were very smooth and shiny, much as if they had been modelled in wax or sugar.

The inscription, too, which told of their lamented deaths, was fast becoming illegible, as was also the case with the other and more gorgeous gilded and Latinized inscription upon the wall beyond; to our fanciful-minded heroine, however, they appeared none the worse for all that. Like Gaspar, too, she enjoyed the more bustling and vulgar region below Battersea Bridge, with its throngs of boats, its floating rafts, black barges, and half submerged piers, the river broadening away towards Putney, and on the further side the scattered clumps of chimneys, with here and there a taller house or church spire—the whole not unlike some sort of smoky Venice wrecked upon these alien shores. Still, in spite of all these various resources, and in spite of all the other alleviations which she could either find or invent for herself, the summer, for the first time in her life,

seemed to trail. It had been settled that she was to go down to Norfolk early in September, but it was as yet only the middle of August, and it appeared to Muriel as if that month had never before had so many days in it as it had this year.

One afternoon, towards the middle of that laggard month, it happened that she and Gaspar were proceeding down the Embankment in the direction of their friend the boatman. A steamer passed as they were nearing the bridge, shooting down on its way to the landing-place. Gaspar wished to see the people disembark, so to oblige him Muriel sat down upon one of the benches to wait until that excitement was over. It was very hot, and silent, and dusty. The plane-trees were shedding their soot-encrusted bark, which lay on the ground below them in a light brownish deposit. It seemed

to her as if the region had grown perceptibly depopulated even within the last few days. A nursery-maid, with her charges depending in a limp and uncomfortable fashion from a perambulator, made a conspicuous figure in the middle distance. Further on, a couple of Chelsea pensioners were coming towards her with the easy, loitering step of men whose work in the world is satisfactorily over and done with. Glancing along the grey satin surface below, she could see a pair of coal-black barge sails expanded in hopes of catching a breeze where breeze there was none to catch. Presently the people from the steamer began to pass. A gentleman with an umbrella, two old ladies with handbags, some workmen with their tools on their backs; then more ladies, old and young. After these a young man, hurrying along as if to make uy for lost time. Muriel thought she recognized that long, swing-

ing stride and the tall, muscular figure with its somewhat incongruous-looking habiliments of sober black. Another moment, and there could be no further question about it—Halliday, and no one else, was passing her.

A sudden impulse to speak to him seized her, and she put out her hand, at the same time calling him by his name. He turned, and uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Miss Ellis! I was just on my way to your house."

"Were you, really? It is quite near. Will you not come back with us now?"

"Thank you, yes, I will. Don't think, though, that I was going to trouble you with a mere afternoon call," he added hastily. Muriel was upon the point of assuring him that there was not the least likelihood of her falling into any such error, but he gave her no time. "What I came for was to ask you a favour, to ask if

you would help a—— Do you, in short, know a Madame Cairioli, or a person calling herself so?"

"Madame Cairioli? to be sure I do," she answered. "She stayed with us some months ago, and left us quite suddenly. I have often felt anxious to know what became of her. She seemed so ill, poor thing."

"She is dying now."

"Dying? Oh, poor woman! Where is she? I should like to go and see her at once," Muriel exclaimed, springing up from her bench in her eagerness.

"No, no, that is not necessary. In fact, it is not a place where you could well go to. What I came about to-day was that —well, she mentioned your name, and I thought perhaps you would be willing— of course you must understand that I haven't the very slightest claim upon you. Still, as I can't get it from any of the

regular sources, I thought perhaps you or your friends might be able—— In short, what I came about was—money." The last word came out with a sort of jerk, and the young man stood before her looking the very picture of constraint and embarrassment.

"Money! is that all?" Muriel said, wondering not a little at his confusion. "Why, of course. Do you want very much though? forty or fifty pounds?"

He shook off his embarrassment with a laugh. "Forty or fifty pounds!" he exclaimed. "Oh, no; four or five will be nearer the mark. I only want to take her out of the place she is in, and to give her a few comforts, poor soul. She can't last long."

"Four or five pounds? Oh, but I think I have that now in my purse," Muriel said, putting her hand into her pocket. "But, indeed, Mr. Halliday, I must insist

upon your taking me to see her," she added. "You don't know how self-reproachful I have been feeling about her all the summer. I do not think we behaved at all rightly or kindly to her. She came to stay with us at my sister-in-law's invitation, and then, not for anything she did, but simply on account of something we heard about her, she was almost turned out of the house into the street. I should never forgive myself if I did not do the little I can now to make amends."

Halliday looked doubtful. "I don't think it is a place for you to go to, really, Miss Ellis," he said. "I am sure your relations would never hear of your doing so."

"My relations? I have no relations—none, at least, that the question affects."

"Well, for yourself, then. It is a wretched, dirty room on the top of a wretched house, in one of the worst parishes in London."

"The more wretched it is, the more reason that people should go, in order to see what can be done—one would think you thought I was a child or a doll, Mr. Halliday! No, please don't say another word. My mind is made up. Only tell me the best way to get there. How were you going back yourself?"

"I was going back by the river," he answered.

"Then I will go back with you by the river. Or no, I forgot. I must go first to Mrs. Prettyman's house to leave her grandson there. We will take a cab; I suppose we shall be able to find one."

As it happened, a hansom was at that moment coming slowly towards them, its driver looking about him with the disengaged air of a man who considers his chance of a fare to be a remarkably remote one. Muriel hailed it and jumped in.

"Get in, Gaspar," she said. "Will

you come in too, please, Mr. Halliday. You won't mind our being a little crowded for a few minutes, I know."

Halliday obeyed, not indeed seeing his way to doing anything else. Arrived at Mrs. Prettyman's, Muriel jumped out without waiting to be helped, and ran up the little walk to the house, where, having deposited Gaspar, she turned hastily back—not, however, without first catching a glimpse of Elizabeth, her eyes wide with dismay at sight of her own companion—then she re-entered the hansom, Halliday gave the order, and they bowled rapidly away eastwards.

Now that the first excitement and satisfaction of getting her own way was over, Muriel began to feel a little embarrassed. It struck her, too, that her companion was extraordinarily uncommunicative—more so than she even remembered him. He looked older too, and thinner

than when she had seen him last; indeed, but for Hyde's reiterated assertion as to his unbounded and unfailing health and strength, she would have said that he was decidedly looking ill.

"Don't you think it would be a good plan if we were to get some soups or strengthening things to take with us?" she inquired, as they were passing up Piccadilly. It was almost the first remark that had been made since they left the Prettymans' house.

"Perhaps it would," he answered.—"Brand, or something of that sort; there is an old woman fortunately, too, at the lodging, who could heat it up."

The order was given, and the cab presently drew up at a grocer's shop. Muriel was for buying everything suitable to an invalid upon which she could lay her hands, but Halliday insisted on their keeping strictly to the original suggestion, de-

claring anything else to be entirely beyond the powers of Mrs. O'Connor, the old woman in question.

Hurrying back to the cab, Muriel almost brushed in her haste against a young man who was strolling down the street—a short, dark-complexioned, rather foreign-looking young man, and it was with rather a foreign air that he lifted his hat, stepping back at the same time to make way for her.

As he did so he caught sight of Halliday.

"Stephen! Can I believe my eyes?" he exclaimed. "You in this part of the town?"

"How do you do, Conroy? Wait a moment; my hands are full."

Halliday assisted Muriel into the hansom, deposited the parcels on the seat, and then turned back a moment to speak to his friend.

"Why have you never come to look us up?" the latter demanded as he drew near.

"I have never had time."

"Oh!"—with a glance in the direction of the hansom.

Halliday turned impatiently away.

"I say, don't forget you're expected at Chudleigh without fail on the twenty-eighth," the other man called after him as the cab drove off.

"Was that a foreigner?" Muriel inquired.

"No, he is not a foreigner. His name is Beachamp. He is a cousin of mine."

"The son of your uncle in Norfolk?"

"Yes. His grandmother was Spanish, which accounts, I suppose, for his dark looks."

"His grandmother? Was she not your grandmother then, also?"

"Yes—my mother's mother. She was

a hateful old woman," Halliday added. "She made my mother's life miserable—shortened it, many people say."

"Your mother is dead?"

"Yes, years ago. She died when I was two years old."

Muriel hesitated to inquire further. What Hyde had told her as to the family disagreements being strongly present with her. Still, the impulse to elicit something more from her uncommunicative companion was, to say the least, equally so.

"You have no brothers or sisters, then?" she said at last inquiringly.

"I have two half brothers," he answered.

"That is more than I have. I have no very near relations."

"My half brothers are not particularly near; the youngest is nearly twenty years older than myself, and I have not seen either of them for more than a year."

The tone in which this was said was not particularly provocative of further conversation, so Muriel relapsed into another silence, which this time was not broken for nearly a mile.

They were already fast leaving behind them all the landmarks with which she was acquainted. Cheapside and Cornhill and Leadenhall Street were now successively past, and they entered upon a labyrinth of narrow streets debouching off some of the yet remoter thoroughfares beyond. It was not a particularly well-favoured region, any of it, but what followed was infinitely worse than anything that had gone before. The sun had been shining brightly when they left the embankment, but it seemed to have gone out long before they reached their destination; indeed, looking out from her hansom, it appeared to Muriel as if the sun never could shine there, or if it did, it would only

be to make the hideousness more hideous. Her brain began at last to grow dizzy with the ugliness and monotony of it all; street after street, house after house, doorway after doorway, each apparently the very facsimile of the last—the same grimy entrances, the same patched and broken windows, the same squalid, unkempt children, the same mean, ugly, care-driven faces, the same filth, want, privation, misery—the same, yet all different; and all, as she remembered with a gasp, a fragment only, the merest fractional part, of the terrible sum-total. Once or twice the cabman went wrong, bewildered by the tortuousness of the region, Halliday standing up to direct him into the proper turnings. At last, however, they got into the right street, and drew up before a house several degrees cleaner, and less forbidding than any that they had lately past.

Muriel felt relieved. "Oh, but I don't call this so very bad, after all," she exclaimed cheerfully.

"Ah but this is not it," Halliday answered. "We cannot, in fact, drive up to where she is. These are my lodgings, where I must ask you to wait a few minutes until I return."

He opened the door with a latch-key as he spoke, and ushered her into a room near the entrance; a moderately large, and very clean room, but bald and bleak to a depressing degree—the baldest and bleakest room, Muriel thought, she had ever seen. A big deal table covered with writing materials, stood in the window, a similar one, but empty, in the middle of the room; there were a few chairs of decidedly uneasy varieties, and a small wooden bookcase of very unattractive looking books in a corner. Apart, however, from all these, and rather pushed

aside as if to elude observation, was a small table, covered with an embroidered cover, upon which stood a single rose in a pretty little spindle-shanked vase, a couple of smartly-bound devotional books lying beside it. There was something abou this table that immediately puzzled Muriel; for the life of her she could not associate all that red embroidery and gilded lettering with her present companion.

"If you will kindly wait here a few minutes," the latter said hastily. "I will not keep you longer than I can help." He went out, shutting the door behind him, and Muriel was left alone.

She looked round. Despite the melancholy errand on which she had come, she could not help being amused at finding herself for the time being the sole proprietress of such peculiarly clerical and bachelor quarters. Certainly they were not of a nature to make her sigh for the

joys of bachelorhood! anything in fact grimmer, uglier, more forbidding she had never before imagined! She got up presently, and wandered about a little; examined the volumes in the shelves, all works of divinity of a somewhat antique and rococo type; the newer, and presumably more personal books she did not feel warranted in touching, but she smelt at the rose, and then moved away toward the window. This, unlike its neighbours, was scrupulously bright and clean—a doubtful advantage, possibly, considering what it looked on. She had just turned away, and was about to resume her original seat, when there came a quick tap at the door, which immediately opened, and a slight, fair, evidently short-sighted man, with a peculiarly candid and confiding expression, entered, tripping over a hole in the carpet as he did so.

"Oh, if you please, Halliday, I am afraid I must trouble you to come out at once,"

"To-morrow?" Halliday repeated, in a tone of amazement. "Poor Skellett! what a fright he must have been in to say that!" he added, smiling. "Why, he lives here. The rooms are his as much as mine; more so, indeed. Those flowers and things there are all his,"—indicating the rose and illuminated volumes of devotion upon the table.

"And I pressed him to sit down in his own room!" Muriel said, laughing. "No wonder he looked so scared at seeing me. I am afraid he wanted you rather badly," she added. "He seemed to be in a great hurry about something."

"Oh, I dare say that it will keep," Halliday replied. "He is the best and kindest little fellow in the whole world," he added; "but he cannot, and never will, accustom himself to the ways of this place."

"And has he got to live here, poor man?" Muriel said pityingly.

"Yes; he is one of the curates. There are four of us altogether."

"Oh, then probably the other—a tall, dark, rather stern-looking young man—was a curate also?"

"Yes; that must have been Porter," Halliday answered.

They had now nearly got to the end of the street, when he turned suddenly up a court or alley—a sort of human backwater, and, like a backwater, the receptacle of all the unpleasant flotsam and jetsam of the neighbourhood. Then up a staircase, foul, dark, crumbling, decaying, into a room or garret, so dark that at first Muriel could see absolutely nothing.

A decrepid old crone—evidently the Mrs. O'Connor of whom mention had been made—came forward to meet them, and presently Muriel found herself standing beside a sort of bed or crib in a corner, upon which lay the figure of a woman.

Ill as Madame Cairioli had looked when she saw her last, Muriel would hardly have recognized her again. The poor woman appeared to be nothing but skin and bone; one thin hand depended outside the ragged coverlet, which constituted her only bed-covering. She seemed unconscious, too, of any one's vicinity, merely moaning slightly, but without opening her eyes.

"The doctor has not been here since, has he, Mrs. O'Connor?" Halliday inquired of the old woman.

She shook her head. "Nor won't, yer rivirence," she whispered mysteriously. "'Tis into the hospital he says she should be tuk."

The patient in the bed stirred and moved her hand. "No hospital, no hospital," she murmured.

"Her mind is set against that," Halliday said to Muriel. "Indeed, I doubt their taking her into any now, unless it

was an incurable one," he added, lowering his voice. "We must see what can be done elsewhere. Had we not better be going, Miss Ellis? I doubt her recognizing you now, and some of the other people of the house will probably be coming back shortly."

In effect, the door, as he spoke, was burst open, and some five or six women entered, who, after a preliminary stare at the intruders, proceeded without further ceremony to fling themselves upon the various bundles of rags which served as seats, and there divide the food they had brought with them, not without a good deal of shrill squabbling amongst themselves. They were not particularly heartless, poor things, only too inevitably hardened to the sight of suffering to trouble their heads about one old woman more or less. To Muriel, however, who was not used to it, this callousness seemed terrible.

"Ah, yes, pray, pray let us go," she said. "Do let us see if we cannot find somewhere else—somewhere where she can be at peace."

It was not so easy to find anything in that densely overcrowded neighbourhood; still, after her late experience, Muriel was not so critical as she would have been half an hour before. The room secured, there still remained the further question of a nurse. At last this too, however, was accomplished, and she and Halliday stood together in the street where she had left the hansom.

"I am afraid I must not offer to see you home, Miss Ellis," he said. "I shall have to read service at one of the hospitals in another half-hour."

"Oh, thank you, but indeed, in any case, it would be quite unnecessary; nothing is at all likely to happen to me between this and Chelsea," she answered.

Now that they were about to part, and that the business which had brought them together was over, an unaccountable embarrassment seemed to have sprung up between them; a mutual self-consciousness, of which both were aware, and both equally anxious to ignore. Muriel began talking quickly, to shake off the impression.

"You will let me know how Madame Cairioli goes on, and whether I can do anything further for her, will you not?" she said. "Even if I have left London, your letter, of course, will be forwarded. Though, indeed, Mr. Halliday, you ought to take a holiday yourself. I know you are very strong, but still there is a limit to every one's strength, and you are certainly looking ill. You ought to have a change."

"Thank you, I am not in the least ill," he answered stiffly. "I am going away, however, soon," he added; "next week, in fact."

"I want, too, to tell you how extremely obliged I am to you for having come to me to-day," Muriel continued hurriedly. "You might just as easily have gone to some one else instead, might you not?"

"I suppose I might," he answered.

"And then I should have been so sorry. It would have robbed me of the poor satisfaction of being able to do something for this poor woman, who I cannot help feeling was treated badly at my house. How curious it is the way things happen," she went on. "If we had not chanced to meet in the New Forest you would never have—have——"

She stopped short in the middle of her observation, her voice dying away from sheer astonishment. What had happened? she asked herself. Nothing had happened. The sky had not fallen, the street had not opened under her feet; nothing at all had

happened; nothing but that as she uttered the last few words she chanced to catch her companion's eyes fixed upon her with a peculiar intentness. But what of that? What was there in his expression, or anybody's expression, that could account for such a sensation—one which, though she failed to give it any name, seemed to amount for the moment to the strength of a revelation? But a revelation of what? she asked herself irritably. Of something in him or of something in her? Not in the latter, certainly, she immediately answered. Why should there be? What was there in this young man, whom at most she had not seen more than some five or six times, to account for anything of the kind? She respected him because he seemed in earnest—more so than most of the people she saw about her—she would respect any one, no matter who he might be, who tried, however unsuccess-

fully, to do his duty; but as for anything further! Meantime the chief immediate result, over and above a feeling of irritation against Halliday himself, was to inspire her with a desire to get away. Hardly another word passed between them. In silence he handed her into the hansom, and in silence they shook hands. The order was given to the driver, and Muriel departed, too bewildered by what had just occurred to be able even to experience the natural feeling of satisfaction in escaping from her late surroundings, and once more seeing the sun, and breathing the—comparatively, at all events—uncontaminated air of heaven.

CHAPTER IX.

"AT WAR 'TWIXT WILL AND WILL NOT."

HALLIDAY went back to his ugly sitting-room, and sat hastily down upon the first chair he came to. To him, too, the last five minutes had constituted something of an epoch, though in a different way from Muriel. What to her had been so new and startling—so startling that she had failed as yet even to take in the meaning of it—to him was neither new nor startling at all. Ever since the second time they had met he had known what his feeling for Muriel Ellis was just as well as if it had been all written down for him in a book. Though he had never been

in love before, he knew very well that he was in love now; he had fought against the feeling, and was fighting against it still, but he had never attempted to deny it. What would have been the use? the fact was there, and his was one of those stubbornly constituted minds to which a fact remained a fact, and a spade a spade, however desirable it might be that they should both be something totally different. I said just now that he had never been in love before, a statement generally taken to mean that So-and-so had never been in love in quite the same fashion, or possibly even quite to the same extent. In this case, however, as it happens, it was meant to be taken, not liberally, but literally. Halliday literally never had been in love before; it had not come in his way, and he had not certainly gone out of his way to look for it. Even Muriel herself, the first time he had met

her, had failed to make any particular impression upon him, despite the undoubted romance of the situation. He had thought her handsome, but he had thought no more about her, and indeed had well-nigh forgotten her existence before they again met. It was this second time, when there had been nothing in the least romantic in the situation, and no apparent provocation at all, then it was that the mysterious, unaccountable bolt had found him out. He remembered as well as possible the very spot in the wood where the discovery had first dawned upon him. It was the day they had met near the Partridges' cottage, and that she had told him that old John Flack was her grandfather. He was marching back to his lodging filled with vague disgust, surprise, and annoyance at the notion; angry with her for having told him, angry with himself for minding, doubly angry with

the fact itself, with the preposterous notion of her being in any way connected with those vulgar, hide-bound people in Norfolk. Suddenly it occurred to him to ask himself what in the world it mattered to him? Of what possible business was it of his whose granddaughter she was, or whether, in point of fact, she had or had not any grandfather at all? Then swift, sudden, overwhelming, had come the answer; the reason was because he loved her; that was simply the long and the short of it. It was all done and over in a minute. He did not even give himself the trouble of considering why he loved her, or what there was in her to arouse the sensation, he accepted it simply as a fact. Not, however, by any means a satisfactory one; on the contrary, a particularly inconvenient, not to say humiliating fact; but still just as certainly one as that he himself

was at that moment a living and breathing man, and every bit as much needing to be taken into account. All that summer he had fought against it, had thrown himself into his work, had resisted going to see her, and had tried to put the idea bodily out of his head; and this was the result—that he thought of it and of her more than ever, that it seemed to him as if he never for a single instant thought of anything or anybody else, and that when her name came casually up in connection with Madame Cairioli, the impulse to see and speak to her had been more than he had been able to resist.

Even in doing this, however, Halliday had felt not a little ashamed. He was not generally given to devising small expedients in order to carry out his own wishes, and in appealing to Muriel rather than to Hyde or any of his other and richer friends, he felt that

he had been guilty of such a small and pitiful expedient. Well now, he said to himself, he had had his wish; he had had what he schemed for, and what was the result? Was he any better, easier, more satisfied on that account? On the contrary, he was a thousand times less happy, less easy, more dissatisfied. He had not even enjoyed the few poor minutes he had spent in her company, his whole time and thoughts having been taken up with the dread of self-betrayal, and the result was that he had been positively discourteous, nay, brutally uncivil to her, and that she must think him a greater bear and Goth than ever.

The truth was that, like many another and a greater hero, poor Halliday had got into a decided quandary, none the less serious, either, because it was so entirely of his own making. He had rushed into his work with all the zeal

of an enthusiast, tossing ease and idleness away from him as ignoble things, believing that in work, and work alone, he was to find satisfaction, and now, alas, alas, for fact! he was beginning to find that it was not so. He was beginning to find that he did hanker for a good many things which were clearly not nominated in the bond, —which lay distinctly outside that arena within which of his own free-will he had restricted himself. As Hyde truly remarked, he was not by any means a St. Augustine, or a St. Vincent de Paul, or anything even remotely resembling them—not one of those lofty spirits, whose parish, as it has been said, is the world, and their family humanity—he was simply a very honest, very well-intentioned, somewhat *borné* young man, with strongly developed personal wishes, and an extremely obstinate individuality of his own, an individuality which had an awkward trick of

starting into prominence just when it was supposed to be most effectually coerced. All that summer he had been trying to coerce it, and the result was that it had never perhaps been louder or more clamorous than it was at that very moment. Try to turn his thoughts into other channels as he would, he could think of nothing, absolutely nothing but Muriel. Her presence, look, gesture, the very way she had of turning her head and smiling, kept presenting themselves over and over again to his mind with the persistency of a vision. He *must* see her again, he felt; he *must* tell her all that was in his mind. True, he had not the slightest expectation of bettering his case by so doing; quite the contrary. But what then? even the very act of speaking would be a relief. Why should a man not say what was in his mind? Was a man, in fact, a man at all who dared not speak his own

mind, who dared not put his wishes to the touch even if he was certain to fail? And, after all, why should he be so absolutely certain to fail? he asked himself. Could any man know his fate until he tried it? And if he *did* succeed, if she *did* love him, why then——

Halliday started up, and strode rapidly to and fro his narrow room, his brain fevered with the thoughts which the last idea had suddenly conjured up. A whole crowd of words, eager, persuasive, remonstrative, seemed to come crowding at once to his lips and clamouring for utterance. Yes, he would go and see her again, he decided—to-morrow, the first thing. He would not play the coward as he had done to-day. He would tell her what he felt—what he had been feeling ever since they first met, and perhaps, perhaps——

Suddenly, as he was striding to and fro, his foot caught in a hole in the carpet—

the same hole in which Mr. Skellett had caught his an hour before. Slight as the jar was, it seemed to bring him to his senses, for he stopped and looked round him; looked carefully round at the bare white-washed walls, the mean, ugly furniture, the cheap, sordid, dingy look of everything; then across the street at the shabby little shops, with their soot-grimed fronts, and uninviting-looking wares. Halliday did not notice such things once in a month as a rule, but now he looked at them all carefully, thoughtfully, as if he was trying to learn them off by heart. Finally he broke into a laugh.

"A nice place, certainly, to ask a woman to come and live in—a very nice place!" he said scornfully.

He had hardly uttered the words before the door opened, and his little fellow-lodger entered, glancing cautiously round as he did so.

"Why, you're all alone, Halliday!" he said wonderingly. "Didn't I hear you talking to some one as I came in?"

"You did; I was talking to a fool," Halliday said curtly.

"Oh! And has he gone?"

"Yes, he has gone—I hope so, at least."

"That's odd now, for I'm sure I didn't see any one go by," the other man said naively. "I thought, you know, at first it might be that young lady," he added, blushing. "The tall young lady, I mean, who I saw sitting here when I looked in half an hour ago?"

"No, it was not her; she is gone too, though," Halliday answered.

"Oh." Then, after a pause, "How handsome she was! wasn't she, Halliday?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Oh, I'm sure of it. So tall and graceful, you know, and such beautiful eyes. Such a lady, too, she looked. It seems

so long since I have seen a lady—a real one, I mean," the little man ended, with a sigh.

"They don't abound about here certainly," replied his friend.

"No," with another sigh. "And yet I suppose one ought hardly to allow one's self to say that either," he added penitently. "There's Mrs. William Hickson, you know, and those Miss Greens who help with the singing; they're very nice and kind, I'm sure. Still it *is* different, now isn't it, Halliday?"

This time Halliday did not respond to the call. He had sat down again, and drawn towards him one of the numerous parochial-looking books which lay scattered over the table. Mr. Skellett stood and watched him. He was not to be taken in with that pretence of occupation; he saw well enough that something had gone wrong, though what it was he failed

to guess, and would not for the whole world have dreamt of asking. Presently, fearing lest even his discreet and delicate observation might prove troublesome, he moved away, and taking up one of his own gilded books of devotion, appeared to bury himself in its contents. Over the top of it, however, he might have been observed stealing anxious glances in Halliday's direction, his air of solicitude lending a feminine, almost a motherly, expression to his little prim, neatly-finished face. They had sat thus for about ten minutes when a bell began ringing, the bell of the chapel belonging to a hospital where the two young men took turns to read the service. After it had rung for a few minutes, Halliday got up, threw his report down on the table, and took up his hat to go out.

"Shouldn't you like me to go this evening instead of you, Halliday?" Mr.

Skellett inquired. "It won't really make any difference."

"Go instead of me? Why on earth should you do that?"

"I don't know. I fancied you didn't look quite the thing. Perhaps you have got a headache?"

"Am I in the habit of having headaches?" Halliday inquired curtly, as he went out, letting the door swing behind him.

He had not gone more than two steps before, however, his heart smote him for snubbing anything so very meek and easily repulsed, and he turned hastily back.

"I say, Skellett, I'm a brute to speak to you like that," he said hurriedly. "And it's true, I am put out about something, though I've not got a headache. You don't mind, do you?" laying his hand hastily upon the other's shoulder.

"Mind? Why, of course I don't mind,

Halliday," the little man answered cheerily. His friend's grasp was rather vigorous—more vigorous probably than he was aware—but that he scorned to mention.

"That's all right;" and, with another energetic, if well-meant thump, Halliday departed, leaving his little coadjutor—mentally, at all events — not a little soothed and comforted by this unexpected return. His devotion to Halliday was simply unbounded; he seemed, indeed, to feel the sort of vicarious joy and pride in his strength and vigour that a child sometimes shows in that of some big dog, which he chooses to regard as his own private and peculiar property. At first, in the earlier days of their acquaintance, there was something indeed almost startling, and even terrifying to his imagination, in being brought into contact with anything so strong and large, and so extremely alive as Halliday—a being who

never appeared afraid of anything or anybody, but, on the contrary, to have an odd, mysterious pagan relish for anything like a physical encounter. Halliday, as we know, was a very combative young man, and now and then something in his new surroundings would awaken the old Adam, and he would plunge into the strife with a vigour totally at variance with all the dictates of clerical propriety, even to the length of occasionally interfering between man and wife — an unwarrantable presumption, as everybody knows! On such occasions little Skellett would stand by in a perfect agony of mingled pride and dismay, uncertain what to do—whether to rush to the assistance of his friend, or to run and scream vigorously for the police. All friendships, we know, are one-sided affairs, and this certainly was no exception to the rule. Still, if his affection was not quite of the same calibre,

Halliday had at any rate a warm regard and liking for the little man; indeed, since the departure of his original friend, Mildmay, Mr. Skellett may be said to have been the only ally he possessed in the parish. The other two curates being both highly exemplary young divines, conscientious and orthodox indeed to the utmost degree; but not perhaps particularly available in the way of companionship. Though very far from an intellectual man himself, Halliday was too big somehow, mentally as well as physically, for his companions, the result being a mutual antagonism; he in his own mind inclining to set them down as a trifle priggish, they in return not unnaturally retorting with comments upon those traits of his which even his best friends could hardly call spiritual. Indeed Porter, who was the leading spirit of the two, had more than once declared that Halliday was nothing

day felt particularly grateful, for his own sake as well as for the patients'. It is a terrible charge, I am well aware, to bring against a clergyman, but Halliday, it had better be confessed at once, by no means relished his privileges as a preacher. Though far from regarding himself as a success in other respects, there was nevertheless a good deal of his work which he both liked, and was conscious of performing creditably. He could even lecture in a rough and ready week-day fashion to the young men who came about him; but when on a Sunday he found himself aloft amongst the cushions of a pulpit, a feeling, which it is hardly an exaggeration to call despair, seemed to take possession of the young man's mind. What *was* he to say to these people? he used to ask himself. These women, especially, with their terrible Sunday bonnets, and their yet more terrible airs of Sunday self-consciousness? Was

it probable, was it even possible, that anything he could think of to say was likely to be of any particular use or benefit to them? And if not, was it not a cruel fate to be set up there to attempt the impossible? To-day, however, no such uneasy self-questionings were in store for him. Within half an hour of the commencement, the last hymn was sung, the last prayer prayed, and Halliday, with his books under his arm, was trudging back on his homeward way.

He did not, however, at once return to his lodgings. Much as he liked little Skellett, there were moments when his companionship was apt to prove a trifle oppressive, so that, on the whole, he preferred to make a circuit. There were not many places in that neighbourhood which could be called enjoyable to walk in; none, in fact, which were not more or less of an offence to every sensitively

constituted organ, but to this Halliday was tolerably indifferent. His organs, happily for himself, were not sensitive, and he could stand sights and stomach smells which would have turned most men sick, and which, to little Skellett, for instance, were simply a daily and hourly purgatory. This afternoon, however, he seemed to himself to have suddenly awoke to the hideousness of everything, and to see it in all its naked deformity. As he walked along the narrow streets, the squalor, ugliness, filth, misery impressed him as they had never impressed him before. The truth was, he was looking at it, not with his own eyes, but with another's—with the eyes of his visitor of that afternoon. If that which he desired, but perfectly well knew to be hopeless, *had* even come to pass, and Muriel Ellis *had* loved him, *had* been willing to throw in her lot with him, could he have asked her to

share such a lot as this? Could he have proposed that she should come and live there? be exposed to such sights and sounds and smells as were at that moment about him? If even he had been perfectly certain of the great value and importance of the work he himself was doing there, then perhaps it might be different; then possibly he might have appealed to her upon *those* grounds. He had an instinctive belief in her capacity for devotedness and self-immolation, but was that, he asked himself, enough? Before inviting others to immolate themselves, one must be pretty sure not only of the inherent goodness of one's cause, but also of one's own special and peculiar fitness for it, and this was exactly where Halliday by no means felt sure. Somehow or other he was unlucky. Things which he took in hand had a tendency to fail, and people he took in hand to make greater haste to go to the

dogs than their neighbours. There was Tom Brattle, the tinker, whom he had undertaken to cure of his drunkenness, and whom he believed that he had cured, and what was the end of it? The man was worse now than ever, and had been taken up only that very week on a charge of assaulting his own father! True, Halliday was just in the mood to exaggerate all this; still that there was a certain amount of truth in the allegation is undeniable. He was rather in the position of a man who flings everything else to the winds in order to follow the bent of his genius, and then finds his genius growing thinner and thinner, and threatening to vanish altogether on his hands. To rush away from all your other duties in order to betake yourself to one special and chosen phase of usefulness, and then to find that your success in that one chosen phase is not, after all, so particularly marked, cannot be said to be

exactly a satisfactory experience! Apart from these remoter considerations, however, there was the simple, practical, every-day question of ways and means. Even in Whitechapel people are not expected to live upon air, and what had he to offer? Nothing absolutely but the scanty remains of the three thousand pounds which he had inherited from his mother, and some eighty pounds a year or so which he received as a curate. Could he, could any man, venture to ask a woman to marry him upon that? As to whether Muriel had or had not means of her own, that somehow did not enter into his calculations. From what he had seen of her in Hampshire, he concluded that either she or her relations must be in fairly easy circumstances—sufficiently so, at all events, to be appealed to in a case of urgent charity—but beyond that he had not given, and even now hardly gave, the

question a thought. What, then, remained? Nothing but an appeal to his father; and from this he shrank. Even for Muriel's sake—even to have the right of going boldly forward and asking her to be his wife—he felt he could hardly do that. It was not so much that he objected to the part of the returning prodigal, but he shrank from the imputation—the natural and inevitable imputation which attaches to the occupier of that *rôle*. Certainly no one could say that poor Halliday had wasted his substance in riotous living, his follies being all of a very different kind from those of that memorable scapegrace. For all that there were points of similarity sufficient to make the situation an awkward one. With what face could he who had so scornfully rejected his father's generosity merely because the conditions displeased him, now go forward and appeal to that generosity? and that

his father, under any conceivable circumstances, would come forward without being appealed to, he knew him rather too well to expect. No, turn and twist the matter how he would, he could see no way—no light, however remote in the darkness—nothing on every side but a sort of hopeless and inevitable dead lock. He could not, he saw plainly, hope to win her; he could not, and he would not, make up his mind to give her up; he would not and he could not settle down rationally to anything else; his life was stunted, worthless, done for. And, having arrived at this thoroughly satisfactory and comfortable conclusion, he was fain at last to retrace his steps to his deserted lodgings, and to the anxiously expectant Mr. Skellett.

When at length he got in, he found the gas lit, and the evening meal duly set out on the central table, his little fellow-

curate looking very neat and spruce in his snow-white necktie. The two young men were in the habit of dining in the middle of the day, that being the most convenient hour for their work. This meal, accordingly, was called tea, and to Skellett it really was tea, and nothing else, the chief indulgences he relished lying in the direction of jam and marmalade, with an occasional muffin or crumpet, which he bought and carried home in his pocket from the baker's. Halliday, however, had a preference for coarser and more substantial viands, in the form of cold meat, which he used to produce from a cupboard, and into which he nightly made inroads which secretly not a little scandalized his friend. This evening there happened to be nothing in particular to do out-of-doors, so after the tea was drunk, and the muffins and cold meat disposed of, the two young men settled themselves down to read;

Halliday with a newspaper which he had bought in the course of his walk, Mr. Skellett with a neatly covered brown volume which he had procured that afternoon from the parish library. The latter, whose eyes were weak, had a small green-shaded lamp which stood on his own particular table, and close to which his book was held. There was, of course, no fire, the night being hot and close; still, what with the glow of the gas, and the more subdued radiance of Mr. Skellett's lamp, the room looked several degrees less grim and forbidding than in the daytime. It was indeed the sort of familiar background against which one instinctively pictures a family group, or perhaps three or four old ladies dozing over their knitting, rather than a pair of young men, neither of whom had yet struck thirty.

Apparently Halliday's newspaper was not much to his liking, for he presently

flung it down, and, walking over to the window, pulled aside the curtain. Across the narrow street he could see into the little interior which matched theirs upon the opposite side. A naked gas-burner was flaring overhead, lighting up the whole scene. The master of the house, he could see, had just come in, and had taken off his paper cap and was bestowing his bag of tools in a corner. Then from his post of observation Halliday saw the wife enter from a back room, with a baby in her arms, which she made over to the father, and began bustling about to get the latter his supper. It was the commonest of all common domestic scenes, utterly wanting in anything like charm or picturesqueness, yet for the moment it seemed to have a certain fascination for the young man, for he stood gazing fixedly at it for several minutes. Outside the usual draggled looking objects were slouching by, with the

usual policeman looking stolidly on at them from the footpath. Further down he could see another and a brighter blaze which told of the whereabouts of the public-house; and here, too, was a slow stream of figures, hardly human to look at in their filth and degradation. Turning abruptly away from all this, Halliday looked back into the room, and at his companion. That little gentleman, with his spectacles on his nose, was deeply engrossed in his volume, so engrossed as to be utterly unconscious of any observation. It was a romance, of a very innocent not to say edifying type, but still abundantly thrilling to little Skellett, whose imagination had never been perverted by anything sensational, far less piquant, in the way of literary provender. The hero was a young and ascetic divine, the heroine an earl's daughter, gloriously beautiful and inexpressibly haughty, but

passionately in love with the Reverend Theophilus; indeed, the greater part of the work was taken up with conversations in which that haughty damsel laid bare her passion in language more creditable on the whole, perhaps, to her feelings than to her maidenly decorum. Mr. Skellett had just reached the point where Lady Zelina, despairing of moving the rigid heart of her Theophilus, had announced her intention of forthwith retiring for life into a convent, when his attention was distracted by Halliday, who came hastily back into the room, and took down his hat from a peg in the corner.

"Have you been sent for? Are you going out?" he said, jumping up.

"I have not been sent for, but I am going out," the other answered.

"Where are you going to?"

"I don't know exactly; to Tower Hill, perhaps."

"To Tower Hill?" Mr. Skellett stood with his mouth slightly ajar, and his spectacles slipping off his nose, all sorts of vague images, called up by the name, coursing one another rapidly through his brain. "What *will* you do on Tower Hill at this hour of the night?" he inquired in a tone of bewilderment.

"Do? Nothing at all. Very likely I shan't go there; as likely as not, I shall go to one of the parks instead. I only want a walk. I must get away from this place. The smells are simply sickening."

"Why, Halliday, I never knew you minded them before."

"Didn't you? well, I do now. Don't sit up, Skellett," he continued, as he pulled on an overcoat. "I can let myself in at any hour, you know; I dare say I may be late."

"You'll not get into any—any trouble,

will you, Halliday?" his fellow curate inquired hesitatingly.

Halliday laughed. "I hope not, I'm sure," he said. "If I do, you'll be certain to hear about it, that's one comfort. All the police know me."

"I don't see that that will be any comfort at all," his friend replied disconsolately.

"It will be a comfort rather to Porter, I think. It will justify some of those dark suspicions of his."

Mr. Skellett looked extremely grave.

"I don't think you're fair upon Porter, Halliday; I don't, indeed," he said anxiously. "I have often told you so."

"Am I not? Well, perhaps, he is not quite fair upon me. Apparently we both cherish misgivings of one another, and probably we are both of us very harmless sort of fellows at bottom. Anyhow, good-night, Skellett; don't sit up;" and before

his little coadjutor could form any further remonstrances, Halliday had pulled the door after him, and was away down the street.

END OF VOL. II.

LONDON: PRINTED BY WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED,
STAMFORD STREET AND CHARING CROSS.