



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

### **Usage guidelines**

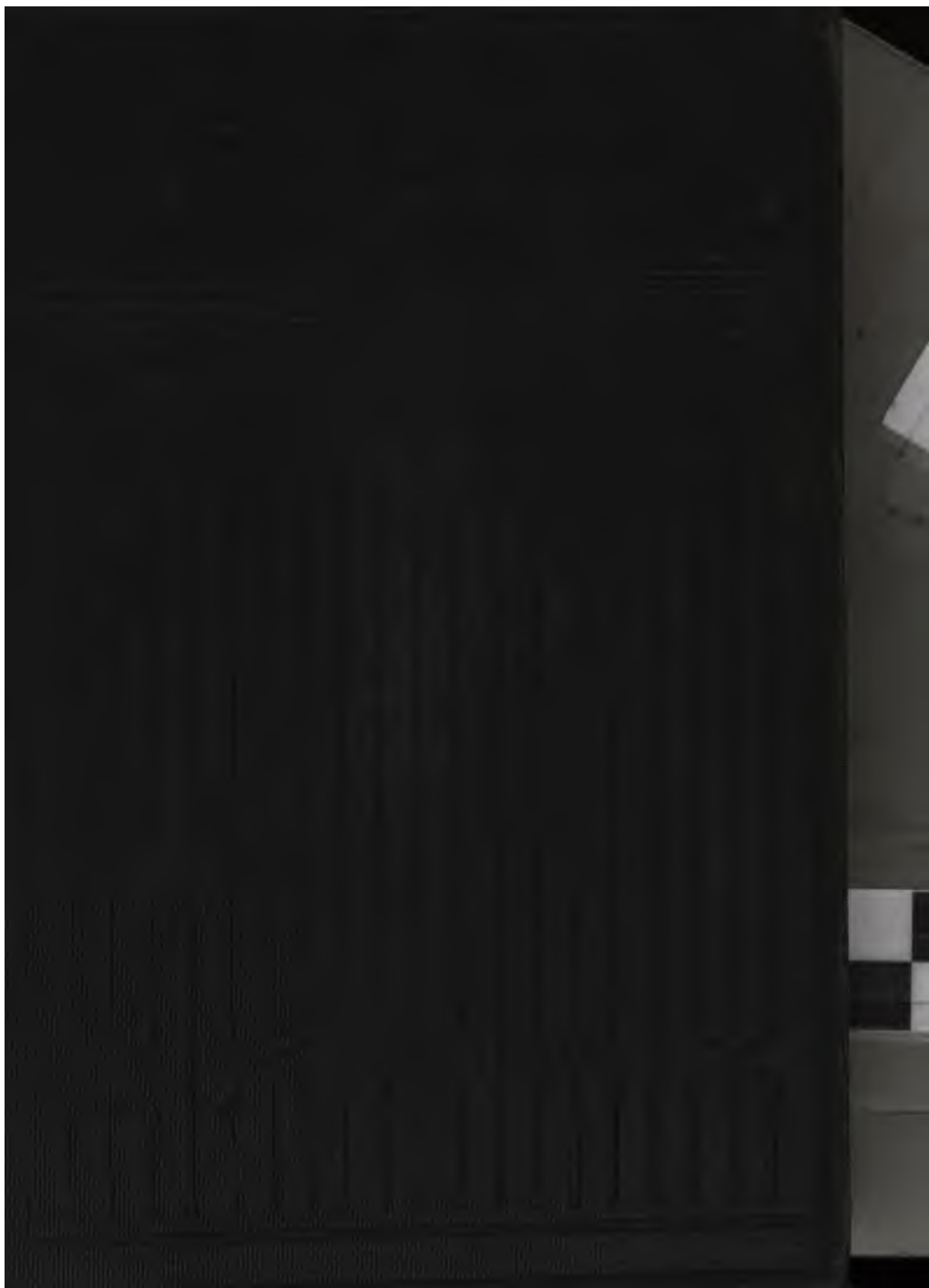
Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

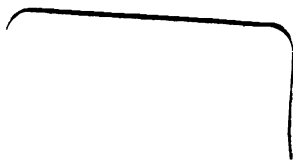
We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

### **About Google Book Search**

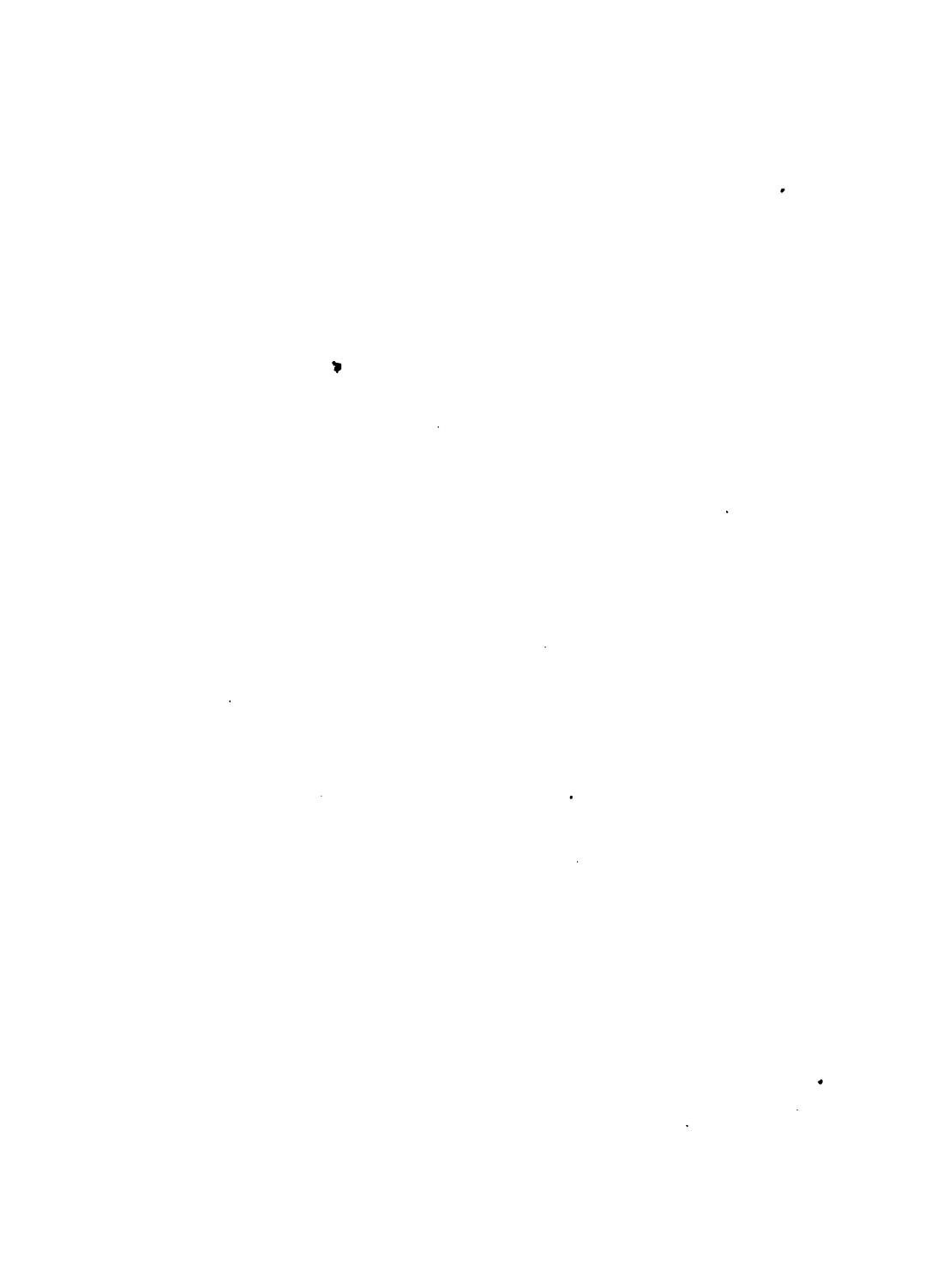
Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>













**A DAUGHTER OF THE SOIL**





A  
DAUGHTER OF THE SOIL

BY  
M. E. FRANCIS

AUTHOR OF "THE STORY OF DAN," "IN A NORTH COUNTRY VILLAGE,"  
ETC.

LONDON AND NEW YORK  
HARPER & BROTHERS, PUBLISHERS

1900

ALM5423

**TO**

**MY SISTER GERTRUDE**



# CONTENTS.



## Part I.

	PAGE
CHAPTER I.	
HOME-COMING . . . . .	I
CHAPTER II.	
COUSINS . . . . .	13
CHAPTER III.	
ROUND THE VILLAGE . . . . .	22
CHAPTER IV.	
RUTH . . . . .	35
CHAPTER V.	
"O, MISTRESS MINE, WHERE ARE YOU ROAMING?" . . . . .	46
CHAPTER VI.	
THE WARREN FARM . . . . .	56
CHAPTER VII.	
EXPLANATIONS . . . . .	70
CHAPTER VIII.	
A COMPACT . . . . .	82

## CONTENTS.

	PAGE
CHAPTER IX.	
LUKE REMONSTRATES . . . . .	93
CHAPTER X.	
COURTING . . . . .	104
CHAPTER XI.	
MRS. ALFORD EXPRESSES HER OPINION . . . . .	113
CHAPTER XII.	
BETROTHAL . . . . .	123
CHAPTER XIII.	
"MARRIED AN' A'" . . . . .	133
<b>Part II.</b>	
CHAPTER XIV.	
AT HOME . . . . .	145
CHAPTER XV.	
A STRANGER . . . . .	154
CHAPTER XVI.	
FATHER AND DAUGHTER . . . . .	173
CHAPTER XVII.	
A FACE AT THE DOOR . . . . .	182
CHAPTER XVIII.	
A REMONSTRANCE AND A PRAYER . . . . .	188
CHAPTER XIX.	
THE CLAIMANT . . . . .	200

CONTENTS. ix

CHAPTER XX PAGE  
A TOKEN . . . . . 213

CHAPTER XXI.  
"JOURNEYS END IN LOVERS MEETING" . . . . . 225

CHAPTER XXII.  
CHERCHEZ LA FEMME . . . . . 232

CHAPTER XXIII.  
BROUGHT TO BAY . . . . . 242

CHAPTER XXIV.  
JUDAS . . . . . 255

CHAPTER XXV.  
MADAME ROUDOFF . . . . . 263

CHAPTER XXVI.  
"HAME IS BEST" . . . . . 279

**Part III.**

CHAPTER XXVII.  
PHILOSOPHY . . . . . 292

CHAPTER XXVIII.  
SUNDAY VISITORS . . . . . 303

CHAPTER XXIX.  
LAST LINKS . . . . . 314

CHAPTER XXX.  
HENRY'S "FOLLY" . . . . . 327



## CONTENTS.

	PAGE
CHAPTER XXXI.	
EHEU! . . . . .	339
CHAPTER XXXII.	
GLIMPSES . . . . .	347
CHAPTER XXXIII.	
GAFFER "GOES FERRARD" . . . . .	356
CHAPTER XXXIV.	
"SIGH NO MORE, LADIES" . . . . .	366
CHAPTER XXXV.	
"MINE EAR IS FULL OF THE MURMUR OF ROCKING CRADLES" . . . . .	374
CHAPTER XXXVI.	
SURSUM CORDA . . . . .	384

# A DAUGHTER OF THE SOIL.

## Part I.

### CHAPTER I.

#### HOME-COMING.

"I WILL walk up to the house," said Anthony Clifton to the driver of the fly which was conveying him to Alford. "You can go on with the luggage—I shall be there almost as soon as you."

Yet the pace at which he followed the lumbering vehicle was so much slower than the shambling trot of the old horse, that his arrival had been announced, his belongings conveyed upstairs, and his host and cousin had walked half-way down the lime-bordered avenue to meet him, before Anthony's tall figure came in view.

The truth was that the sight of this quiet old place where he had passed so considerable a part of his boyhood and early youth had struck Clifton with a sudden sense of pain—a pain so sharp and inexplicable that he was quite confounded by it. Why, when he passed through the big gates and heard them groan and rattle as they swung on their hinges.

should the familiar sound smite him? As his steps crunched over the gravel, his glance wandering vaguely through green vistas of park, the scent of the lime-blossom floating down to his nostrils, why should these trivial things awake in him such unaccountable sensations of—what was it?—Tenderness? Regret? A kind of remorseful yearning? Pooh! it was folly! Yet Anthony had for so long fancied himself incapable of strong emotion of any kind that now he felt both curious and ashamed.

He paused and looked round. Yonder, through its leafy framework, he caught a glimpse of the house, a large, rambling, red-brick mansion with nothing particularly romantic about it. There awaited him his aunt, a dear, erratic, comfortable old body whom he had bullied and teased to his heart's content in his childhood, and of whom he had always been fond—after a fashion. There, too, was his cousin Henry, the best fellow in the world, for whom, as long as he could remember, he had entertained a brotherly affection of the calmest and least exacting order, and who had borne his prolonged absence from England with the utmost equanimity. It was certainly not the prospect of meeting his relatives again which thus agitated Anthony.

Many a breezy canter did he have in old times over those sunlit slopes; from the spot on which he stood he could see the plantation in which he had spent hours as a boy, lying on his back amid the young bracken—he could catch the glint of it now behind

the paling. Over there was the tree where the herons built year after year. Here—just here—he had turned to wave his hand to his uncle before setting out for India. Commonplace recollections enough surely, and yet—

“It is easily accounted for,” said Anthony to himself, walking on again, with a shrug and a smile. “Any man would feel rather queer coming back after an absence of fifteen years to a place which was once a sort of home to him. It is the idea of the changes which have taken place in oneself and one’s life, while everything one has left remains exactly the same, which strikes one so oddly—the contrast”—

Here he laughed—not altogether a pleasant laugh, the word had awakened a fresh train of ideas.

“What a callow youth I was!” he said, and then he sighed.

It was at this point of his meditations that his cousin Henry Alford came in sight. Anthony quickened his pace, smiled when they were within a few yards of each other, and swung his walking stick upwards with a gesture which was presumably meant to express pleasure.

“Hallo!” he cried.

“So there you are!” remarked Henry.

Thus did those two Englishmen meet after a separation of fifteen years.

Being now near enough to shake hands, they did so, scanning each other the while; Henry gazing with admiration at his cousin’s handsome, bronzed

face, and well-knit figure, and Anthony observing with a certain displeased surprise the crows' feet round the other's eyes, and the grey hairs in his moustache.

"Hang it, he's only three years older than I am," he thought.

"I did not expect you just yet," said Alford, turning, and walking with him towards the house, "you know you said you would come by the afternoon train."

"Yes, I did intend to—but it was so hot and stuffy in town I thought I might as well get off earlier. I knew it wouldn't put you out."

"Of course not—only I should have liked to meet you at the station."

Anthony made some polite rejoinder, inquired about his aunt's health, and, after expressing satisfaction at the reply, strolled on for a minute or two in silence. Presently he observed with a smile,—

"It is curious to find everything unchanged here. Of course I know there *have* been changes, great changes"—as Henry's expression altered. "I was awfully sorry to hear about your poor father—it was rather sudden at the end, too, wasn't it?—I am talking of the place itself. It strikes me oddly to find it so exactly the same."

"The evergreens have grown a good deal," remarked Henry.

"And so I daresay has the grass," returned Clifton

irritably. The cousins laughed together, and looked at each other with more kindness than before. Anthony's little ebullition seemed to break down the constraint between them. Such meetings as these are frequently embarrassing, and sometimes painful. The re-union of friends and kinsmen who have lived apart for years is indeed often more difficult to get over than the parting. It is when we suddenly light upon some little well-known trait in the strange personality of our old friend, that we begin to realize his identity.

"I see you are as peppery as ever," cried Henry, passing his arm through Clifton's.

"And you are as matter-of-fact!" returned Anthony. "I say, do you remember the day when—"

The recital of some boyish dispute followed, and the two were laughing and talking gaily when they arrived in front of the portico, on the topmost step of which a stout old lady was placidly awaiting them. She wore a garden-hat pushed back from her forehead, and a black lace shawl disposed cornerwise—the corners being very crooked—both, or their duplicates, well remembered by Anthony.

"So there you are, Tony, dear," she remarked, extending a plump, cool olive cheek, and repeating her son's greeting in the most gentle voice imaginable. "I am so glad you have come, but we expected you by a later train, didn't we, Henry? I suppose you've had lunch, but perhaps you'd like some tea—"

or would you like what your poor uncle used to call *his* tea sometimes? A naughty B. and S., or, rather, I should say W. and S., for I think whisky and not brandy is the proper thing."

"Thank you, I should prefer some of *your* brew," returned her nephew, following her into the house. He looked about him as he entered, scarcely heeding the trickle of Mrs. Alford's voice, which flowed on almost unceasingly, except when now and then she interrupted herself to chuckle quietly over her own slight pleasantries. It is only fair to add, in testimony to her never-failing fund of spirits, that no one else ever dreamed of smiling at Mrs. Alford's jokes.

The library at Alford was the most comfortable room in the house; a large and lofty apartment, not too imposing to prevent one feeling at ease, yet impressive in its width and height, and variety of sober and harmonious tones. Books lined the walls from floor to ceiling—not your flashy-looking, tawdry, modern affairs, but staid and solid calf-bound volumes, the most recent of which had been added at the beginning of the century, for the late Squire had been no reader, and Henry kept his collection in a sanctum of his own. Anthony smiled to himself as his eyes fell on the incongruous elements which his aunt continued, as of old, to introduce into this, her favourite sitting-room. On a carved oak table lay a copy of *Society*; a tinsel-bedecked, flower-embroidered anti-macassar, procured probably at the Baker Street Bazaar, was perched uncomfortably astride of the

antique straight-backed armchair, in which she usually sat ; and her work-basket, overflowing with the brightly-coloured prints and flannels which she manufactured into garments for the poor, lay inside the high brass fender. In the corner, yonder, was the writing-table which Henry's father had used sometimes. Anthony became grave again as he glanced towards it. Here there was a change. No tweed-clad figure bending over the blotter, no white-bearded old face to look up cheerily as he entered, no jovial greeting. He seemed to hear still the kindly words of encouragement at parting : " Well, my boy, the world's before you, we shall hear of your doings, I daresay. You'll do great things with your life, I'm sure."

Anthony gave a great start.

" What did you say, aunt ?—' *The world's before you. We shall hear of your doings—*' "

His doings !

" You'll do great things with your life—great things with your life," went on this inward echo of a long silent voice, till Anthony, to drown it, jumped up and went to the window. As he passed his cousin he saw that he had a bald spot on the top of his head, which he had not hitherto noticed, and which distracted his thoughts effectually—it was provoking to find his playfellow so unmistakably middle-aged. Though he himself was thirty-five, he had not yet ceased to look on himself as a young man.

" I want to know, my dear Tony," observed Mrs.



Alford presently, as he approached the tea-table, "why you were not made a judge, or a governor, or a potentate of some kind or other out there. I always understood that people in the Civil Service went in for that sort of thing. I know Basil Pennington, who isn't half as clever as you, had a kind of royal position. He was called his Excellency, and lived quite in state. I think it was very unfair of the Government, I must say, to do nothing for you."

"It was my own fault," returned Anthony. "I chucked the whole thing before I was five-and-twenty. Otherwise, who knows? I might be my Excellency now."

"Well, you ought to be called your Excellency, because I am sure you *are* very excellent," chuckled Mrs. Alford, looking round in placid triumph. "Very—isn't he, Henry? But it was foolish of you to give up your career. I remember now your writing to tell us about it, but I never could understand why you did it; and neither could your uncle—could he, Henry? It was a great disappointment to him."

"Yes, I know—I was sorry."

"Well, but I never could understand *why* you did it," pursued the lady, drawing her work-basket towards her, and beginning to stitch, as if for dear life, at a huge mass of red flannel. "Do explain to us now, Anthony, please. I could not make out from your letters."

Anthony extended his cup with a bored look.

"May I have a little more tea, please? There

really isn't anything to tell. I was sick of the life and of the work, and the place—everything bored me, and so I cut it. There—are you aware that my cup is overflowing ? ”

Mrs. Alford handed it to him, but forgot to put down the teapot, and growing excited during the course of her argument, and happening to wave the hand which held it, the contents described a series of amber circles on tray and table. “ I call it shockingly lazy of you, and very aggravating. What is the use of the Almighty giving you brains if you don't use them ? You might have made a fortune, and your own property is not so *very* large, you know. Besides, it's such a foolish thing—to work and slave as you did to pass your exams—I am sure you used to look like a ghost with all your grinding and cramming—and then to go and give everything up—for nothing.”

At this point, Henry, mournfully rising, possessed himself of the teapot, placed it on the tray, and removed the table to a little distance. Mrs. Alford, without pausing in her speech, seized her bundle of flannel and flapped it aggressively.

“ There you are—thirty-five last February ! You might be a K.C.B. by this time—you might be Governor-General or something or other out there, and have a large pension. And all your daughters would have three hundred pounds to buy their trousseaux when they married ; and if you died, your widow would have an excellent what-do-you-call-it

and your sons I forget how much to start them in life—anyhow something very good. And you have thrown it all away.”

“My sons and daughters will not require pensions and trousseau money,” said Anthony grimly.

“And there again,” cried Mrs. Alford, suddenly going down upon her knees—to her nephew’s astonishment—and absently passing her free hand beneath the chair she had been sitting in, but talking all the time. “There, again! Why didn’t you marry, Anthony? Of course it must be most dull and comfortless for a young man to live abroad without a wife, and I am sure,” she pursued in muffled tones, for by this time her head was under the arm-chair too, “I am sure, though people do say India is an unhealthy place for children, I should have been delighted to take charge of yours for you. Little dears—it would have made me young again.”

“Thanks,” observed Anthony calmly, “you seem very anxious to provide for my family. But I don’t think I shall trouble you in that way.”

“Well, as I’ve often said to Henry, there is something unnatural about the whole business. You were clever and hard-working, and suddenly you throw up your career. You were always falling in love as a lad, *always*—dear me, the trouble your uncle and I have had with you when you would run after undesirable people—and yet you won’t marry! I tell you what it is,” said Mrs. Alford, suddenly emerging from beneath the chair, and squatting back on her heels

with an arch look on her flushed face ; “ I believe you’ve been in love once too often. I do ”—shaking her fore-finger at him ; “ I believe there’s some woman at the bottom of all this. As an old Irish friend of mine used to say, ‘ Whenever a young man is mysterious and unsatisfactory, depend upon it, it is a case of either Punch or Judy.’ Now, you always were very abstemious, so it can’t be Punch, therefore it must be Judy.”

Both men laughed, Anthony, perhaps, the most heartily, and Mrs. Alford, charmed at this rarely granted tribute to her wit, chuckled for a considerable time herself, and, with a final nod, dropped on all-fours again.

“ My dear mother, what are you looking for ? ” asked Henry, a little irritably.

“ I am looking for my—oh, what a mess the carpet is in, Henry ! It’s all wet. These gardeners are *too* careless. How often have I told them to water the plants *outside* ! ”

“ I think it is probably the tea which you upset when you were waving the teapot about just now. Do tell me what you are looking for ? ”

“ I dropped my what-do-you-call-it,” responded his mother, from beneath the chair, “ and I can’t get on without it.”

“ Your needle, do you mean, or your scissors ? ” asked Henry. “ Do get up, mother ; you’ll give yourself a headache, and do for goodness sake try to think of the name of the thing you dropped.”

“Here it is,” cried Anthony in triumph, suddenly diving under a neighbouring sofa, and producing a thimble. “This is what you want, isn’t it?”

“Thank you, dear,” returned his aunt, sweetly, rising and resuming her seat, a little red in the face but otherwise quite composed. “Yes, that is it. Now I can get on with my work. Do you know this is for poor Susan Waring? You remember Susan Waring? What an active, stirring woman she was! Well, now, would you believe it? She’s quite bed-ridden! You must come and see her to-morrow—she will be so pleased. You were always a favourite of hers, you know. Don’t you remember she used to say you were the spit-an’-image of your granfeyther? What she meant by that I don’t know, but she evidently considered it a compliment. Oh, yes, you must come round the village with me.”

Mrs. Alford prattled on blissfully for about an hour, while Henry read the paper with much rustling and crackling, and Anthony listened vaguely and felt a good deal bored. It was a relief to everyone when the dressing-bell rang.

## CHAPTER II.

### COUSINS.

WHEN Mrs. Alford had withdrawn for the night the two men retired to Henry's special room, one of the small, ill-furnished, nondescript apartments, which, for some occult reason, are usually beloved by the masters of old country houses. Though Henry had in no way inherited the tastes of his predecessors, he had not done away with the traces of them which still remained in this family retreat, and had even subordinated his own thereto. His progenitors had been men much given to tramping over ploughed fields, to standing about in stable-yards, to riding fast-trotting cobs along muddy lanes ; their boots had borne testimony to these varied forms of exercise, and the floor of their "study" was in consequence economically covered with oil-cloth. Henry was the nattiest of mortals, a scholar, moreover, and a man who liked to spend wet days in company with his books better than tramping abroad ; but he preferred to add a hearth-rug, disproportionally large and absolutely out of keeping with the well-worn, almost patternless floor-covering, to removing the same. The walls of the room were studded with antlers,

cases of stuffed wild-fowl, and other trophies of the chase, while the place of honour over the mantel-piece was awarded to a gun-rack, beneath which bristled a large array of well-blackened pipes. Henry never shot, and abhorred tobacco ; but he treasured these tokens of his father's favourite avocations with affectionate reverence, stowing away his own books in out-of-the-way corners and cupboards, and allowing his very writing-table to be overshadowed by a large deer's head which grinned sarcastically at all comers.

As he sat in the old Squire's leather-covered chair this evening—in which his spare and rather undersized figure looked oddly out of place—Anthony was struck by the contrast between him and the former Lords of the Manor. They had been big, broad-shouldered men, grey-eyed and brown-haired, as was Anthony himself, with massive limbs, and faces bronzed by exposure to the weather, just as his own was bronzed by foreign skies. Henry was dark and pale, with small, fine features, and black hair now turning a little grey about the temples, and suspiciously thin at the crown.

“You are not much like a Squire Alford, Henry,” observed Clifton between the puffs of a cigarette.

“No,” returned his cousin. “You would act the part much better. Your mother was a true Alford, and you take after her. Well, it is most probable that some day you will reign here, so that is as it should be.”

“Don't !” cried Anthony hastily. “You are much

more likely to outlive me. You are a respectable, steady-going old chap, you know, and I am—well, the reverse. And you are content to live here from year's end to year's end—whereas I am a rover by nature. How many years is it since I have been in Europe, not to say England? Fifteen. I scarcely know what led me to come back even for this flying visit. Partly, I suppose, to look you up—”

Henry endeavoured to appear gratified, but only succeeded in showing his incredulity.

“Partly for bothering business matters. I hear my white elephant of a house is shockingly out of repair. Bodenham, who has always managed my affairs, as you know, says I shall never get another tenant if something isn't done. So I've come to see if it is worth while patching it up. If it is in such a tumble-down condition as Bodenham says, perhaps I shall leave it alone. Anyhow, English country life would never suit me. I shall go back as soon as I can to my camel-riding, and elephant-hunting, and tiger-shooting in different parts of the uncivilized world, and bid an everlasting farewell to my native land.”

“I don't like to hear you talk in that strain,” returned Henry quickly. “I have for a long time wished to speak to you on this subject. I want you to realize, Anthony, that as matters stand, and unless something very unlikely comes to pass, you will be my heir. And I wish—for that reason if for no other—that you would give up this wandering life and



settle down in England. If I outlive you, as you say—which is most improbable—then your children should succeed to this property, and keep up the old place and the old traditions.”

“Don’t talk to me of the old place and the old traditions!” cried Anthony vehemently. “The very thought of them oppresses me. My dear fellow, I am not fit to be master here; my son, if I had one, would in all probability resemble his disreputable papa. Put it out of your head, Hal. I’m a savage by nature, and I prefer the society of savages. I like to lead a wild free life—to go where I like, and do what I like, and be responsible to no one. I should go mad if I lived as you do here—you don’t live, you vegetate. I simply couldn’t stand it.”

“Then is the old race to die out?”

“Don’t count on me to perpetuate it. Why are you so lazy, Henry? If you think so much of the family name, your duty stares you in the face. You must marry as soon as may be, provide yourself with an heir—and let me go to the devil in peace.”

Henry leaned forward and looked steadily at his cousin.

“Anthony, what is the meaning of it all? Will you not tell me? You were once ambitious enough and eager enough to secure your share of the world’s goods. I don’t want to worry you, as my poor dear mother does, with questions, but there must be something to account for the change in you. You are only thirty-five, and you look younger—you

have been pretty wild, as I know, both from yourself and from certain reports which have occasionally transpired concerning you, but you have never disgraced yourself in any way. Why do you talk so recklessly as if everything were over for you in life?"

Anthony interrupted him with an oath,—

"—, so it is!"

Then throwing himself back in his chair, he said peevishly, "You said you didn't want to worry me, Henry. Well, you do worry me; please change the subject."

"It is never too late to mend," went on the other sententiously. "You are a clever fellow and a good fellow—"

"No, I'm not, I'm a reprobate."

"Other men who have sowed wild oats in their youth have become decent members of society afterwards," pursued Henry. "Why should not you—"

"Why should not I marry some rosy-cheeked thick-headed English maiden, and go to church on Sunday, and receive my own rents, perhaps farm my own land, or some of it? My dear chap, the prospect doesn't smile to me. Now you have carried out every part of the programme with the exception of the rosy-cheeked maiden. Tell me, do you find the life fascinating? Would you not be a million times happier if you were free to settle at Oxford with a modest professorship?"

Henry laughed a little ruefully.

"In one way you are right. I am not by nature

fitted for a country life. However, I accept my lot and endeavour to do my duty."

"Good little boy!" exclaimed Anthony, yawning slightly. "As for me, I don't believe in duty."

"Come; you cannot in conscience—" began Henry, but his cousin interrupted him,—

"I have no conscience, none whatever, no heart—no faith in God or man—no beliefs of any kind, in fact. I threw 'em overboard long ago, and find I am much more comfortable without 'em. I have outgrown the fine old myths of our childish days. Make the best of life—such as it is—while it lasts; that's my maxim! It's a sorry business at best."

"Yet I remember the time when you thought very differently," said Henry seriously.

"Good old solemn Hal! You look as much shocked as if you were a parson—you would make a very good parson, Hal. I believe you read a chapter every night before you go to bed."

"I want to know what you have been doing with yourself," persisted the Squire. "Your flippant talk doesn't in the least impose on me. What have you done with your life, Anthony?"

"Gambled with it," said his cousin grimly. "There you have the truth in three words. What have you done with yours, Henry? Wrapped it round in a thousand narrow prejudices and buried it. Better my crop of wild oats than your mouldy existence, anyhow."

"I don't agree with you," cried Henry, really nettled. "Surely an honourable and harmless life,

devoted to duty, is better than a life which at best is a tissue of folly."

"Good again!" remarked Anthony, resuming his semi-recumbent position in his arm-chair, and staring at the ceiling. "'A tissue of folly' is a very fair description of my career, but folly is sometimes very nice. You old wiseacre, you don't know how nice it is! You've never been tempted to do a foolish thing in your life."

"Haven't I?" retorted Henry. "As it happens, I am sorely tempted at this present time to do an excessively foolish thing."

"You!" cried Clifton, starting up with a shout of laughter; "What, the sober old Squire! My dear chap, I'm delighted to hear it. It's the most human thing I've heard you say yet. Why don't you do it, old man?"

"Because I am hampered by certain old-fashioned principles, and—I haven't the courage, Anthony."

"Pluck up your heart, man, and don't be weak-minded! What does it matter about your wretched principles—chuck them up as I did and see how comfortable you'll be. I *should* like to know what your folly consists in, Henry. I can't connect you with anything in the least foolish. I hope it's genuine folly, and not a morbid conscience masquerading under the name. You don't want to turn Methodist preacher, or Roman Catholic, or anything of that kind?"

Mr. Alford shook his head.

"You *must* tell me, Henry. You want to gamble on the Stock Exchange, or to do a little quiet betting on the turf, or to build a new wing to the house, or to—Henry, be candid. *Is* it Punch or Judy?"

Henry laughed outright, but a faint blush spread over his sallow face.

"Have you a secret longing to indulge in ardent spirits—or are you a sad Lothario, Henry? (You couldn't be a gay one if you tried.) Oh, Henry, I did not expect this!" He held up a warning finger, and laughed boyishly, as his cousin, with no little indignation, denied both insinuations; adding that he had not the smallest intention of divulging the nature of the foolish thing in question, and had merely mentioned it to show that even sober-minded people like himself were not exempt from temptation, but that such temptations could, of course, be wrestled with and overcome.

"Pray understand," he added stiffly, "that though I spoke of folly, I did not intend you to suppose it criminal. It would be—it would be undesirable for me to yield, but not wrong."

"Would it make you happy?"

"Yes—very happy."

"Poor chap—I wish you'd do it. I'd stand by you—'pon my word, if it would facilitate matters for you, I'd almost turn steady myself—anything short of matrimony I'd undertake for you, old man."

"You are very kind. As it happens, matrimony is the only thing you could undertake which would serve me materially. I wish you would think of it, Anthony."

"Why don't *you* marry? Come!" said Clifton. "It's all very fine—why *don't* you? Are you still thinking about poor Lucy Pennington, or does the—folly interfere?"

"Lucy Pennington's memory will always be sacred to me," said Henry with emotion; adding, after a short pause, "I don't want to marry because I have a notion that a man should give his wife an undivided heart. That, it would be impossible for me to offer—therefore it is better for me to remain single."

In spite of his stiff, rather pedantic manner, he spoke with deep feeling. Anthony was amused and touched at the same time.

"Poor Lucy! But, after all, Henry, one woman is much the same as another, and you could easily pick up a girl that would suit you just as well. As for your exalted ideas about undivided hearts, and all the rest of it, they would be thrown away on most girls. Your wife's heart would probably have been pretty evenly distributed by the time you came—but she would be none the worse for that."

Henry, who had had enough of the conversation, now rose and remarked in a disapproving tone that it was time to go to bed.

"Poor Henry!" said Anthony, laughing.

"Poor Anthony, rather," returned the Squire with a sigh.

## CHAPTER III.

### ROUND THE VILLAGE.

"Now, Tony," observed Mrs. Alford, suddenly appearing on the terrace, where her nephew was comfortably installed on a sunny bench. "I hope you have not forgotten your promise to come out with me and call on your old friends in the village."

Anthony laid down his paper with a gloomy face, and inwardly anathematized his old friends in the village.

"I am very comfortable where I am," he said, after a moment's pause. "You will not be so cruel as to disturb me?—I'll go and see the village people to-morrow, if you like."

"And why not to-day? Procrastination is the something-or-other of Time. It may rain to-morrow, and I'm all ready, Tony, and my carriage stops the way—and I'll be *so* disappointed if you don't come. There!"—with a radiant face as Anthony rose—"That *is* a good kind boy. Now you may carry that nice little jug of soup as a reward. It's for Susan—but she'll say a look at you is better than any soup, I know."

Anthony glanced regretfully round him ; the sunshine was gilding the stone bench on which he had been sitting, the bees were humming over the flower-beds in the closely-shaven slope beneath ; the fountains were dripping lazily—everything was warm and sunny and lazy—the petunias and heliotrope down there smelt delicious ; he had been beginning to think he liked English country houses rather. And now his aunt summoned him to lead her donkey over the cobble stones, and to tramp through farmyards, and to sit in stuffy rooms while old women talked about their ailments ! After all, he did not think he *would* stay long with his relations.

“ Now,” said Mrs. Alford, as he ruefully took hold of the jug ; “ now, come along, Tony dear,—we’ll have a nice long afternoon if we make haste ; they’ll be so jealous if we miss any of them out, poor people. Don’t spill the soup, Tony ; I don’t think it’s quite set, and it will make a mess of your clothes if you don’t take care.”

She turned and led the way, looping up her dress so that her nephew was enabled to observe that she wore low-heeled boots with elastic sides. Her black cashmere gown was decidedly rusty, and had a very perceptible pocket ; the corners of the shawl were still more ridiculously uneven than on the preceding day, and her hat, tied under her chin with a black riband, would have been scorned by any dairymaid. But, in spite of her motley attire, her oddities of speech, her absent-mindedness, her occasional eccen-



tricities, no one could be two minutes in Mrs. Alford's presence without realizing the fact that she was an aristocrat, every inch of her, and one who knew how to uphold her dignity.

Outside the portico stood her favourite equipage, a bath-chair drawn by a diminutive black donkey. A groom stood beside it, and a footman was also in attendance, holding a shawl, a large basket, and a brown paper parcel, from the gaping ends of which protruded certain folds of red flannel.

"I shall not want you to-day, Quin," observed Mrs. Alford to the groom. "Mr. Clifton is coming with me. Put the basket at my feet, James—the parcel can go behind me. Tuck in the shawl well at the sides. Just turn it round, Quin. Now, Anthony, we are ready."

She took the reins and Quin retired, observing respectfully to Clifton "You'll want to be careful of the donkey goin' through the village, sir. She has a trick o' turnin' in at all the gates she finds open."

The donkey wagged its long ears and set off at a sturdy pace, Clifton following, much hampered by the jug, while Mrs. Alford, clutching in turn at shawl, basket, and parcel, and occasionally dropping the reins, sustained a somewhat disjointed conversation.

"Isn't this a sweet little animal, Tony? I've only just got it. My dear Bob died of old age a few months ago, and I swore I never would have another pony. Now, go on, Paddy—I don't want to go on

the grass, thank you ; keep straight. Just tuck in this shawl, will you, Anthony ? Thanks. Mind the jug—whatever you do, take care of the jug.”

“Confound the jug ! ” breathed Anthony fervently to himself, as the sticky compound within splashed over his fingers. “Come on, you little beast. What do you call your donkey, aunt ? ”

“I call it Paddy—you see it came from Ireland. Don’t you think it’s a good name ? ”

“I think Bidy would be more appropriate,” observed her nephew.

“Oh, no, I think Paddy sounds much nicer. By-the-bye, that reminds me, did I ever tell you of old Mrs. Goby’s gander ? You know Mrs. Goby ? She lives in the thatched white cottage near the church. Well, she had a gander called George which she loved as the apple of her eye. But one day when I was passing I found her in great trouble. ‘What do you think, ma’am ? ’ said she ; ‘George laid an egg this morning ! ’ Oh, Tony, Tony ! I shall be upset ! Anthony !—the wheel is jammed against the gate-post ! ”

Paddy had profited by her mistress’s enjoyment of the anecdote to dart suddenly sideways just as they were emerging into the road, and, heedless of the fact that the wheel was stuck fast after the manner alluded to, prepared to take herself, and as much of the bath-chair as she could conveniently wrench away, to the village, without loss of time. Anthony rushed to the creature’s head, and sawed at its iron mouth

till by main force he succeeded in backing it a few steps, then with much inward loss of temper and visible loss of soup, Paddy was safely piloted past the dangerous place and turned in the right direction. The sun was pitilessly, glaringly hot, the road was dusty, and when they fairly found themselves in the straggling village street, the odours from "shippons" and "middens" a trifle overpowering. Paddy duly made for all the gates, and was with difficulty hauled back, proceeding in a zigzag fashion, which seemed to cause her much satisfaction, and occasionally, to the terror of her mistress, hoisting one wheel of the bath-chair on the parapet. It was with intense relief that Anthony saw his aunt alight at last at Mrs. Susan Waring's door, Paddy delivered over to the charge of a small boy, and the jug of soup, suspiciously light, and exceedingly sticky outside, deposited in an obscure corner of the "dresser."

Susan was in bed—indeed she never left her bed now—and Anthony with a sinking heart followed Mrs. Alford up a narrow staircase, or rather ladder, into a small and stuffy room. Susan was sitting up, propped with pillows, the covers of which, as well as the sheets and other bed-napery, were spotlessly white; muslin curtains draped the tiny windows, and in one bloomed a scarlet geranium. Some highly-coloured prints decorated the walls, a valentine of the most brilliant hues and facetious design obtainable for a halfpenny being pinned close to Susan's bed. It represented a gentleman in a check suit and a green-

tasselled smoking-cap, gazing with a distraught expression on two very pink babies.

"A'most th' only bit o' pleasure my poor mother has is lookin' at yon," explained Susan's daughter, Mary, as she caught Anthony's eyes travelling towards this work of art. "One o' th' lads got it off a peddlin' chap as were goin' 's rounds, an' hoo took such a fancy to 't we 'ad to let her 'ave it."

"It's so nat'ral—eh, dear, it is that," put in Susan, with a feeble chuckle. "Look yo' theer at th' silly face o' th' chap! Seems as if he were sayin'—'Eh, theer's never two on yo''—same as one o' they gomeril town bodies would, yo' known. Eh, theer's many a time when I'm feelin' a bit down-hearted, when th' pain's bad an' that, I calls out to our Mary theer—'Fetch a light, lass, an' let's have a look at th' twins'—an' then I'm fit to kill myself wi' laughin'."

Susan spoke in a high quavering treble, her chin rested on her chest, and her head was afflicted with a ceaseless tremulous movement; but her eyes were exceedingly bright and lively, her hearing was fairly good, and, though very old, she was by no means in her dotage.

"How's Squire?" she asked, as Mrs. Alford sat down. "He's a great stranger is Squire. Eh, as I often say to our Mary 'ere, 'Squire'll never be a proper village gentleman!' Nay, ma'am, I dunnot raly think he will—he doesn't seem to be shapin' to it, does he? He'll ax yo' how y'are, yo' known, an' never seem to take a bit o' pleasure i' th' answer.

Now t'owd Squire—our Squire, as I allus called him, feyther o' your dear 'usband, ma'am—he'd come in an' set down so nice an' say—'Now,' he'd say to my mother, 'now, Betty, let's have a chat. How's stoomach?' he'd say, an' my mother 'ud tell 'im; an' if hoo'd a bad foot, yo' known, or a sore 'and, hoo'd unlap it an' show 'im—an' he'd never be in a hurry to go, wouldn't our Squire. He'd look, an' he'd nod's head, an' he'd say—'Poor soul, ye have suffered a deal! I've never seed such a 'and in all my days,' he'd say; an' my mother 'ud be that pleased—eh, he was a sad loss, was th' owd Squire. We's never see his like again, never!"

"Do you know, Susan, I have brought my nephew to see you," said Mrs. Alford, who did not quite relish the present topic. "Mr. Clifton — Master Anthony, as you used to call him."

"Miss Louisa's son?" said the old woman, endeavouring to turn her palsied head towards the corner where Anthony stood. "Eh, I am pleased! Eh, Mr. Anthony, you 'ave been a stranger—come a bit nearer, see—till I look at yo'. Yo're a bonny lad, y'are that! An' whatever ha' yo' bin doin' out in Injar all this time? Eh, isn't he the very pictur' o's gran'feyther? The spit-an'-image, he is! Eh, he is—bless his bonny face! He's han'some, he is. He's a deal han'somer nor Squire, ma'am, he is, for  
"He!"

"—e my blushes, Susan," said Anthony, who ling a little uncomfortable in spite of his

amusement, and who now endeavoured to edge himself away. - But Mrs. Waring clung to him with her shrivelled hands, and burst into a shrill cackle. "Your blushes, say'n yo' ? Aha, Mester Anthony, yo're none o' th' blushin' kind I doubt—not but what if all's true as we'n yerd o' yo', yo' might weil blush a bit. Eh, they do say," she added, gazing at him with a kind of awe-struck admiration, "as yo'n bin terrible wild, Mester Anthony! Well, I will say't for Squire"—elevating her voice and looking at Mrs. Alford after the manner of one making a concession—"Squire mayn't be what yo' call han'some to look at. (He were allus a bit nesh, an' he seems to be warsening as he gets owder, poor gentleman.) An' he isn't not to say clever, yo' known, nobbut wi's book larnin' an' that—Eh, theer's folks 'ere in the village as 'ill tell yo' as Squire can scarce tell a field o' wuts from a field o' turmits—but still, when all's said an' done, he's *good*, an' that's everythin', Mrs. Alford, isn't it, now ? Not but what," she added, with a sly side glance at Clifton, "when I was a yoong lass I fancied th' lads best as was a bit mischeevius. Now, yo'r gran'feyther, Mester Anthony, he wasn't what yo' might call a bad 'un, but he'd a deal o' sperrit—a deal for a gentleman. I mind wan day he coom in 'ere, an' it were as much as he could do to carry himsel'. If he'd ha' been wan o' ersels, I'd ha' said he was proper fuddled, but o' course, I wouldn't go for to say sich a thing o' th' Squire. Well, he'd been dinin' somewheer, an' ridin' whoam at arter, he'd fell

off's 'orse some way, an' theer he were wi' a great nasty cut in his fore'ead, an' the skin hangin' reet down over 's e'en. 'Here, Betty,' he says, 'fetch a needle an' thread an' sew me up,' he says. 'The missus munnot see me wi' this new kind o' veil to my face.' 'Nay,' says my mother, 'our Susan mun do't —yoong e'en is best,' hoo says. 'Tak' a needle, child,' hoo says, 'an' white thread, an' sew Squire up. Sit yo' down, sir, we's put yo' to reets i' no time.' Eh, I were all of a shake, I can tell you, but theer, I fetched needle an' thread, an' stitched away as well 's I could, an' Squire never so much as hollered, an' when all were done, he says, 'Well, Susan, which mun I gi' yo', a kiss or a crown-piece, for doin' that job for me?' 'A crown-piece, please, sir,' says I, an' he gied it me, an' th' kiss too, an' he laughed fit to split, he did."

Mrs. Alford laughed too, with gentle tolerance, and then rose to take her leave. "We have brought you some soup," she said, as she extended her hand. "Mary, you will find the jug downstairs on the dresser. You like soup, Susan, I think, and this is really strong and will do you good."

"Ah, I can do wi' a drop now an' then," returned Mrs. Waring. "Yo' hannot sent so much lately, han yo'? Hoo mak's very good stuff, your cook yonder," she added condescendingly, "I feel as if I had summat i' my in'ards when I sup that. Go and fetch the jug Mary, an' let's see it."

Mary, a bony, middle-aged woman. whose words

were necessarily few, and who confined herself chiefly to spasmodic grins, and incoherent murmurs of an apologetic order when her mother was more than usually plain-spoken, clumped down the ladder obediently. Anthony retired into the background as a sudden cessation of sounds in the kitchen beneath betokened a pause of dismay on Mary's part, and felt a nervous tremor when she re-appeared with a blank countenance, handing the jug in silence to Susan.

Mrs. Waring tilted it slowly and brought one eye to bear upon its contents.

"My nephew carried it all the way here for you," said Mrs. Alford graciously. "Wasn't it kind of him?"

"Ah, yo' carried it, did yo', Mester Anthony?" observed Susan. "Yo' didn't find it none too heavy, I'll warrant—unless," with a sudden suspicion, "ye were supping it as yo' coom along."

"Oh, my gracious goodness, mother, *however* can yo' goo for to say sich things?" ejaculated Mary. "A gentleman same as Mester Anthony! Eh, dear o' me!"

"No, I didn't drink it, Susan, but I must confess I spilt a good deal. I am sure Mrs. Alford will send you some more, though, and here are a few shillings to buy a chicken or something to keep you going."

"Thank yo'," said Mrs. Waring, relaxing, "I'm obleeged t'yo', sir. Next time as yo're thiukin' o' sparin' me a drop o' soup, ma'am, yo'd best let me know, an I'll send up to fetch it."



She looked round as she spoke, but Clifton had already beaten a retreat, and now stood in the tiny garden without, inhaling the fresh air with rapture.

"Where shall we go next, Tony dear?" said Mrs. Alford, as she emerged, leaving Mary smiling in the doorway.

"Are all your old people like that?" asked Anthony gloomily.

"Oh, they are not all so original as Susan—Susan is quite my show old woman. She's delightful, isn't she? Well, Mrs. Alcock next door has had a baby lately—you wouldn't care to have a peep at it, would you?"

"No," said Anthony decidedly, "I shouldn't—I do draw the line at babies, aunt."

"Well, I'll just run in for one moment to ask how she is. I shan't be more than a minute."

She disappeared; and Anthony stood leaning against the little gate, feeling bored and cross. Mrs. Alford's minute had expanded to five, when Mrs. Alcock's door opened; but it was only an urchin of tender years who emerged, blowing a tin trumpet, and capering gleefully down the path.

"I got a penny," he remarked, pausing opposite to Anthony, "Mrs. Alford gave it me."

Here he nodded, and looked expectantly at Clifton, continuing in a moment—

"She gave it me—not to blow my trumpet indoors."

“Did she?” said Anthony, idly. “Well, I’ll give you another not to blow it out of doors.”

The child’s chubby face assumed a dubious expression, but he hesitatingly held out his dirty little hand. Anthony produced a penny and held up a warning finger.

“Now, remember, if I give you this, you are not to blow your trumpet at all.”

The little boy looked at him, and his jaw fell.

“Never any more?” he gasped, and then, clutching his tin treasure closer to his breast, dropped his hand and trotted off, casting occasional scared glances over his shoulder to see if Clifton was pursuing him.

“It’s my birthday to-day,” remarked a little black-eyed girl who had been peeping through the opposite gate at the tall stranger, “an’ nobody never giv’ me nothin’,” she added, fixing a longing eye on the penny which was still in Anthony’s hand. •

“Oh, it’s your birthday, is it? Well, take this penny,” throwing it to her, “and buy some sweets.”

She scrambled over the gate and into the street in a second, and possessed herself of the penny, turning it over without enthusiasm, and observing as she turned to go, “I had a birthday last week, an’ Squire, give me sixpence.”

“She’s allus havin’ birthdays,” put in a bigger lassie—two or three of them having suddenly sprung up, apparently from the cobble-stones. “Her grand-

ma gives her thrashin's for it sometimes, but it don't do her no good—she's that greedy."

"An' she pegged a stone at me, she did," cried a stout, little corduroy-clad lad, adding himself on to the group, and opening his round blue eyes to their fullest extent, as he made this surprising statement. "She pegged a stone at me yester-arternoon, but I pegged her one back, an' I told her I'd tell th' p'lice-man—an' I will too."

"She's allus gettin' pence off folks," resumed the eldest of the party, "an' she's goes an' buys paradise an' heyts it all by herself."

"Can you buy paradise for a penny?" asked Anthony, fumbling in his pocket.

"Yes, sir," came a chorus of voices.

"Well, paradise is cheap—go and buy it by all means."

He distributed the few small coins which he chanced to have about him, and smiled as the children scampered off, for a moment forgetting his exasperation at his aunt's delay.

## CHAPTER IV.

### RUTH.

ANTHONY stood idly watching the receding forms of the children until they vanished into the "shop" where "paradise" and kindred goods were obtainable. On withdrawing his eyes he became aware that a much more interesting person was approaching on the opposite side of the sunny street. A girl, unusually tall, whose carriage and gait at once attracted his attention, so full of unconscious grace and dignity was the one, so light, and free, and springing was the other. The girl was, as has been said, unusually tall, and her figure was more full and rounded than might have been expected from her very youthful face; her shoulders were broad, her waist trim and well-moulded, but not of the wasp-like order. It was as she drew nearer that Anthony saw how young and charming was the face under the wide-brimmed straw hat—an oval face, dark-eyed, red-lipped, shaded by abundant dark hair.

Who could she be? Not the clergyman's daughter, for good old Mr. Pennington had lost his only girl, Henry's betrothed, years before. Some visitor at the Rectory? No, for she paused here and there to

speak to one or two of the village people, nodding and smiling with evident familiarity.

"Who is that young lady?" he asked, when she had passed and was out of hearing.

He addressed the boy who was leading Paddy up and down, or rather, being towed by Paddy from one open gate to another.

"Yon's no young lady," returned the youth, with some scorn. "Yon's nobbut Ruth Sefton fro' th' Warren Farm."

"What? Bob Sefton's daughter?"

"Ah—woigh, lass! Here's Mrs. Alford coomin'."

"Well, I haven't kept you long, have I?" inquired that lady triumphantly. "Now where shall we go? Shall we look in at old Jimmy Barnes? His rheumatism is so bad, poor fellow."

"Aunt, it's nearly four o'clock, do you know? I don't want to call on any more old people to-day. Take me to see something young, if you like. By the way, what a handsome girl Ruth Sefton has grown! She went by just now. Ah, she is coming back—she has been to post a letter, I see."

"I am so glad; for I particularly want to see her. How do you do, Ruth? I'm so pleased to see you. I know I want to ask you something, but I can't remember what it is."

Ruth crossed the road, answering Mrs. Alford's greeting with a little salutation that was almost a curtsy, and a bright smile. Then she stood waiting in perfect calmness while the lady searched her memory.

Anthony surveyed her furtively ; she bore a closer inspection, as few girls of her standing would have done in his fastidious eyes. What a skin, fine-grained and soft, its creamy hue occasionally overspread by a flush which Murillo would have loved to render ! What beautiful curves, from ear to shoulder, from chin to bosom ; what finish in the workmanship of the straight nose, the dark brows, the small delicate ears ! Even the hands, though sun-burnt and not particularly small, were well-shaped and looked refined. The dress, too, a print with a kind of buff ground, was made with a severe simplicity which was almost elegance—no flounces or frills, none of the tuckers of lace or knots of ribbon dear to the rustic soul. How did this girl come to be Bob Sefton's daughter ?

"It's no use," said Mrs. Alford, "I cannot remember. I shall probably think of it when it is too late. This is my nephew, Mr. Anthony Clifton, Ruth. *You* won't remember him, of course. You were quite a child when he went away, but your father will. Mr. Clifton must go and see your father some day."

"Father will be pleased, I'm sure," said Ruth smiling. "He often speaks of Mr. Anthony. I remember you, too, sir," she added ; "you used to come and shoot rabbits sometimes in the warren that runs along by the back of our place."

Her voice, Anthony remarked, was full and clear, and pleasant in tone, the high-pitched and rather nasal local intonation being absent, but a faint hint of the northern accent perceptible in certain words.

"I am glad you remember me," he said, extending his hand.

Ruth shook hands without the least embarrassment, but accompanied the ceremony with the little semi-curtsey afore-described, as though to mark her sense of the honour.

"I must have been at least five or six when you left," she said, her eyes meeting his frankly. "I used to go and peep at you, from behind the cornstacks, and when I saw you were going to fire, I would run away. I was always afraid you would shoot me by mistake, and I suppose the fear helped to make me remember you."

"*Now* I know!" exclaimed Mrs. Alford, triumphantly, "I remember now what I wanted to ask you, Ruth. I want to consult you about my poor little chickens. You know I have some that I hatched myself—in my incubator, I mean—and they were doing so well till lately. But now they have got something the matter with their dear little legs—I don't know what it is. They walk on their elbows, Ruth—or, perhaps, I should say knees, only they are turned the wrong way—and their poor little claws are all curled up, and they look so miserable. What do you advise?"

"It must be rheumatism," said Ruth, assuming a business-like air. "Chickens suffer from that often. You should keep them very dry and warm."

"Wrap them in flannel, do you mean, or put them by the fire?"

“ Not too near the fire, I think ; what I generally do, you know, when one of our new-hatched chickens is weak, is to carry it about with me, inside my dress— here ”—touching her bosom—“ I know that no harm can come to it there, and one does not waste one’s time in looking after it. It is so pleasant,” she added, smiling, “to hear the ‘ cheep-cheep ’ which tells you it is beginning to revive.”

“ I don’t think even my love for my poor little chicks would induce me to do *that*,” said Mrs. Alford, meditatively. “ It must tickle so ! But it is just like you, Ruth—I never knew such a tender-hearted creature as you are ! You should see her nurse a sickly lamb, Anthony, and really, I have known her sit up all night with an injured calf.”

“ Poor dumb things !” said Ruth. “ It is hard to see them suffer—they don’t know why it is, and they can’t help themselves or tell you about it. And when they are used to you they trust to you and cling to you in their own way, and seem to look to you to make their pain better.”

“ Well, to return to my poor chickens,” resumed Mrs. Alford, “ what do you prescribe, Ruth ? They are much too big to be carried about, even if I wished to.”

Ruth recommended certain remedies and took her leave, Anthony looking after her as she walked away.

“ What an exquisite creature !” he exclaimed. “ Do tell me, how does she come to be honest old



Bob Sefton's child? Who was Bob's wife? I forget. . . . She died some years ago, didn't she?"

"Yes, she came from the Fylde country—a fine stirring woman, as they all are in that part of the world. What butter she used to make! She was what I call an ideal farmer's wife."

"Well, but where does the girl get her refinement from? That's what I want to know. It's not merely her beauty, though *it* is undeniable, but everything about her. Just see how she walks; how she carries her head. She's a woman in a thousand, or rather, she's unique. I never saw anyone like her."

"Yes, she is certainly a handsome girl," assented Mrs. Alford. "Now, Tony, we really must make haste, you know, or we shall be late for tea, and there are two or three places I must take you to."

Anthony submitted rather sullenly to be introduced to an old gentleman who suffered from spasms, and who announced with some pride that he had not closed an eye for three weeks.

"Quite impossible," said Clifton, glad to find an outlet to his irritation. "Don't tell any sane man that. You couldn't live if it were true."

The patient looked at him, "unbthought himself," and finally explained:

"Well, I don't say but what I res's'es now and then, but I never loses conscientiousness."

They went next to see a child with hip-disease; a little, gentle, placid, brown-eyed creature, who smiled a wan smile at the grapes produced by Mrs. Alford

from her basket, and whispered to her doll, which was lying beside her, that she should have some too.

“Eh, hoo sets a deal o’store by her doll,” said the mother, a thin, haggard-looking woman, overburdened with a large and sickly family. “I don’t know whatever hoo’d do without it. Ruth Sefton gave it to her a two-three months ago.”

“Did she?” said Anthony, with more interest. “That was kind of her.”

“Eh, hoo is th’ kindest, good-natur’ddest lass—I could never tell yo’,” returned the mother. “When I’m busy, yo’ known, or have to go to town an’ that, hoo’ll come here many a time, an’ sit with Lizzie for company—won’t hoo, Lizzie? And hoo’ll sing to her an’ tell her stories an’ keep th’ other childer from botherin’ ’er. Wan day, as I’d a many things to do, and geet back whoam late—theer if Ruth hadn’t set the little things to their tay—jist same as I would mysel’, yo’ know. Made up th’ fire an’ boiled the kettle an’ made ’em a nice bit o’ toast. Not a bit more particular nor if hoo were a poor sarvant-wench, i’stead o’ wan as needn’t never do a hand’s turn for nobry. Why, yonder at th’ Warren Farm, theer’s a lass along wi’ owd Barbara, as hasn’t nought to do nobbut th’ ’ousewark. Ruth might set i’ th’ parlour an’ be waited on ’and an’ foot if hoo’d a mind. Her feyther’s fair silly about her; but hoo’s not that mak’ o’ wench—nay, hoo’s a stirrin’ sort is Ruth. Well, but warn’t it humble of her to see to th’ childer that gate?”

"How the poor woman does talk!" ejaculated Mrs. Alford, when they left the cottage.

"I thought her rather a nice woman," said Anthony.

After two or three more calls his penance came to an end, and, to his great joy, they turned homewards. As Paddy condescended to keep to a steady pace and ignored all usually tempting gateways, no further accident occurred to delay them.

"Anthony," cried his aunt, "just come and look at my chickens, poor, dear little things. There are five of them. I was so pleased, because it is the first time I ever hatched anything in my incubator. They are just outside the window here, in their artificial mother."

Anthony followed her to the terrace, and after a good deal of hammering at the artificial mother, and indeed, tilting of the same, five nondescript creatures came shuffling into the daylight, with half-closed eyes, and drooping wings, and ruffled plumage. Not even the "Jackdaw of Rheims" could have presented a more dismal appearance, after the curse had fallen, than Mrs. Alford's chickens.

"Poor little dears!" ejaculated she. "What shall we do with you, eh? Aren't they sweet though, Tony? I hatched them in my own dressing-room, and I've given them every single meal they've ever had."

But Anthony did not respond as enthusiastically as she expected.

"You have not told me yet," he said, as they entered the library through the long French window, "how it is that the girl we saw to-day comes to speak so well, and to be so refined, and altogether so unlike a farmer's daughter."

"My dear Tony, how can you say so? Ruth is the very picture of a country girl—isn't she, Henry?" as the Squire entered the room.

"Isn't who what?" said Henry.

"Isn't Ruth Sefton a perfect country girl? Anthony can't understand how she comes to be a farmer's daughter."

"She is a country girl, certainly, in all her tastes and pursuits—yes, and in her freshness and simplicity; but I can understand what Anthony means. She is certainly not like the ordinary run of farmers' daughters."

"I want to know why she doesn't drop her 'h's,' and speak through her nose, and slouch when she walks."

"Tony can *not* get over her walk," put in Mrs. Alford, in parenthesis.

"Of course it is due in a great extent to a certain innate refinement," said Henry; "but Ruth has been well educated, too. Her mother was a Roman Catholic—many of our Lancashire people are, you know, and before she died, it seems, she implored her husband to bring up their daughter in her Faith. So Bob sent her to some convent boarding-school in the south—not a middle-class school by any means.

I fancy they are rather behind the world in teaching, but it is an old-established place and the tone appears to be high. They have turned out Ruth a lady, if nothing else."

"What nonsense you do talk, Henry! Come and have some tea! Ruth a lady! She is far too sensible to think herself anything of the sort. She is a daughter of the soil—a good, innocent, hard-working girl, and she has no aspirations beyond her station. I have seen her hanging up the washing on the hedge."

"So have I," said Henry, in rather a peculiar tone, and with a glance which seemed to betoken retrospection.

"And she *always* makes up the butter—and washes the tea-things. She even wears a bed-gown and petticoat in the mornings, and clogs sometimes."

"Clogs!" interrupted Anthony, "she shouldn't wear clogs. She'll get into the habit of clumping, and ruin herself."

"Ruth never looks so nice as in her working dress," retorted Mrs. Alford. "She is a very charming girl, and has only one bad point. It's such a pity she's a Roman Catholic."

"I don't think so at all," said Henry; "Ruth's religious beliefs are exactly what one would expect from her. Simple and spiritual and earnest."

"After all," commented Anthony, "Catholicism is the most poetic form of Christianity—it cannot be

denied. There is something very grand about the ritual of the Church of Rome. It is at once stately and emotional, mystical and artistic."

"Give me the 'Thirty-nine Articles'!" said Mrs. Alford. "Really, I think you are both talking in a very funny way. You, of course, are hopeless, Anthony; but Henry! I am surprised to hear such sentiments from you."

"I was only discussing the matter from an abstract point of view," returned Henry, with a little start. "And as for Ruth Sefton, I can't imagine her anything but a Catholic, just as I can't imagine her anything but a country girl."

Mrs. Alford yawned. It was more of a habit with her than the result of fatigue or want of sleep, and generally intimated that she had had enough of the subject actually under discussion.

Henry dutifully changed the conversation to chickens and their ailments, and had the satisfaction of seeing his parent become exceedingly alert and wakeful once more.

## CHAPTER V.

"O, MISTRESS MINE, WHERE ARE YOU  
ROAMING?"

UNDER a very grove of palms and other tropical plants in the largest greenhouse sat Clifton, drowsily conscious of warmth and comfort, and faint sweet scents of moist earth and moss; an occasional whiff of stronger perfume being wafted to him from hot-houses adjoining. A bird was singing, too, somewhere—a caged bird, probably, for the warblers of the woods are mute during the summer heat—in little fitful gusts, and a bee was humming and droning in the glass dome overhead. . . . He was suddenly aroused by a breath of cool air which played upon his face: the greenhouse door had swung open. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. He had actually been asleep and dreaming—a curious dream, too, about that girl, Ruth Sefton. What odd things dreams were, to be sure! He had certainly not been thinking of her before he fell asleep; and now his mind was full of her. He rather wished he could dream of her again. He closed his eyes and tried to doze, but presently tiring of the futile effort, rose and sauntered into the house.

Mrs. Alford was out. Henry was out. The house was silent. Hang it! It *was* a dull place. What was a fellow to do?

He went into the drawing-room and began to strum on the piano and to hum snatches of songs.

“Bon-jour, Suzon, ma fleur des bois,  
Es-tu toujours la plus jolie ?  
Je reviens tel que tu me vois  
D’un grand voyage en Italie—”

He broke off, staring meditatively at the keys, and then began again,—

“O, Mistress mine, where are you roaming?  
O, stay and hear; your true love’s coming  
That can sing both high and low.  
Trip no further, pretty sweetening;  
Journeys end in lovers’ meeting,  
Every wise man’s son doth know.”

It was a curious thing that he should have dreamt of Ruth Sefton, and dreamt, moreover, that he loved her. She would have been worth loving—under different circumstances. As it was, she was certainly worth looking at. What if he went and looked at her now? Supposing he made a state call on his old friend, Bob Sefton. It would at least help to kill time.

Impelled by this sudden fancy, he left the house and soon found himself in a narrow lane, which led, as he knew, to the Warren Farm. This farm was more than a mile from Little Alford village, and a very quiet and retired spot, there being no other home-steads in its immediate neighbourhood. Anthony walked briskly along the sandy path. It was



bordered on either side by a high bank, which was pretty enough with its edging of furze-bushes and foxgloves, but which effectually shut out every vestige of view. Presently, out of sheer impatience at being thus imprisoned, he climbed one of these banks and looked round. A golden summer land spread before him, uninteresting save for its warmth of colouring and the general air of peace and prosperity which prevailed. Pastures with cattle standing in them, corn ripe for harvesting, meadows dark with clover, distant woods wreathed in haze. The rattle of an unseen mowing-machine sounded from afar, the shouts of the driver audible in the stillness, and even the crack of his whip ; but not a human figure was in sight. Yes, there was one, the very one, too, that Anthony desired to meet. Crossing a field at some little distance he descried Ruth ; she walked swiftly, looking neither to right nor to left. Now she came to a low railing and swung herself over it with the ease and grace peculiar to herself. Anthony watched her till he found she was turning in the opposite direction to her home ; upon which he resolved to follow her. He cared little to call on Bob Sefton when Ruth was not there ; he could soon catch her up and escort her at least as far as the village. A chat with her would help to while away the afternoon, and her beautiful face was, as he repeated, worth looking at.

He descended the bank and hastily retraced his steps ; but, to his surprise and chagrin, when he

reached the spot where the lane joined the road which led to little Alford, Ruth was not in sight.

After a moment's pause of frowning dismay, he again climbed the bank which had so long hidden her from his eyes, and looked round once more. Was that the flutter of her skirts yonder behind that tall hedge? Yes—there it was again. She was proceeding in a straight line across country instead of turning into the road as Anthony had expected. Where could she be making for? Never mind, he would follow, wherever it might be; she would wonder, when he came up with her, why he had pursued her thus. But he could easily find some excuse—or what if he made no excuse. If he said, "I wanted to see *you*, Ruth!" would she blush and smile, and drop those lovely eyes of hers in shy pleasure? Or would she be indignant, or simply amazed?

He pressed on, leaping the wide ditches where irises and forget-me-nots flourished amain, scrambling through hedges, and anathematizing the branches of dog-rose which caught him as he passed; round about a waving, rustling field of wheat—why was it not permitted to ford the golden-green sea? The flutter of Ruth's draperies, always just a quarter of a mile ahead—up one of "those infernal banks"—and then—Hallo! what was this? Why, of course he should have remembered. Here was the high road—the road which led to Brooklands, and yonder was the little Roman Catholic chapel—of course, it was there that Ruth had bent her steps. Her figure

was not in sight, though the road here was straight enough ; she must already have entered.

Anthony approached the tiny edifice, and, after a moment's hesitation, opened the door softly. He would wait within until she had finished her devotions ; she would not suppose, even if she turned and saw him, that he had gone there on her account.

But Ruth did not turn ; her head was bent, her hands clasped, her whole attitude one of prayer. Anthony sat down on one of the wooden benches at the end of the church, and looked about him ; it was a poor little place enough, but very clean and well kept ; none of the appointments jarred on his artistic sense of proportion. The statues were of white plaster only, but well-modelled ; the crucifix, an old one of wood, of some value as a work of art. A lamp hanging in front of the altar cast a tempered light round. It was very quiet there—quiet and restful, and the girl's figure, kneeling so still near the altar-rails, seemed to harmonize with its surroundings. Her back was, of course, turned to Anthony, and after a little time he began to feel impatient. Why did she not move ? He believed she knew he was there, and was purposely affecting to be absorbed in devotion. He wanted to see her face. What did it look like when she prayed ? Presently, prompted by an impulse of which he afterwards felt ashamed he rose and approached her. He saw her face then, for one instant, and paused ; but it was too late to withdraw now—she had caught sight of him. She

looked up, genuinely startled, and Anthony felt angry with himself for his momentary suspicion. He drew a step nearer.

“Ruth, pray for me,” he whispered hastily, eager to make some excuse for thus venturing to disturb her.

“Yes, Mr. Anthony,” said Ruth, quite simply; the colour which had sprung to her face left it as swiftly as it had come, and she turned her eyes towards the altar again.

Clifton walked softly away and left the church, making straight for Alford. He was confounded by the girl’s innocent directness, ashamed of himself, of the part he had played, of the attitude he had been prepared to assume towards her. He had intended to amuse himself during the homeward walk—he could not well decline his escort—a little good-humoured chaff would soon put them on a friendly footing, he had fancied; but now he relinquished the idea with sudden remorse.

“That is a good girl,” he said to himself. The momentary glimpse of her face as she prayed had been a revelation to him. What faith, what reverence! Well, it was very beautiful to see—too beautiful to disturb; Ruth was a girl to be admired and respected, not played with. He would leave her alone.

A day or two later on, however, he came upon her again in a totally unexpected fashion. Urged by Mrs. Alford, he had gone to call on the Rector, who was, much to his satisfaction, away from home, and,

returning by the high road, had discovered Ruth in parley with a tipsy man. A very tipsy man, as the first glance assured him—a blear-eyed, dirty, disreputable-looking old ruffian, in that stage of intoxication which precedes absolute unconsciousness. Yet Ruth's eyes were bent kindly on him as he stood, propped up against a gate, leering stupidly at her; and her hand actually rested on his ragged sleeve.

"Come, now, Jack," she was saying, persuasively. "It's only a little way, you know. Come."

"Ugh," said Jack, proceeding to make some wholly inarticulate remark, and affectionately clinging to the gate-post.

"Just a few steps," urged the girl, "and you can lean on my arm, if you like."

Anthony, who did not approve of this suggestion, approached quickly. "Ruth," he said, abruptly, "you had better come away. That old fellow is—disgustingly drunk—not fit for you to speak to."

"Ugh," grunted Jack again, as though endorsing the remark.

"Don't mind us, please, Mr. Anthony," said Ruth, recovering from her first surprise, and speaking in a low voice. "The poor old man is a friend of mine—I can always manage him. Come, Jack, come—take my arm."

Jack pointed with his shaking forefinger at Clifton, stared wildly, and laughed idiotically.

"If you wouldn't mind going on, sir," suggested Ruth, "I think I could manage him better. He

knows me, you see. I shall soon persuade him to go home.”

“Take my advice and leave him,” said Anthony, authoritatively. “You should not have anything to say to him while he is in this condition. Leave him for the present—I daresay he will get sober enough to find his way home by-and-by.”

“Oh, no, he won’t,” she cried, anxiously. “I know what he is. He will drop down like a log and lie here for hours—and it is so dangerous. He might suffocate, or be run over. A cart did go over him once and break his leg,” she added, in tones of distress.

“Serve him right!” muttered Clifton, adding, after a pause, “I am not going to leave you with the creature, though. Perhaps I can help you; I’ll take one arm and you—if you insist on it—can take the other.”

Jack, apparently too “far gone” to object, stumbled on between them, slowly, and with difficulty. He was a filthy and unsavoury old rascal; but though Anthony stole an occasional indignant glance towards Ruth, he could detect neither disgust nor horror on her face. At last they reached Jack’s cottage, pushed open the door, and, at Ruth’s suggestion, placed him on a battered, horsehair-covered couch in the corner. Anthony stood aside, watching her with a mixture of displeasure and admiration while she loosened the old man’s neckcloth and unfastened his frowsy collar. He was already heavily asleep.

“He’ll be all right when he comes to himself,” she

said, with a deprecating smile, as she turned away at last.

Anthony followed her out of the cottage—a solitary, tumble-down little dwelling, at some distance from the village.

“Do you make a practice of seeing home all the inebriates of the neighbourhood?” he asked abruptly, as they emerged.

“Oh, no,” said Ruth, flushing; “I—poor Jack is an exception. He used to work for us, and I was very fond of him. He used to be so good to me as a child, I can never forget that—he was a kind, simple, harmless creature; but he is drinking himself to death now, I’m afraid.”

“So I should think,” said Anthony, still unconvinced. “He seems a thorough old reprobate, I must say.”

“I’m always afraid of something dreadful happening to him,” she pursued. “I am always expecting to hear he has been run over, or that he has fallen into a ditch; and I feel so sorry sometimes when the village boys jeer at him and torment him—children are so thoughtless.”

“Well, I don’t want to appear unkind,” remarked Anthony, “but I should say the feelings of your *protégé* must be pretty well deadened. He doesn’t strike me as a sensitive person, by any means.”

Ruth looked annoyed. “Of course, I can quite understand your looking down on him, sir,” she said, quickly, “but I cannot forget what he was long ago

—before his troubles. You know it was trouble that drove him to this," she added, more gently.

Anthony's whole expression changed.

"So you think trouble is an excuse for anything?" he said, softly.

"Not an excuse, exactly. I suppose there is really no excuse for doing wrong; but I always feel—somehow—hesitatingly—" that we should not be hard on people who have suffered a great deal. And, as far as I am concerned," she added, with a little laugh, "I could forgive almost anything in a person I was fond of."

They had been standing just outside the old man's cottage, and now both moved on.

"I must be getting home," she said. "Many thanks for helping me, sir. Good-bye." She was gone; but Anthony remained looking after her for a moment or two.

"If I thought there were a God," he said, half aloud, "I should say, 'God bless her!'"



## CHAPTER VI.

### THE WARREN FARM.

EARLY on the morning after his meeting with Ruth and her tipsy friend, Anthony left the house on the ostensible pretext of picking up a few rabbits before breakfast. He took his gun, indeed, but walked at such a round pace and with so little precaution that no rabbit with the faintest vestige of common sense would have been taken unawares.

His way lay through the park, where the dew was sparkling in the morning sun, and light gossamer filaments, unseen save where moisture beaded them with minute silvery drops, floated against his face: "fils de la Vierge," as the quaint old saying over the water went. Anthony dwelt on it with an odd pleasure. There was, indeed, he thought, a kind of unearthly innocence in this placid morning hour. Everything was so fresh and sweet and pure in the young daylight, the very face of nature seeming clothed with a new power and glory, he could almost believe that virginal fingers had been at work yonder under the blossoming branches—that light, unreal feet had struck out that silvery path across the open,

that the faint and exquisite morning scents had been wafted from the garments of some passing spirit.

He passed on, laughing to himself at the conceit, and soon found himself climbing the range of sand-hills which bounded the warren familiar to him as a boy.

Yonder was the sea, lapping slowly up among the dark scattered remains of the submarine forest which broke the monotony of the glittering expanse of sand beneath the dunes. The water seemed to laugh this morning—to dimple in the sunlight ; and the wave-lets ran in and out of the brown narrow ridges like children playing hide and seek. Even the muddy, brackish river beyond wore the colour of the summer sky.

But inland was a sight which interested him more ; a cluster of roofs, thatched and tiled—one, longer and loftier than the rest, covered with greenish stone slabs—a fine array of hayricks and cornstacks were grouped among them, and, crossing the sunlit space between, he caught sight of a figure that he recognized. He walked quickly along the crest of the hill, pausing when near enough to see more distinctly. The girl's face was hidden by a white sun-bonnet, the strings of which hung loose ; but the form, displayed to advantage in its becoming north-country dress, could be no one's but Ruth's. He could hear her voice, too, loud and musical, as she called the chickens to be fed ; now she was scattering the corn among them, with round, free gestures. She was in-

capable of an angular movement it seemed; he watched the sweep of her arm with curious pleasure. A collie, which had been sunning himself under a stack, rose, stretched himself, and drew near her, wagging his tail. An unseen calf bleated piteously; evidently it knew her voice.

Now someone was calling from within—"Ruth, Ruth, coom thy ways in an' dunnot be so wasteful. Thou's gi'en they chickens enough stuff to last 'em for a week."

"Eh, we cannot let them clem, can we?" answered Ruth.

"Coom thy ways in as how t' is. Doesn't thou hear clock strikin'? It's gone eight, an' tay not made, nor cloth laid, an' Maggie busy i' th' wesh-'ouse. Saturday an' all—an' thy feyther as has bin agate sin' dayleet. He'll coom in fit to heyt all 'at's i' th' 'ouse, an' find nought ready."

"Coming, coming!" cried Ruth, throwing a last handful to some stragglers which had not had their share before, and then hastening across the yard and entering the house.

Anthony began to descend the hill slowly, wondering if he might venture to intrude at this early hour, and longing to find some plea which would obtain for him an invitation to share the homely farm breakfast. There could be no harm in wishing to see the girl in the presence of her family, and the experience would be amusing.

While he was hunting in his mind for a pretext, he

was suddenly hailed with a stentorian "Hallo!" and, looking down, descried a tall and portly figure with an empty sack thrown over its coatless shoulders, and an immense chip hat shading a face that he remembered of old, though the double chin now bade fair to become a treble one, and the whiskers had turned grey.

"Hallo, Bob," said Anthony, "I'm glad to see you. Can I come down this way?"

Farmer Sefton placed his legs more widely apart, slowly tilted his person a little backwards, pushed the wide-brimmed hat off his brows, and then, in somewhat inconsistent fashion, shaded his eyes with his hand.

"Con yo' coom down this gate? Well, I reckon yo' can if yo'n any business 'ere this time o' th' day; but if yo' han't, I'd advise yo' to cut afore Warrener Jim leets on yo', or wan o' they keepers fro' th' Hall yonder. 'Bob'—say'n yo'—yo'r mighty free, my lad, but I cannot call to mind as I've clapped e'en on yo' till now."

"Yes, you have," said Anthony, leisurely climbing over the fence and down beside the farmer. "Many a time, Bob! What, don't you remember the time we went eel-bobbing?"

"Eel-bobbing," said Sefton, knitting his brows, "I hanna gone bobbin' for snigs this sixteen year an' more. Let's see—who han we gotten 'ere? Eel-bobbin'! . . . Eh, by th' mass! It's Mester Anthony! I'm proud to see yo', sir, an' I'm ashamed

o' not knowin' ye—but I reckoned yo' was wan o' they chaps as is allus agate o' shootin' o' th' shoore."

"I thought you would have heard I was staying at the Hall."

"Well, now that I unbethink mysel', our Ruth did say summat, but I didn't tak' mich notice—we're that busy, ye see, gettin' hay in and that. Eh, but I'm fain to see yo', Mester Anthony! Ah, 'twas th' eel-bobbin' that staggered me. . . . 'Eel-bobbin', says you, an' I bethinks mysel' who were it was with me when I last went bobbin' for snigs, an' it cooms in a flash—'Mester Anthony!' Eh, we had a gradely do yon time, sir, hadn't we? Well—yon's our owd Barbara lookin' out for me—I've bin agate sin' afore it were leet an' I'm fair clemmin'. But it's early for yo' to be out, too—wunnot yo'—if yo'll not tak' my axin' yo' amiss—wunnot yo' step in an' have a bite o' summat?"

"I think I will if I shan't be in your way, Bob. Breakfast won't be ready at the Hall for an hour or more. But I hope it won't put your daughter out."

"An' what should it put her out for? Hoo can put another shovelful o' tay i' th' pot, an' pop down another rasher i' th' pan—an' theer! It'll happen vex our Barbara a bit, for hoo likes coompany best i' th' parlour an' all gradely—but I reckon yo'll not be too proud to set down just same as oursel's, Mester Anthony. Well, coom on, then.—In wi' thee, —Barbara," raising his voice; "don a clean apron!

Squire Clifton's coomed to breakfast wi' us. Eh, th' owd lass 'll be some mad wi' me! Now stir thisel'. I'm fair famished—but theer, I'm used to it! I'm allus sharp set, I can tell yo', Mester Anthony. I could do wi' a pound o' beef every hour an' be clemmin' at after."

In the big, low-ceilinged, family living-room Ruth awaited them; as they entered she was in the act of preparing a place for Anthony, and having set a chair for him, came forward with a bright smile to welcome him. She had removed her bonnet, and the breeze coming in through the open doorway ruffled the tendrils of hair round her brow; what an open, candid brow it was! and how charmingly the hair grew about it, with a natural wave, and twining itself here and there into little soft rings.

Presently entered Barbara, the old servant, who ruled her master with a rod of iron, and was even now preparing a lecture to be administered to him after the departure of their visitor. The fashion of her dress was exactly the same as Ruth's own, except that the girl's "bed-gown" was of pink print and Barbara's of lilac, and that the latter's white locks were smoothed away under an imposing-looking cap. She was followed by a tall youth, ruddy-faced, and fair-haired, whose habitually open mouth gave him an appearance of stupidity which those who knew him declared to be unmerited. He slouched forward without speaking, and took possession of the nearest chair.

"Barbara, don't you remember me?" asked Clifton, as she advanced with her hand under her apron in preparation for presently grasping his.

"Ah," said Barbara, "dipping" a curtsy, and suffering a sour smile to play about her features. With a final polish of her hand she presented it to Anthony, and after he had duly shaken it, restored it to its former place. Then, turning to Ruth, she desired her abruptly to get 'em all to work while she fetched bacon. Ruth poured out Anthony's tea, and paused when about to add the milk—

"You will like cream, I know. I'll get some in a minute."

She rose and left the room in spite of his assurances that cream was a wholly unnecessary luxury. He even hastened after her, repeating his remonstrances; but she held on her way with gentle obstinacy, and, still followed by her guest, crossed the yard and entered a long, low room in one of the outbuildings. This was the dairy, a delicious place, cool and rather dark after the blazing sunshine outside; such light as filtered through the narrow windows being tinged with green, so dense was the growth of ivy without on the wall in which they were set. The long shelves, made of slabs of yellowish stone, bore a goodly array of earthenware pans, with here and there a wooden bowl piled high with eggs; the air was full of the faint, peculiar smell of cream.

Taking a tin skimmer, Ruth began to fill the small

jug she had brought with her. Anthony watched for a moment the thick yellow cream wrinkling as the skimmer crossed the basin. Then he looked round at the homely scene, and then at Ruth herself—her bent head, with the sunlight from the door resting upon the rim of her oval cheek, her down-cast eyes with their full lids, and long, dark lashes. George Eliot had described a somewhat similar scene, he thought to himself, but what a difference between Hetty Sorrel, “that distracting kitten-like maiden,” vain, coquettish, selfish, and this grave and dignified Ruth! How unconscious she was of her own beauty and of his admiration! He watched her narrowly, but could detect no sign of embarrassment; no thought beyond her wish to be hospitable.

“There,” she said, laying down her skimmer and wiping the jug with a clean white cloth; “I am sorry to have kept you waiting so long—but indeed,” with sudden surprise—“I don’t know why you should have waited, sir.”

“Your dairy is charming,” said Anthony. “I am delighted to have seen it. Don’t be in a hurry to go. It reminds me of—of all sorts of things. The days of my youth amongst the rest. Do you know my greatest delight as a small boy used to be to make my way to the dairy at home, and persuade the dairymaid to give me a drink of cream out of a skimming thing like that of yours? I wish you would give me one, now, for the sake of old times.”



"Well, that is a funny fancy!" exclaimed Ruth with a laugh.

"Well, but—will you?"

"Yes, if you like, sir—but we must not be long, because my father is waiting for his tea."

The skimmer flashed round the pan again, and then Ruth offered it to Anthony.

"Oh, no, you must hold it," he cried, putting his hands behind him, "otherwise the illusion will not be complete."

Her brows contracted with momentary impatience, but she smoothed them again, and smiled as one might smile at a child.

"Be quick, please," she said, holding out the dipper.

But Anthony drank very slowly, anxious to make the most of a new and fascinating experience. Ruth's loose sleeve fell back from her round white arm; the dark eyes, necessarily raised a little as she presented the dipper to this tall man, remained frank and grave as ever, the colour did not deepen in her smooth cheek. Anthony's pulses had quickened during the ceremony, but he knew that if he were permitted to lay a finger on that firm sun-burnt wrist he would detect no change in the regular beating beneath.

When he wiped his moustache at length, he detected an expression of relief on Ruth's face, and thought with momentary pique that Hetty Sorrel would not have been so glad to get rid of Arthur

Donnithorne. Was Hetty the truer woman of the two? As he returned to the house in Ruth's wake, however, he dismissed the notion with scorn. Hetty was a little shallow creature, incapable of deep emotion—now, if this girl were to be loved as Arthur loved Hetty—no, not as Arthur loved Hetty, but as a true man should love a noble woman—if one were to stir the depths of that rich nature, to rouse the hitherto undreamt-of capabilities hidden away behind that placid exterior, it would be—well, it would be worth seeing.

With this somewhat lame conclusion he rejoined the family party. A smoking dish of bacon swimming in gravy now occupied the centre of the table, and Barbara, standing in Ruth's place, was dispensing tea.

"Well, I'm sure, I dunno whatever's come to thee, lass," she remarked, as she made way for her. "Thou met ha' bin waitin' for the cow to be milked i'stead of fetching a sup o' cream. We couldn't wait, thou knows—thy feyther were gettin' quite vexed—"

"I am glad you didn't," said Ruth. "Mr. Anthony said being in the dairy reminded him of when he was a little boy, and used to beg the dairymaid at the Hall for a drink of cream out of the dipper. And what do you think?" she added, laughing, "he would insist on my giving him one now."

"Well, did you ever?" ejaculated Barbara; while Bob Sefton paused in the act of conveying a huge

piece of bacon to his mouth, and, resting his knife and fork on end, uttered a "Ho! ho! ho!" which made the room echo again. The fair-haired youth who sat opposite Anthony fixed an unwinking stare upon him, munching his bread and bacon the while; even when he gulped down his tea, his round blue eyes continued to gaze at the stranger over the edge of the cup. Anthony took a violent dislike to him on the spot; indeed, he was already somewhat annoyed at Ruth's indiscretion.

"Thou met ha' the manners to give Squire Anthony some bread, Luke," observed Barbara presently, addressing the young man. "There thou sits shovelin' down all thou can get into tho' an' niver a thought to other folks. Cut a slice or two off th' loaf an' dunnot be sich a noddy."

Luke obeyed; his fingers narrowly escaping the bread-knife in his unwillingness to withdraw his gaze from Anthony during the operation.

Barbara crossed the room, shouted one or two directions to the kitchen, where several of the labourers were partaking of their morning meal under the supervision of Maggie, and, finally returning to the table, sat down beside Luke, helped herself to bread and bacon, and unceremoniously requested her young mistress to give her some tea.

"Well, Mester Anthony, I shouldn't ha' thought yo'd ever have been so childish," observed the farmer, after masticating and ruminating for some time. "Out o' the dipper! That beats all."

“Thou met’s well ha’ fetched a cup, Ruth,” put in Barbara, “or raly, if thou had but gi’en a call to Maggie, hoo’d ha’ got thee wan. Anybody ’ud think thou was a poor foolish kind o’ lass wi’out a bit o’sense the way thou goes on. As I allus says to feyther—yo’r pains an’ yo’r brass is thrown away on Ruth. What’s th’ good of all that fine schoolin’ yo’n gi’en her? Hoo’s nobbut same as a child at th’ end. An’ yo’ payin’ out sich a deal for her, gettin’ Maggie to wait on her, an’ biddin’ her dress hersel’ fine, an’ that—why, yo’ll never see her with a ribbon or a flower same as another lass, an’ hoo’ll wortch, an’ clean up, an’ do for hersel’ same as if hoo belonged to cottage folk. Yo’ll never get her to tak’ a bit o’ decent pride in hersel’.”

These remarks were made entirely for Anthony’s benefit. Barbara was still “mad,” as her employer expressed it, at being taken unawares. She liked “everything gradely” when she entertained company; the furniture prepared, the fine damask tablecloth spread with the best china and the silver teapot and spoons; a variety of dishes, moreover, testifying to her culinary skill, and her mistress and herself brave in their Sunday gowns. And behold, a visitor coming to breakfast before half the morning work was done; nothing to offer him but the most ordinary fare; Maggie such a sight with her Saturday cleaning that she could not appear to wait on them, and she herself, and worse still, Ruth, clad in bed-gown and petticoat! There was

the Gaffer, too, sitting down to table in his shirt-sleeves, and with unwashed face. No wonder Barbara considered it incumbent on her to convey, after her own fashion, to Squire Clifton that if things were homely at the Warren Farm it was from choice and not from necessity. Anthony scarcely heeded her, but Farmer Sefton was somewhat annoyed.

"Theer—keep thy mouth shut, will thou? My Ruth's a good lass—I wunnot have her barged at. Hoo looks all th' handsomer if hoo does dress hersel' plain, an' hoo's all the better for wortchin' a bit—same as me an' her mother. Hoo's reet to be house-proud, so theer."

"You like me to do for you, don't you, father?" said Ruth, and Anthony caught the tenderness in her soft eyes as they rested a moment on the old farmer's face. "And, between ourselves, so does Barbara. I wonder what she'd say if I were to sit down and do nothing while she is trotting about. We should hear a different story then."

"Nay, nay," returned Barbara, relaxing a little. "Theer is no need for 'ee to do a hand's turn, lass, an' thou knows there isn't. But, of course, if thou's a fancy for sich-like it's nobbut waste o' breath to try to hinder thee."

Here a diversion was caused by Luke pushing back his chair and rising from table.

"Wheer art thou fur?" inquired Farmer Morris.

"The Six-Bits," responded the youth, in husky tones. "Tom'll be agate mowin'."

“ Ah, off wi’ thee ! ” said the farmer. “ I’ll be theer in a two-three minutes.”

Anthony rose also, having no further excuse for stopping ; but announced that he would accompany Bob as their ways lay in the same direction.

“ Aye, yo’ can coom if ye like,” returned the farmer, without any great alacrity. “ Ruth—fill up, theer’s a good lass.”

He held out a deeply-coloured and highly odiferous pipe, which his daughter duly filled, and at which he sucked vigorously while she applied a match to the tobacco.

“ Now, then, Mester Anthony, I’m off if yo’re ready.”

Anthony took his leave, and presently the pair disappeared, Ruth looking after them with a smile.

“ You’d scarcely think he was the Squire’s cousin,” she remarked. “ He’s very simple for one who has travelled so much.”

“ Simple ! ” ejaculated Barbara. “ He’s none such a fool as he’d have us think. Eh, how ever could thou go for to give him a drink out o’ th’ dipper, lass ? ’Twas but for a marlock he axed thee. He mun ha’ thought thee a fine noddy, I’ll reckon.”

“ No, he didn’t,” said Ruth quickly, but she coloured all the same.

## CHAPTER VII.

### EXPLANATIONS.

ANTHONY and his companion walked along for some time without speaking, but presently Clifton broke silence by asking the name of the young man who had breakfasted with them.

“Luke Aughton, d’ye mean? He’s—well, now it’s a bit difficult to explain to yo’—he’s a kind of a nevvey o’ mine. Yo’ mind my sister, Mary, as married yonder, wan o’ they Tyrers o’ Brooklands? Ah, happen yo’n forgotten. Well, Mary wed first a man as was called Snippet—a baker he were, an’ they’d six childer. He was sowd up an’ he deed, poor chap; an’ then Mary wed Tyrer o’ Brooklands, and *they* had six childer more. Well, but Tyrer buried a wife afore he wed our Mary, an’ he’d seven childer by her—how many does that mak’?”

“Nineteen.”

“Nineteen—ah, an’ that were pretty well, wurn’t it?—but yo’ han’t heerd all yet. Tyrer’s first wife was a widow afore hoo wed him, an’ hoo had three childer by the first husband—so that were twenty-two in all. Ho! ho! ho! Twenty-two—did you ever hear o’ sich a tale?—Luke Aughton’s wan o’ that

lot—th' others was lasses—wan geet wed an' wan went to sarvice. But this lad—theer he was, an' our Mary couldn't do wi' him at all. 'Tyrers an' Snippets is enough for any woman,' hoo'd say—'but they three Aughtons to 'em, eh,' hoo'd say, 'it's enough to break a body's 'eart.' Well—arter a bit they geet agate o' fightin,' th' lot on 'em, an' Luke Aughton thrashed Tommy Snippet. Eh, my word! Our Mary took the besom to Luke, an' Tyrer sauced her for't, an' hoo coom cryin' to me, an' hoo said, 'Eh, Bob, for pity's sake tak' yon lad off me. He's a good lad when he's let alone,' hoo said, 'an' he'll be company for your Ruth. And theer's a many odd jobs as he can do—but, eh,' hoo says, 'we'n too many on 'em yonder.' 'Reet!' says I, 'pack th' youngster off our way. I can do with him, I dessay,' says I, 'an' we's find him a bite o' mate, an' a bed.' Well, he coom. He were a well set-up little lad an' very sharp, so I took to him fro' the first—an' theer he's bin ever sin'."

"Sharp!" remarked Anthony, "I shouldn't have thought he was sharp to look at him."

"Ah, but he is, sir. He's allus got's mouth hangin' oppen, an' that gives him a stupid kind of a look; but I can tell yo' he keeps his e'en an' his years oppen too. He does that. He's one o' th' better mak' o' chaps is Luke, an' a great favoryite. \* Our Ruth used to think a deal of him when hoo were a little wench—but hoo doesn't seem to mak' so mich count on him sin' hoo's comed fro' school. I thought they'd



happen wed—an' I'd ha liked th' match well enough, for Luke he's mich same as my own lad, an' Ruth 'ull have all as I'm worth when I'm gone. I'd ha liked to get it settled now as they're both up-grown—but our Ruth 'ull ha' none of it. Hoo's content as hoo is, hoo says, an' hoo wunnot hear a word o' company-keepin'—not wi' nobry."

"You see, Bob, your daughter is not an ordinary girl. I must say I can understand her being unwilling to have anything to say to a lout like Luke."

"Coom, Mester Anthony, Luke's none so ill. Theer's a many lasses a-settin' o' their caps at him as 'ud be reet glad if he'd look their way. But he says, 'Nay, I'll bide till Ruth cooms round'—he mak's sure as hoo will, soon or late. An', arter all, he's happen reet. Hoo's bound to wed someone, an' why not Luke as hoo knows sin' they was both child-little? I fancy hoo's nobbut gotten some maggot in her head at th' convent yonder."

"What—do you think they want to make a nun of her?"

"Eh, dear o' me! no, sir. Hoo's not that mak' o' wench. Nay, but hoo's gotten—notions, yo' known."

"Well, what else would you expect?" said Anthony warmly. "You give her the education of a lady, and then you are quite astonished that she should be above the common run of girls. Why on earth didn't you keep her at home if you wanted her to be just an ordinary village lass?"

“Why, this is how ’twere, Mester Anthony. When our missus were agate o’ deein’, hoo axed me to see as th’ lass were brought up a Roman Catholic same as hersel’. Well, hoo were a good woman, an’ I thought as I couldn’t do better nor let our Ruth be o’ th’ same mak’—an’ I’d promised her when we were wed as th’ childer should all be Catholics. So I says, ‘Aye—as thou likes, owd lass—but how mun I do? Neither me nor Barbara ’ud be mich hand at larnin’ her her catechis’ or that.’ ‘Eh,’ says hoo, ‘thou mun send her to school—to a convent-school—an’ they’ll larn her theer.’ Well, arter we’d buried our missus, an’ getten Ruth’s blacks, I went to seek a convent-school for the little lass. Hoo weren’t nobbut just eleven at th’ time. Well, I yeard o’ this ’ere nuns’ convent down in ——shire as ’twere th’ owdest an’ th’ best in England. So down I went to see it, an’ in coom a gradely little owd lady, wi’ a white cap on her head, an’ a black shawl o’ the’ top, an’ a white pinner same as a child, an’ long black skirts trailin’ o’ th’ floor, an’ this were th’ Abbeyess. Well, we geet a-talkin’, an’ hoo towed me as there were two sets o’ schools theer—one for ladies an’ one for poor folk. ‘My lass is neither one nor t’other,’ says I, ‘but I want her to get the best eddication as a lass can have. An’ mind yo’ bring her up a gradely Catholic though,’ I says. Well, Mester Anthony, that poor school was for orphans, yo’ known, an’ reet poor lasses, an’ they was to be sarvants, an’ larned trades an’ that. ‘Oh,’ says I, ‘yon’ll not do for me. My

wench is behowden to no one,' says I, 'yo'd best book her for t'other.' 'But how am I to do that?' says th' Abbeyess—'it's only for young ladies.' 'How mich d'ye want fur a young lady?' says I. Well, hoo tells me. 'All reet,' says I. 'My lass is young enough an' bonny enough an' sharp enough—yo' can make a lady of her if you like. An' as for th' brass I'll pay it now if yo' wish an' fetch her o' Monday.' Well, hoo geet agate o' talkin' an' objectin', but I stuck to it as my lass had as good a reet to be theer as ony other, an' after a while I geet vexed. 'All reet,' says I, 'theer's a parson up our way as calls himsel' English Catholic. I'll get him to larn her her religion, then,' says I, 'for if these is your Roman ways I don't howd wi' 'em. One lass is as good as another when all's said an' done, an' happen one Catholic is as good as another, so I'll say Good-arternoon.' Well, th' owd lady laughed a bit—an' th' job were done then.—See, Mester Anthony, yon's the Six-Bits, an' Luke lookin' out for me. I munnot tak' yo' out o' yer road. I'll bid yo' good-day, sir, an' I hope yo'll look in again soon."

They shook hands and parted. Anthony had recovered from his transitory annoyance on hearing of Luke's pretensions—they were too preposterous to be considered seriously—and now proceeded on his way with a rapid, springing step, his heart bounding within him, his face reflecting the sudden new sense of youth and joy and vigour which had taken possession of him. After all, life was not over at thirty-five.

It still contained much wholesome enjoyment if he chose to avail himself of it.

The episode of the morning, for instance ; the peep at the simple life of these good country folk, how fresh and amusing and delightful an experience it had been ! The mere contemplation of that girl in her home—why, it softened and up-lifted a man. Yes, it was in her home that one should see her. Her refined and educated speech to be appreciated should be heard amid the broad talk of her father and his associates. But then how pleasant were her occasional lapses into the north-country idiom ! “ Father likes me to do for him. . . . Eh, but we cannot let them clem.” . . . Again, how well her beautiful figure was set off by the peasant dress, how graceful and dignified were her movements as she went about her household work !

At one moment he had been tempted to think her position anomalous, but in the next he realized that it was the one of all others best suited to the girl. She was made for this life under the open sky, for comradeship with the birds and breezes, for the gathering up and the generous bestowal of the riches of her mother earth. Aye, her Mother Earth ! Not only had Ruth's nature been fostered and moulded by all beneficent country influences, but it even seemed to Anthony that it partook in its very essence of the nature of the soil. Large, and simple, and kindly ; innocent in itself, and purifying all with which

it came in contact ; bountiful to lavishness. By-the-bye, what was it his aunt had called her ? “A daughter of the soil.” Mrs. Alford did not often hit on anything appropriate, but this name certainly suited the girl to perfection.

He came back through the village, which was now curiously still and placid ; the children were at school, the men afield, the women busy with their Saturday indoor cleaning. It was a pretty village, after all, thought Anthony—there was for him a certain glamour about all country things this morning—and the inhabitants were evidently thrifty and comfortable. How delicious that hay smelt ! It was a new stack, greener than the rest and thick with clover. And there were actually cabbage-roses in that cottage-garden ! How many years was it since he had seen or smelt a cabbage-rose ? He wondered if Ruth possessed a garden, and if cabbage-roses grew there. Surely there was sweet-briar somewhere in the neighbourhood—the perfume was strong in the air ! Really, Little Alford was a charming village—he scarcely knew when he had enjoyed a stroll so much.

His aunt and Henry were at breakfast when he entered, Mrs. Alford being in the act of inveighing against the iniquities of certain Brahma hens.

“I keep them on purpose that they may supply me with eggs for breakfast. You know, Henry, I always like a big brown egg. Well, but the stupid things won't lay. They always want to sit—so

idiotic of them ! As if there was any use in sitting when they won't lay. Good-morning, Tony, you are rather late."

"I have been for a walk. What a delightful village this is ! I had quite forgotten it was so quaint and pretty."

Mrs. Alford beamed.

"So glad you appreciate it, dear—of course *I* love it. But how energetic of you to go out before breakfast. You must be dreadfully hungry. Now, what will you have ? Will you begin with an egg—a nasty, little, stupid white Leghorn egg—or will you be rasher and have a rasher ? Ha, ha, ha ! did you hear what I said, Henry ? Henry never laughs at his mother's jokes. What, neither ? Kidneys, then, or there's a pie of some kind on the side table."

"I'll have some pie," said Anthony, rising, and helping himself to a very small portion ; he felt unaccountably reluctant to announce that he had already breakfasted at the Warren Farm. They would think it odd—and Henry looked even more solemn than usual this morning. He never seemed to understand that a man was occasionally liable to whims.

Clifton did not put forward any excuse for his small appetite, and listened tranquilly to his aunt's theories on the subject ; that good lady being much distressed, and occupying herself chiefly during the meal in endeavouring to account for it.

When the cousins had adjourned to the study, however, and Anthony was in the middle of his first cigarette, he was somewhat disconcerted by the appearance of a footman, who came in carrying his gun.

“They have sent this up from the Warren Farm, sir. The lad who brought it said you laid it on one side when you were breakfasting, and they did not see it till after you had gone.”

“Oh!” said Anthony, feeling in his waistcoat pocket; “will you give the boy this shilling for his trouble, and say I am very much obliged?”

He continued smoking with apparent equanimity, though inwardly he was much annoyed. Why had he been such a fool as to keep this morning expedition a secret? Henry would think he had some special reason for doing so, and trump up a great story out of nothing.

There was silence for a moment or two after the servant had left the room, and then the Squire remarked, with an unpleasant laugh,—

“Now I understand your loss of appetite!”

“Yes,” returned Anthony, looking at him defiantly. “I had already done very nicely at the Warren Farm. I walked round by the back of it this morning, and I met old Bob, and Bob invited me to breakfast, and I accepted—and I came back by the village, and admired it very much, as I told your mother. There—now you know all about it.”

“You have not explained why you should have

made a mystery of your visit to the farm—in order to conceal it you actually endeavoured to eat a second breakfast. If it is all so simple, why could you not have mentioned it ? ”

“ Why ? Because you have got such a confounded long face, Henry—and because, if you can possibly manage it, you will make a mountain out of a mole-hill. I have told you the truth, but, of course, you needn't believe it if you don't like.”

“ I do not believe you,” said Henry, and then crossing the room he laid his hand on his cousin's shoulder—“ Anthony, for God's sake, don't tamper with that girl ! ”

“ What do you take me for ? ” cried Clifton, shaking off the other's hand and springing up.

“ She is a good girl,” went on Henry, vehemently, “ and so unsuspecting of evil, so intensely innocent-minded, that I fear for her on that very account. Remember what her education has been—for seven years shut up in a convent, where no breath from the outer world could penetrate ; then returning to this quiet place. She is too much above the village folk to gossip with them, and consequently is not in the way of hearing even the little scandals of the neighbourhood. She has the stature of a woman, but the heart of a child.”

“ Well ? ” said Anthony.

“ Well—why are you hanging about her ? ”

“ I give you my word that I admire and respect her more than I have in my life admired and re-



spected a woman. I should think myself a scoundrel if I wronged her so much as in thought."

"And you would be a scoundrel!" said Henry, warmly. His face was flushed, and his voice shook, but he continued, after a moment, with an effort at calmness: "You must see for yourself that your admiration can do her no good. Leave her alone, Anthony—why should you bring a disturbing element into her placid life? If she sees much of you, she will begin to take an interest in you—to like you, perhaps. You will put ideas into her head—and then you will go away and leave her with the heartache."

Anthony's face softened so much that the Squire thought his arguments had touched him, and added in a gentler tone: "Come, you are only here for a short time—you have not seen Ruth very often; you are not likely to meet her unless you deliberately seek her out. It won't cost you much to keep out of her way during the rest of your stay. Promise me that you will, Anthony."

"I will do nothing of the kind," said Anthony, curtly.

"Then I shall take the first opportunity of warning Sefton that you are not a fit person for his daughter to associate with."

Anthony turned as pale as his cousin was unwontedly red, but he looked determined.

"If you choose to insult me, and Ruth, too, by your insinuations, you can do so, of course," he

observed, after a pause. "I daresay I can set myself right with Sefton—but on your head be it if strange notions are put into the girl's mind."

Henry made no answer, and Anthony smoked in silence for a moment or two; then, suddenly looking up, with a bright smile, and the frank, engaging manner which he could assume when he chose, he said,—

"Henry, don't be a fool! You misjudge me—indeed you do. I am not such a bad fellow as you think."

"You told me yourself you were a reprobate," responded Alford, gloomily.

Anthony laughed—

"I made the worst of myself that night."

"Was not everything you told me true, then?"

"One thing was not true. I said I had no beliefs. I have one—I believe in a good woman."

"All the same I shall warn Sefton," said Henry.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### A COMPACT.

“ I PRESUME,” said Henry, on the following morning, contemplating Anthony as he lay outstretched in his favourite sunny corner of the terrace, “ that you don’t intend to go to church this morning ? ”

“ Wise Henry ! I don’t.”

“ I think you might put in an appearance for once—the first Sunday after your return—if only to please my mother. Poor old Pennington, too, will feel hurt if you stay away, and what will the people think ? ”

“ Let them think what they please. Whatever I am, I am not a hypocrite.”

Henry turned and walked slowly away. Mrs. Alford and most of the servants had already betaken themselves to church, and presently the bell stopped ringing and an absolute Sabbath stillness reigned.

Then Anthony rose and set off at a round pace in the direction of the Warren Farm. He had a well-grounded hope of finding Ruth alone at this hour, when her father and the domestics would most probably be at church. The service at the Catholic

chapel had, he knew, taken place early. He had heard the little bell jangling faintly when he strolled towards it in the morning ; and he remembered of old seeing the congregation leave it about nine o'clock. The congregation was a small one, and there was no resident priest, one from the neighbouring country town officiating on Sundays. Ruth's devotions, therefore, would have been concluded long ago.

Here was the farm ; not a creature stirring, apparently, except the pigeons that circled round with a great flapping of wings as he approached, and the dog, which drew near, lifting its lip ominously.

Anthony snapped his fingers at it and whistled ; whereupon the bushy tail began to sweep backwards and forwards. The new-comer was neither a tramp nor the postman : he had even broken bread with the family, and was evidently not afraid ; therefore, the collie decided that he might safely be permitted to pass.

Clifton crossed the yard and tapped at the door. It was the back door, but he had not patience to go round the house to the principal entrance. He could hear steps within, and Ruth's voice singing softly as she moved about :

"O, rest in the Lord, wait patiently for Him. And He will give thee . . . thy heart's desire . . . thy heart's desire . . . And He will give thee thy heart's desire—"

Anthony knocked again, impatiently, and the girl

presently opening the door, started at sight of his glowing, excited face.

“ May I come in, Ruth ? ”

“ Surely, ” she said, looking at him in amazement. Then, as he entered, and she noted his increasing agitation, she suddenly trembled and turned pale.

“ Oh, Mr. Anthony, you’ve not come to tell me bad news ? There’s—there’s nothing wrong with my father ? ”

“ No, no. Do not be afraid. I have come to tell you something, but it is only about myself. It will not distress you. ”

Ruth looked at him with more and more surprise ; but, after a moment, laughed a little.

“ I can’t imagine what you want to tell me. But will you not come into the parlour, sir ? It is cooler. ”

He followed her into a good-sized room, which looked out on a large, old-fashioned orchard. Through the open windows little gusts of summer air came in, warm and flower-scented, but the room itself felt cool, and the grass without, beneath the gnarled old trees, lay in shadow. The room was a curious one, panelled in oak to a considerable height from the ground, and the walls above tinted in distemper, a buff colour. There was a little square of carpet in the middle, and a table with books ranged at regular intervals round a large bowl filled with flowers. The furniture was heavy and antiquated, a wide, deep sofa almost filling one side

of the room. In the large, projecting fire-place ferns were prettily arranged, and on a bracket opposite the door stood a white statue of the Madonna. With the exception of two daguerreotypes of Ruth's father and mother there was not a picture on the walls. No wax flowers, no stuffed birds, no china figures—not even a woollen antimacassar ; it was not like a room in a farm-house. The remembrance flashed across Anthony, as trivial things do even in crucial moments of one's life : this was Ruth's room, and, with her natural good taste, she had banished all such monstrosities on taking possession of it, and had made it something like a convent parlour : though traces of a personality not altogether ascetic might be noted here and there. She now pointed to one of the cumbrous arm-chairs and seated herself on the sofa, turning so as to face Anthony. She was dressed in white to-day and looked very cool and fresh ; no more colour than usual in her smooth cheek. She did not know what to make of this visit, of Anthony's prolonged silence, of his agitation ; but was herself absolutely unperturbed—the embodiment of virginal dignity. Was it coldness or simplicity ? He was about to find out.

“ I will sit beside you if I may,” he began, abruptly. “ What I have to tell you is—difficult to say, and I have not the courage to face you while I say it. I— I want you to hear from my own lips something that my cousin, Henry Alford, is going to tell your father at the earliest opportunity—to-day probably. Do

you want to know what he will say? He will say, 'Sefton, I think I should warn you that my cousin Anthony Clifton is a bad and dangerous man. Do not encourage him to go to your house—do not allow your daughter to speak to him.'"

He broke off with a clumsy attempt at a laugh. Ruth, in spite of his implied request that she would avert her gaze, turned round to look at him. There was colour enough in her face now, and her large eyes were very wide open.

"I'm quite sure the Squire would never say such a thing," she cried, indignantly, "and father wouldn't believe him if he did."

"But—it is unfortunately true," observed Anthony, huskily.

"I am very sorry," said Ruth, after a pause.

"Yes, it is true," he went on, falteringly. "I am not fit to speak to you. Your father would do well to forbid me the house—and yet I feel that I am not altogether bad. I am capable of better things."

"I don't quite understand, Mr. Anthony. Even if you have been very wicked, as you say, surely, if you repent, your cousin will not be hard with you. I am sure my father would not think of being rude or unkind to you. And, after all, why should he? It is no business of his. If you are good enough to be at the Hall," she added, "you are good enough for our place."

Anthony could hardly repress a smile, though he had almost a desire to weep.

"Then you will not refuse to see me and to speak to me?"

"Certainly not, sir—whenever you come our way."

"But—if your father says you are not to?"

"Oh, of course, if my father says," began Ruth, hesitatingly, "if my father says"—she broke off with a puzzled look, continuing, after a moment, "I don't see why he should say—anything."

"He might think it dangerous," said Anthony, in a low voice. "He might be afraid—of my falling in love with you, Ruth."

She drew away from him, flushing to her very temples; even her little ears crimsoning. Her eyes had a startled look, but she spoke with dignified displeasure.

"Mr. Anthony, you should not say these things to me. I do not understand such jokes—I think perhaps it *is* better for you not to come here any more."

She was not so simple after all; or, rather, with all her simplicity she had the instincts of a woman.

"I am not joking," said Anthony, "I never was more serious in my life. I am only trying to make you understand why your father might probably object to me. And now I want to tell you that in one way he would be right—I have fallen in love with you already. No—don't get up—don't go away—hear me to the end. I love you, Ruth. I love you as I never thought I could love any woman. I want you to be my wife."



"I think—you must be mad, sir," said Ruth, "or else trying to make fun of me—I—I, oh, do let me go away!"

"No, I must have my answer first. Ruth, how can I make you believe that I am deeply and solemnly in earnest? I swear to you by everything you hold sacred that I am in earnest. I love you passionately—I must have you! . . . I will give you time—don't be frightened," he added, changing his vehement tone for one very gentle and tender. "You shall have time to get used to the idea—I don't expect you to love me yet, I only want you to let me teach you to love me. And then—some day—when you choose and when you are ready, you shall be my sweet wife. Your own priest shall marry us—I will promise everything you wish."

Ruth was trembling like a leaf; no one had ever spoken to her like this before—she was frightened, disturbed, and yet moved to the depths of her being. She shrunk into the furthest corner of the sofa, and averted her face; she would have given worlds to run away, to burst into childish sobs, and yet durst not. The very passion of the man held her. At last she said, still with averted face and shaking voice,—

"How can you—feel for me as you say? You don't know me—you have only seen me a few times."

"If I had seen you hundreds of times I could not love you more," cried Anthony. "Darling, one loves beauty and innocence and truth at once and for ever. One sight of your face was enough for me—

but it is for your goodness I want you most. Oh, Ruth, take me and save me! You could make anything you liked of me—you could teach me to be good and true. You know what I am—but with you I could be better—will you not teach me—will you not help me? Look at me, my sweet Ruth, and say you will help me.”

She turned round, breathing quickly and trembling still; her big, soft, innocent eyes were dim. They looked at Anthony for one moment and then dropped—but Anthony had seen enough in that transient glance, and his heart leaped with triumph.

“I do not ask you to love me yet,” he said, very softly; “only to let me see you—let me be with you. In time I hope you will learn to love me. I know I am unworthy of you—and yet because you are so good I hope you will have pity on me. Oh, Ruth, I will be true to you, I will worship you; my great love will wash away the past. Give me hope—tell me that you will try to love me.”

“I will try,” she whispered, and the tears rolled slowly down her cheeks. It was a strange, solemn, bewildering experience, and she gave her pledge in doubt and awe. And yet her heart went out to the man in pity and gratitude, and—something more.

He stooped and kissed her hand, continuing to hold it without speaking; and presently she stole a glance at him. His handsome face was softened, transfigured; tenderness, a kind of humility in the usually bold grey eyes. And he loved her so much,

that he wanted to make her, even her, Ruth Sefton, his wife ; he trusted in her absolutely, he believed she had the power to direct his life and win him back to God. Oh, he thought too highly of her—far too highly ! But still if she could help him . . . it was very wonderful to be loved as this man loved her.

“ I will go now,” said Anthony, “ and to-morrow I will come again. Be true to your promise, darling.”

“ I will be true,” answered Ruth, and, pressing her hand once more, he left her.

He hastened across the yard and away from the farm precincts, never pausing until he found himself in the open fields. Then he stood still and looked round. Absolute solitude—universal sunshine and peace. And Ruth was his. Yet he cast himself on the ground with a groan.

“ Ruth, Ruth ! Why am I not worthy of you ? ”

He lay motionless for a while, hearing, as if in a dream, the bees humming, the larks singing over his head, distant chimes sounding faintly in the air. Presently he sat up ; his face was working curiously, and his eyes were wet.

“ Oh, Ruth,” he said again, half aloud, “ how happy we might have been if I were worthy of you ! ”

He had sat, staring before him for some little time, when a man climbed over the fence which he had cleared a little while before, and walked slowly across the field, starting back as Anthony rose from the ground.

“ You, Anthony ! What are you doing here ? ”

"I have been sitting still for about half an hour. Where do you hail from?"

"I walked a little way with Sefton, and am now taking a short cut home."

"Oh," said Clifton.

"Yes," pursued Henry, in an agitated tone, "I have kept my word, Anthony, and warned him about you."

"Have you?"

"Yes, and he quite agrees with me that his daughter must be kept out of your way."

"That is a little awkward," said Anthony, "for she has just promised to be my wife."

"Anthony, what devil's work is this?"

"I wouldn't use bad language on a Sunday if I were you," said Clifton, flippantly, though he was desperately angry. The two men faced each other, Anthony still quivering with his recent excitement; Henry indignant and surprised.

"What does it mean?" he asked.

"It means that you forced my hand, my dear fellow. You obliged me to take Ruth by surprise in a way I never intended. However, it's all right. She belongs to me now—so do your worst."

"I am—surprised," said Henry, walking on slowly. "It's a preposterous thing, and I wonder at Ruth consenting to it." Then he paused, and said bitterly and emphatically, "It is like you—it makes a fit end to your career to offer your miserable remnant of a life to such a girl as Ruth."

“Henry, let my miserable life alone. Do you suppose I don’t know—I don’t feel—Hang it all, you are mean and ungenerous to twit me! I tried to keep away from her at first—because she is so good—and then I met her—and then—After all, the past is dead and buried! Is a man never to have a chance?”

He paused, choking with passion, continuing after a moment: “I can’t give her up, and I won’t. You asked me just now what I was doing here? Well, I was lying face downwards for the most part, groaning because I am what I am—and I was thinking—wondering—if I could make a supreme effort, and go away—and leave her. And I simply can’t, Henry. If I were to go to the other side of the world, she would draw me back. And then I sat up and thought of her—of a look I saw in her eyes just now, and I swore that I would never give her up. And I never will. She belongs to me—she loves me!”

“She loves you!” repeated the Squire. “Well—God forgive you, Anthony, and God deal with you as you deal with her.”

## CHAPTER IX.

### LUKE REMONSTRATES.

LUKE, Barbara, and Maggie drove back from church in the shandry, but Mr. Sefton himself did not accompany them.

“Feyther’s walkin’ wi’ Squire,” volunteered Barbara, pausing in the kitchen before she retired to doff her Sunday gear.

“With the Squire!” repeated Ruth, colouring with surprise and uneasiness. Certainly, Mr. Alford had lost no time. She was sorry; she would have liked to have spoken quietly to her father before his mind had been biassed against this new wonderful lover of hers.

“Ah—Squire axed him to walk a bit o’ th’ road wi’ him. Well, how long has beef been down? Whatever hast thou bin thinkin’ on? Why, it wunnot be ready this hour an’ more? Eh, Ruth! I’ve never knowed thee do sich a thing; feyther ’ll be mad. He was sayin’ in church as he could ’earken to sermon better if it hadn’t ha’ bin so near dinner-time. Why—bless th’ lass; wheer’t thou off to?”

“I am going to meet father,” said Ruth, hastily. “Look after the beef, Maggie, and don’t let it burn.”

She ran across the yard, and took the path through the fields, which was considered a short cut to the village proper, walking nearly a quarter of a mile before her father's large person came in sight. He was alone, and proceeding slowly, mopping his brow every now and then.

"Why, 'ere's our Ruth," he observed, as he caught sight of her. "Here's our bonny Ruth come to meet feyther. Eh, lass, I'm nearly dead!"

"Barbara said the Squire was with you," said Ruth, turning and walking beside him.

"Ah, he coom a bit o' th' road wi' me. Eh, I'd as soon have rode this terrible hot day. I would, lass, I can tell thee. I'm a'most melted away."

"Sit down on the bank, father, and rest a little. Dinner won't be ready just yet. I was rather late in putting the beef down to roast. Sit down and smoke a pipe—that will cool you."

"Eh, I'm sorry dinner isn't ready. Whatever made thee late wi' th' beef, eh? I've had that bit o' beef i' my mind all through sermon. Well, if it's not ready theer's no good i' my sweatin' to get whoam. Ah, I mun smoke a pipe, mun I? Well, I've no objections. Is yon bank dry, thinks thou? E-e-h, it's a weary way down to't. Theer we are."

He lighted his pipe and smoked in silence for a moment or two; then Ruth asked timidly,—

"Did the Squire want to see you about anything in particular?"

"Nay, nothing so very particklar as I call to mind,

lass. Nay, nothin' so partick—lar. He was sayin'—seems a funny thing, too—about yon cousin of his—”

“ Mr. Anthony ? ” said Ruth, as he paused.

“ Ah, him. He were sayin' as he weren't too well satisfied wi' him. Seems he's been wild, thou knows, an' foolish an' that. I can bethink mysel' now as we'n yeerd some queer tales of Mester Anthony. They'd slipped my mind again—but now that I bethink mysel'—ah, I mind 'yearin' on him.”

“ But that was long ago, father, wasn't it ? ” asked the girl, plucking nervously at a tuft of grass.

“ I b'lieve so—but he isn't mich good now, I doubt. Nobbut a wastril, poor gentleman—so Squire seems to think.”

Ruth's heart burned with resentment against the Squire ; but after a moment she inquired—

“ Why did he, Mr. Alford, tell you all this, father ? It seems a funny thing, someway.”

“ Well, see thou, this is how 'tis. Squire says, ‘ I feel, ’ he says, ‘ you ought to know how things are, ’ he says, ‘ you havin' a young daughter an' that. ’— It were very thoughtful of him, weren't it ? ‘ It's best keep her out of his road, ’ he says ; ‘ lasses is best wi'out knowin' chaps o' that mak'. ’ ‘ Well, ’ says I, ‘ I thank yo' kindly, sir, I'm sure—an' if Mester Anthony does coom our way, I'll mak' so bold as to ax him to step a bit further on. ’ ”

Ruth had turned red and pale during her father's characteristic rendering of his conversation with the



Squire ; and now was silent, wondering how she could best break to him her very different views.

The farmer puffed contentedly at his pipe for a moment or two, resuming presently,—

“ I’ve nought agen Mester Anthony—nought ony ways—but theer’s a deal o’ sense in what Squire says. Mester Anthony isn’t so very likely to be powlerin’ about our place ; but still, if he do, thou mun just say thou’rt busy, and shut door in’s face.”

“ Oh, father, father, but I don’t want to shut the door in his face !” cried Ruth, bursting into sudden tears. “ It’s very hard and cruel to cast up the past at him when he wants—he wants to be good now.”

“ Hello !” ejaculated Bob, gazing at her in astonishment. “ What’s all this to-do ? My word, Ruth, lass —”

“ He was here to-day,” she interrupted, vehemently, “ and he told me himself that he had been a bad man—long ago, I am sure it was long ago—and he said he could do better, and he would do better if—if—I would help him.”

“ If—whatever art thou talkin’ about ? What’s thou got to do wi’ yon, thou foolish wench ? I’ll larn him to better himsel’ wi’ thee. What did the domned rascal want wi’ comin’ danderin’ about thee, when we was all i’ church yonder ? ”

“ He wants—he asked me to be his wife, father. He says he loves me and would make me happy, and I—Oh, please, dear father, don’t send him away.”

She tried to throw her arms round his neck, but old Bob, turning very red in the face, and frowning fiercely, wriggled away from her, and relieved his mind by a volley of fine round oaths.

Ruth covered her face with her hands, and wept; and presently the farmer, having come to the end of his litany, began to soften towards her. Putting out his horny hand hesitatingly, he stroked her hair.

“There—wipe thy e’en, my wench, an’ think no more on’t. Yon lad’s been foolin’ thee. Damn him an’s cheeky ways! Eh, thou’rt but a childish lass not to see as he were playin’s tricks on thee. Doesn’t thou know as gentry doesn’t wed wi’ farmer folks—eh? Whatever ’ud Squire say, an’ Mrs. Alford an’ all? An’ does thou think, as I’d let my wench tak’ up wi’ a wild, leet-livin’ ne’er-do-weel as his own cousin has not a good word for? Nay, not if he was gentry twenty times over, so theer!”

Ruth sat up, and dried her eyes.

“He wasn’t joking, father. He was in deep and solemn earnest; he said so over and over again. He said he never thought he could love a woman as much as he loves me, and he thinks—he said if I would marry him I could save him, and make a new man of him. Of course, I didn’t exactly promise to marry him—”

“Oh, thou didn’t, didn’t thou?” interrupted the farmer, sarcastically. “Theer now! Well, that’s summat!”

“No; but I don’t want to send him away, father.

*I don't.* He asked me to take time to know him. He wants me to let him come and—court me, you know, father. And, after all, if I don't like him when I have seen a little more of him, I can always tell him so. But I do want you to let him come."

"Well!" ejaculated her father, after a short pause. "So that's all I get by traipsing off arter convents for thee! I s'pose they larned thee they kind o' things theer. Thou as wouldn't so mich as keep company wi' poor Luke yonder, as we've known sin' he were a little 'un. Nawe, thou didn't want no company-keepin' wi' nobry—nobbut the first wastril as crooks 'is finger an' says 'coom' to thee! I tell thee if I'd ha' known as th' Abbeyess 'ud learn thee to be that mak' o' wench, I'd ha' sent 'ee to th' Methodies."

Then Ruth cried again, and the sight of her tears filled her father with rage and grief. He tried the effect of threats and oaths and remonstrances in turn, and at last, finding Ruth absolutely determined, wiped his eyes with his coat-cuff and told her to go her own gate.

"Let him coom, then, sin' thou's set on't; but, mind, I'll not say he's to wed thee till I've seen more on him. I mun feel more satisfied nor I am now."

"Yes father, that's quite right. I only think it's fair to give him a chance since he's so bent on it. And, you see, father, if—if he is really anxious to reform, and you are satisfied, and—I find I can like him, would it not be a great thing, a wonderful thing, to think that we can save him? You know if we

are hard and unjust he might turn the other way and go to the bad altogether."

"I wish t' th' Lord he had gone th' t'other gate afore he come moiderin' us here. Eh, dear o' me! Well . . . will yon bit o' beef be done yet, thinks thou? Eh, Ruth, I wouldn't never ha' thought it o' thee. But coom, let's be toddlin'."

Ruth was distressed and touched; but, though a good girl, as good even as Anthony thought her, she would not have been woman without a certain share of self-will. She had, moreover, a strong character, and had been used in her quiet way to rule everyone at the Warren Farm, even Barbara, though Barbara was not aware of it; her father, above all, was accustomed to be swayed by her judgment, and in this eminently personal matter she did not feel it imperative to submit to his.

She was somewhat disconcerted, when—dinner having been disposed of—Farmer Sefton, who had somewhat recovered his equanimity, after an ample portion of beef, washed down by copious draughts of ale, remarked to Barbara and Luke that "our Ruth" had started company-keeping.

"An' yo'll never guess th' name of her chap," he added. "Who dun yo' think? Mester Anthony! Our Ruth's takkin' up wi' gentry folk."

Well, of course, Barbara had a good deal to say on the subject. She was at once elated and irritated. Ruth was good enough to be a squire's lady—she was, for sure, and what else did Gaffer expect after taking

her out of her proper place and cracking her up with convents and that? Barbara could have told him all along what would come on't. Not but what she wouldn't be proud to see the day—and, of course, it was a fine match, and Ruth 'ud soon be too grand to have a word for any of her own folks. But *she* never thought it 'did no one no good to set them up above theirselves. Eh, well—it was easy seen what was the meaning of Mester Anthony asking for a drink out of the dipper! Dear, dear, Ruth *was* simple! Eh, but when all was said and done, Barbara would as lief have had Luke there—she would, and so would feyther, but Ruth was always one as would take queer fancies.

Luke, meanwhile, looked as black as a thunder-cloud, but did not express his opinion until he found himself alone with the farmer.

“I tell yo' what it is,” he growled, then, “I'll ha' compensation for this.”

“Compensation!” echoed his master, hazily. “What art talkin' about, lad?”

“Why—Ruth,” cried Luke. “Here hoo is takkin' up wi' yon Mester Anthony, arter me waitin' for her all these years! How's that for a fair bargain?”

“Well,” grunted Sefton, “thou needn't wait no longer now—seems so.”

“Some 'un 'ull ha' to pay for't though,” returned the other. “Here am I bidin' her time, an' never so mich as courtin' another lass, an' makin' sure as hoo'd coom round—an' hoo goes an' serves me this gate.”

"Hoo never said as hoo'd wed thee as how 'tis," observed the farmer, after mentally digesting Luke's remarks, "an' I dunnot see what thou's got to grumble for. 'I'll bide,' says thou, but hoo never said 'Do'—so theer."

"Well, but yo' did, yo'rsel'. 'Keep a good 'eart, Luke,' says you, 'Hoo'll come round,'—weren't that what yo' said—time an' again? Ah!"

"Well, an' so I did," retorted Sefton, "an' so I thought—but hoo thought different, that's wheer it is."

"I'll ha' compensation, though," repeated Luke. "I will. Yo'll see."

"I'll compensation thee!" cried the farmer, laying down his pipe and leaning forward in his chair. "Thou great noddy! What art thou talkin' about compensation for? Who's fed 'ee and brought thee up, same as if thou was a lad o' my own? Aye, an' paid thee wage as soon as thou could do gradely work? Dunnot thou be a fool—I'll compensate thee out o' my house if thou dunnot keep a civil tongue i' thy 'yead."

"I'd as lief be out o' th' house as in it, if Ruth's agate o' coompany-keepin' wi' yon," said Luke, with a sniff, and then a sob.

Bob Sefton took up his pipe, and lit it afresh, laid it down again, and glanced at his adopted son.

"Have another sup of ale, lad," he said persuasively.

"Nawe," sobbed Luke.

"It'll do thee good," insisted the farmer. "Maggie!" raising his voice to a bellow. "Fotch a pint here!—

theer lad, sup it up an' give over breakin' thy 'eart for a job as canna be mended."

Maggie brought in the ale, and Luke drank it, as it were, under protest; breathing very hard between the gulps, and shaking his head mournfully from time to time.

Bob stared at him solemnly the while, and as soon as he thought him sufficiently restored to resume the argument, proceeded, hesitatingly—

"Arter all, Luke—when all's said an' done thou'rt a bit i' th' wrong thyself, lad. Seems as if thou'd made too sure o' th' job all roads. Thou thought thou'd nought to do nobbut bide wi' thy great mouth oppen an' th' lass 'ud drop into 't for sure afore long. Why thou gradely noddy! Did thou ever year of a lass as was courted that gate? If thou'd bin half a mon," pursued Bob, warming with his subject and hammering the table with his fist, "thou'd ha' made a shift to sharpen thyself up, an' done a bit o' th' reet mak' o' courtin'. Eh, mon! why didn't thou buy a drop o' hair-oil, an' don thyself seemly, an' wear a posy i' thy coat? An' thou met ha' made our Ruth a present now an' again—an' tow'd her hoo were a bonny lass, an' thot."

"I did say summat o' th' kind once, an' hoo let on as hoo didn't hear," grumbled Luke; "an' Barbara called me a mis-mannered hound, hoo did. What should I be givin' her presents fur? Yo' keep me short enough, an' hoo's everything a lass could wish fur. Presents indeed!"

He paused, rubbing his tow-like hair meditatively.

“Hair-oil!” he observed presently, as though that were a suggestion in which he was forced to recognize some sense—“Ah, I never thought o’ thot. I met ha’ bought me a drop, too, if t’ad coom to my mind. . . . Hair-oil—ah, I’m sorry as I didn’t think on’t.”

“Ah, thou met ha’ bethought thysel’ o’ summat o’ th’ kind if thou’d a bit o’ sperrit. But it’s too late now as how ’tis.”

The farmer filled his pipe afresh, and heaved a deep sigh: then a comical idea seemed to strike him; his eyes began to twinkle and his shoulders to roll.

“So thou reckons to ha’ me up for britch o’ promise, eh?” he chuckled. “Ho, ho, ho, britch o’ promise!”

Luke glowered at him for all reply, passing his hand again slowly over his locks; he was still thinking of the hair-oil.



## CHAPTER X.

### COURTING.

ABOUT four o'clock next day the new lover's shadow fell across the threshold of the Warren Farm ; all the doors were open, and he felt somewhat taken aback on discovering that the whole family were at tea in the living-room. He had purposely chosen this hour for his visit, hoping to find Ruth alone, and disengaged—and, behold, not only was she in the act of dispensing tea to her father, Luke, and Barbara, but, judging from the sour and forbidding glances cast in his direction, all three were in possession of his secret. He might have guessed that this would be the consequence of Henry's interview with Bob. Ruth rose at once, and Anthony's momentary irritation vanished at sight of the lovely blush and smile, which told their own tale of timid joy. What did he care for these country bumpkins, after all ? Ruth, his Ruth, was glad to see him.

“ I am afraid I am disturbing everybody,” he observed, pleasantly, as he entered.

“ Disturbing us ! 'umph ! Well, I won't say but what you' mostly do seem to leet on us when

we're at mate," growled the farmer, without moving or smiling.

"I'm sure we're all very glad to see you, sir, no matter when you come," cried Ruth, quickly; the blush of pleasure had deepened to an angry glow, and the usually soft eyes flashed. Anthony laughed inwardly. What! his beautiful saint had a temper of her own, had she? He loved her the more for it.

"Luke, fetch a chair for Mr. Clifton—Barbara, get another cup. Father, you'll welcome Mr. Anthony, I know."

How she mastered them all! They obeyed her every one, more or less willingly, even old Bob struggling to force a smile as he mendaciously informed Anthony that he was proud to see him.

He sat down beside Ruth, feeling a good deal amused, if a little abashed, and watched the girl in silence as she poured out his tea.

Presently a sort of rumbling chuckle was heard, and, looking round, Anthony saw Mr. Sefton's mouth widening and his eyes twinkling. Meeting Anthony's gaze, the farmer winked.

"Dunnot yo' think yo' could happen fancy a drink out o' th' dipper, Mester Anthony? Ruth 'ill fetch it yo' in a minute. Ho! ho! Cut away, lass, t' th' dairy. Thou'd like to fetch a drop o' cream, wouldn't thou? Is th' dipper handy, Barbara? Now then, Squire."

Anthony did not move, however, and merely remarked very demurely that he liked his tea just as

well without cream. Ruth's courage so far failed her that she did not offer to get any, though her father facetiously continued to press her to "nip round yonder," and to "just see if Mester Anthony couldn't do wi' a taste," until he ended by chuckling himself into a good humour.

"When all's said an' done, though," he observed, becoming serious all at once, "I dunnot know as I tak' it so very kind o' yo' to coom puttin' notions in my lass's 'yead, Mester Anthony. What sense is there i' wark o' that mak'? Theer's a deal o' difference 'tween yo' an' her, an' it's no ways seemly for yo' to be talkin' o' coompany-keepin'. Let her tak' up wi' a lad of her own degree, an' yo' can have yo'r pick o' th' ladies, Mester Anthony."

Luke, who had been listening attentively, heaved a deep sigh, and paused, a huge morsel clearly defined in his cheek, to gaze at the new-comer. and see what he thought of that.

Ruth sat with her eyes cast down, growing red and pale alternately. How could her father talk like that before everyone? What would Mr. Anthony think?

Anthony did not lose his self-possession, though there certainly was a good deal of unusualness in the situation. This was "coortin'" with a vengeance.

"You see I don't happen to fancy any lady but Ruth," he said, quietly. "I want her—and nobody else. But we'll talk over this matter afterwards, shall we? How are your crops doing?—I thought your wheat looked well as I came along."

“Ah, yo’ thought a dale about my wheat, I’ll be bound. Ye’re a cool ’un as ever was, Mester Anthony”—growing angry again—“a bit too cool for me. I canna tak’ it thot easy. Why, how’s a mon to sit an’ talk o’ this an’ thot an’ t’other to a felly as has nought in’s mind but to ’tice away’s only child fro’ him? Natur’ couldn’t stand it—an’ so I tell yo’.”

“Ah, see yo’, th’ Gaffer’s i’ th’ reet on’t,” put in Barbara. “’Tisn’t in natur’, as he says, as he could be pleased at losing the wench. Fur it’ll be losin’ her as how ’tis. Yo’ reckon to tak’ her off us—her feyther, as hasn’t never had chick nor child, as th’ sayin’ goes, nobbut her—an’ me as has brought ’er up, I may say. An’ theer ye go an’ tak’ her off us—eh, hoo’ll be thot set-up hoo’ll never so mich as look our way arter yo’n wed her—an’ yo’ reckon to tak’ her away to they outlandish places ye’re so fond on, Mester Anthony. It isn’t to be expected as we con like that.”

Clifton glanced at Ruth ; she did not dare to raise her eyes, but her lips were quivering and tears were evidently not far off.

“You must remember that Ruth has not yet made up her mind,” he said, gently. “It is a little hard to discuss everything while I am still ‘on approval.’ But you may be quite sure, if she does consent to be my wife, I shall not take her away from you, nor from England, if she does not wish it. She shall do exactly what she likes—with herself—and with me.”

Ruth stole a swift glance of gratitude towards him, and then looked round the table with a kind of tremulous pride. They could see for themselves what manner of man her lover was, now, surely.

"Very fine," said Barbara, incredulously. "Ah, yo' can talk gradely, Mester Anthony—but hoo isn't yo'r wife yet, see yo'? 'T'ull be another story then, I reckon, an' yo'll soon alter yo'r note. Hoo'll larn to be a fine madam afore aught's long, an' to look down on her feyther an' her feyther's folk—yo'll not fancy her coomin' 'ere mich, an' yo'll not be for lettin' us go t' yo'r place. So theer. I tell yo'."

"Mr. Anthony knows—whatever happens—I could never give up my own people," said the girl; the brightness had gone out of her face suddenly, and she spoke in a low, constrained voice.

"Yes, Ruth, I know it, and I should never wish you to do so. We'll discuss all that presently, you and I. Of one thing you may be sure. There shall always be room under my roof, wherever it may be, for your father if he likes to come and see us; and for Barbara, too," he added, half jestingly, "if she will promise not to scold me and frighten me out of my wits."

Barbara and her master exchanged gratified glances, and the farmer observed that no one could say but what Mester Anthony spoke han'some. The expression of Ruth's face rewarded Clifton for this somewhat rash promise. He was prepared to extend the invitation to the entire household of the Warren

Farm, anything rather than hear that pained, doubtful tone in her voice, or see her bright face clouded ; but just then his eyes fell on Luke ; Luke, who was staring straight before him, and slowly and noisily masticating. Anthony's gravity almost deserted him ; Luke was clearly impossible.

The meal being now over, Anthony invited Ruth to go out for a stroll with him ; and presently the two tall figures walked away together.

"They're a bonny pair," murmured Barbara, looking after them. "It's a match, Gaffer, for sure, an' a bonny match, too—when all's said an' done."

"Ah, I reckon it'll not tak' our Ruth so long to mak' up her mind," responded Gaffer, with a sigh. "Eh, but it's a queer thing, Barbara—I cannot tak' to't some way. I welly think I'm dreaming half the time."

Ruth, too, felt like one in a dream : yesterday morning no one had been further from her thoughts than Anthony Clifton, and to-day—her mind and her heart were full of him ; she could scarcely conceive life possible without him. She was not given to analyzing her feelings, and even now would have been shocked and startled if anyone had told her that she loved him. And yet, whether because she was moved by the suddenness and violence of his attack, or whether she had already been unconsciously attracted by him, it is certain that Anthony had been right on the previous day in fancying he saw a dawning tenderness in her eyes.

As for Anthony himself, he was ecstatically, deliciously happy. He was as much surprised, perhaps, as anyone at the turn events were taking. But a few days ago he would have denied any notion of contracting such an alliance: he had not been aware of the extent of his passion for the girl until his cousin had proposed that he should see her no more. In seeking a private interview with her he had, at first, been actuated merely by the desire to ensure her sympathy in case she should learn his true character; and then, captivated by her simplicity and sweetness, he had resolved to secure her for himself.

Well, she was his now, that beautiful, exquisite creature; he felt already sure of his prize. He loved her, loved her, loved her—such love as his carried everything before it. He was unworthy of her—to his heart's core he felt it—but he would never give her up. Let bygones be bygones—he would be good to her, he would worship her, she should be the happiest of women. But he must proceed very carefully. He must keep himself and his ardour thoroughly under control. Ruth must not be frightened, no matter how much it cost him to hold aloof.

During that first walk, therefore, they conversed rather as friends than lovers; Anthony spared no pains to win the girl's confidence and conquer her shyness, and gradually she took courage to talk freely. Glancing at him now and then, and emboldened by the kind and tender interest in his face, she grew more and more at her ease; and soon Anthony,

leading her on by skilful questions, learned all about her past life. He and she laughed together over the recital of certain episodes in her school-days ; but she was more closely drawn to him by his quiet sympathy when she spoke of the mother, so early lost, and so tenderly beloved.

“ Did you ever see her ? ” she asked, diffidently, after a pause.

Anthony shook his head.

“ She was so good,” said Ruth softly ; “ you cannot imagine how good she was.”

“ She was like you, then,” said Anthony, with a smile.

“ Oh, no—far, far better. Mother was a saint. You never saw a cross look on her face. But I want to be like her—I try—as well I can, to do what she did.”

“ That is why you work so much harder than you need, I suppose.”

“ Well, you see, before she died she told me to try and take her place. ‘ You must look after father ’—those were her last words to me. So you see, Mr. Anthony, I could never be long away from him.”

“ Of course not. But”—adroitly changing the subject—“ I wonder that your education did not make you unfit for your home life.”

“ Oh, the nuns were very wise. They used to encourage me to remember my real station, and were always pleased when I told them I wanted to be like my mother. Of course I could not help learning to



· speak differently, and picking up things from the other girls. ‘And the nuns, too—they were most of them delicate, high-bred ladies, and, under their worn habits, and in spite of the convent discipline, they had certain little ways—I can’t describe them—but no one could be rude or rough when they were by.’”

Presently the conversation drifted into different channels, and Anthony discovered another quality in Ruth which he had not looked for in her—being content with the charm and innocence which had originally won him, but which was none the less delightful to him—the girl had great natural quickness of intelligence.

What joy awaited him in the future, he thought, exultingly: he could never tire of her society. He could teach her anything. He could enjoy her as a companion as well as cherish her as a wife. He was more deeply in love than he could have conceived possible when they parted, arranging to meet again on the morrow.

They said farewell at the farm-yard gate with a pressure of the hand, and a glance, trustful on the part of Ruth, ardent, in spite of himself, on Anthony’s part; and went their several ways with beating hearts.

## CHAPTER XI.

### MRS. ALFORD EXPRESSES HER OPINION.

WHILE Anthony still affected to consider himself on probation, though no one, including himself, had the smallest doubt as to what would be the issue of events, news that he was paying his addresses to Robert Sefton's daughter flew like wildfire round the neighbourhood. Mr. Pennington was the first to break the tidings to Mrs. Alford, whose indignation and surprise were extreme. After the Rector had departed, shaking his head and looking very solemn, she sent for her son, to whom she announced Anthony's proceedings in a tragic, not to say explosive, manner.

Henry's calmness annoyed and disappointed her.

"He told me himself some days ago," he remarked. "Is it a settled thing, then?"

"Henry, you are a perfect idiot! How could such a thing possibly be settled? You must tell Sefton you won't hear of it for a moment—tell him you'll turn him out of his farm if he does not *instantly* put a stop to it." And really, you *must* talk seriously to Anthony—you are the head of the family, after all. He cannot be *allowed* to disgrace us."

“My dear mother, if you think there is the slightest use in talking to Anthony! Besides, he already knows what I think of the matter—there is no use in saying anything more.”

“I mean to say a great deal more, then, I can tell you. It is too scandalous! I must say you irritate me, Henry, making believe to treat it as a trivial matter, and nothing but what you expected. No one *could* have expected such a complication as this. If Anthony had picked up some low woman in India—a begum or an ayah, or a creature of that kind—I should not have been surprised. I always did say I was prepared for *any* folly on his part. Do you remember somebody asking me once if it were true that my nephew had become a Bashi-Bazouk?—and I said that I hadn’t the faintest notion of what a Bashi-Bazouk might be, but that if it were anything improper and undesirable for a young man, I had no doubt that Anthony was one.”

Henry murmured something unintelligible, and his mother proceeded, knitting violently the while,—

“I was not, however, prepared for anything quite so bad as this. Ruth Sefton, one of our own village girls!—*don’t* interrupt me, Henry—I say *nothing* could be so bad as this. He comes back to disgrace us in our own home—he takes a girl from our very door! Why, I shall be cousin-in-law or something to old Bob Sefton! He’ll consider himself one of the family. *Henry!*”—with a little scream of exasperation—“why don’t you say something? Isn’t it awful?”

"I think it is a great mistake," said Mr. Alford, in his quietly sententious way, "and I am very sorry for the girl."

His mother rolled up her knitting and sat upright in her chair, her usually placid face red with anger.

"My dear Henry," she observed, as soon as she could obtain sufficient mastery over herself to speak, "will you have the kindness to go away? Otherwise, I might say something rude. Go away, and send Anthony to me."

Anthony came, and submitted with very great good-humour to be lectured and expostulated with. His aunt lost her temper at the very beginning of the interview—indeed, it had been imperfectly regained at the close of her discussion with Henry—but Anthony remained quite unruffled throughout. Even when Mrs. Alford's wrath and grief found vent in tears he was not exasperated.

He came a little nearer to her, and patted her hand, smiling.

"Come, Aunt Alice—do not take it so much to heart. After all, it does not concern any one but myself—"

"How *can* you talk like that?" interrupted Mrs. Alford, with an angry sob, "when you know you are dragging the whole family into the dust? Disgracing us *all!* We shall never dare show our faces in decent society again, Henry and I. You need not try to shut your eyes to it, Anthony—you must *feel* what you are doing."

"I know that, personally, I am setting the world at defiance, but I have so long defied the world it should not surprise [you or anyone else. I am quite prepared to be cut by your friends in future—if ever I meet them, which is not likely. I do not expect to come here often, and if I do I shall stay at my father-in-law's."

"Anthony, you have not even the ordinary instincts of a gentleman! Either that, or you are so blinded with perversity and passion that you do not see how monstrous your behaviour is. Do you wish to drive us away from this place altogether? How would it be possible for me to remain here while my nephew is the guest of—Bob Sefton, his father-in-law?"

"You must disown your nephew, that is all," returned Clifton, coolly. "Everyone knows I am a disgrace to the family, and this will, of course, be considered the culminating point. You are wrong in calling me blind: I am taking this step with my eyes wide open, and am fully alive to the consequences. It is a step downwards, according to your notions—I know what I myself feel it to be, but I cannot expect you to agree with me. I am sorry for your sake and Henry's that I do happen to be so closely related to you, but nevertheless I don't feel myself called upon to sacrifice my whole future in order to avoid a shock to your pride."

Mrs. Alford buried her face in her handkerchief, observing presently, in muffled tones, that Anthony was a nasty, ungrateful boy, and was making a base return to her for all her former kindness.

“Was not I a mother to you when you were a child?” she asked, removing her handkerchief at last and displaying a tragic and tear-marbled face. “Didn’t I sit up night after night with you when you had the measles? I wish I hadn’t, now,” she added, lugubriously. “You make one quite wicked, Anthony—you make me almost wish you had—you had—”

“Turned up my little toes while I was young and innocent?” said Clifton, and then he laughed.

“Seriously, my dear aunt,” he went on, composing his face, “I am very sorry this should be such a trouble to you, but still a man has but one life, and it is only natural he should endeavour to secure for himself the greatest good and happiness attainable while it lasts. Now, this for me is centred in Ruth—and, therefore, I mean to have Ruth at any cost.”

“Well, at least, you should do as other men do who make low marriages,” interrupted his aunt, fiercely. “Go quite away—you and your horrid wife—and never show your faces in the neighbourhood again. If you had any consideration, any common decency, you would.”

“I cannot, unfortunately, promise to do that,” replied Anthony quietly. “I must consider Ruth before any one else. She will naturally want to see her father from time to time, and though personally I should prefer to keep away from Alford and its vicinity, if she wishes me to accompany her I shall do so. I will guarantee, however, to keep as much on Bob’s premises as possible, and my presence will in

no way interfere with you. You and Henry can comfortably ignore me."

There was a mixture of determination and mockery in his tone which Mrs. Alford found hard to bear. She sat upright, tapping her feet on the floor, and presently relieved her mind with a little outburst spite.

"One easy way out of the difficulty you have not thought of. Your aristocratic connections shall march, my dear Anthony. Henry shall give your prospective father-in-law notice to quit at once."

"There is only one slight obstacle to that little plan of yours. Most of Sefton's land is freehold, and the dwelling-house is absolutely his. You can't eject a man from his own property." He stooped to pick up his aunt's knitting, which had rolled on the floor: as he raised his head their eyes met, and he smiled gaily.

"Come, don't worry about me any more. It is an understood thing that my marriage will cut me off from you completely—but, meanwhile, let us keep on friendly terms."

The familiar lightness of his tone, a certain sweet wilfulness in his smile, were too much for the poor old lady, who was, in her own way, genuinely fond of him.

"Oh, Anthony," she said, brokenly, "you were—you were such a nice little boy! Why have you turned out so badly?"

"Why, indeed?" he returned with sudden gravity,

adding, after a pause : "and yet if you only knew ! This, which troubles you so much, is the very best thing which could befall me. If I had married Ruth Sefton early in life, I should be a different man now."

Late in the afternoon Henry met him returning from the farm, and stopped him, looking searchingly into his face.

"Everything is decided, evidently : I need not ask in which way."

"No, I fancy it is pretty easily seen," returned Clifton, with an agitated laugh. "I—I—old chap, I feel so happy myself I wish it wasn't such a blow to you all."

To his surprise Henry grasped his hand warmly.

"I am glad you are happy—and I hope you will make Ruth happy, too. This—is not of her seeking, you know, and so you should be doubly good to her. My mother and I don't look on things in quite the same light," he went on, confusedly. "The girl is not to blame at all—she deserves to be happy. This is an extraordinary whim of yours, but *she* should not suffer for it."

Anthony looked at him in amazement, the colour slowly mounting in his face, but said nothing, and presently Henry asked—walking on slowly beside him the while—"When does the—ceremony take place ?"

"As soon as possible, I hope. I shall see the priest as soon as I have finally arranged matters with Ruth."



"The priest!" repeated Alford, turning sharply round and flushing in his turn.

"Yes—do you not know that Ruth is a Roman Catholic?"

"Yes, but I—under the circumstances—. Surely, Anthony, you do not seriously contemplate—"

"I contemplate acting according to Ruth's wishes in every respect. It has been understood all along between us that, if she becomes my wife, I agree to all conditions imposed by her Church."

"Then the—the children?" stammered Henry, more and more taken aback.

"The children shall be brought up in their mother's religion. As I happen to have no religion myself, the sacrifice is not so overwhelming as you appear to think."

"Anthony, this is the most deplorable thing I ever heard of. You belong, at least nominally, to the Church of England; there has never been a Roman Catholic in our family since the Reformation—and yet you propose . . . Oh, it is dreadful, dreadful! Ruth herself is a reasonable and conscientious girl; if you took her in the right way she could be brought to see—"

"It is rather absurd to make a family matter of it, Henry; I practically cease to belong to the family. I have taken my own life into my own hands, and mean to make it what I choose. Ruth's faith is a beautiful thing—I would not shake it for the world. She shall bring up her children to be as like herself

as possible. Excuse my candour, Henry, but you really are an idiot of the first water—suggesting that I, *I* should talk to Ruth ‘in the right way’ about religion! You certainly are no judge of the fitness of things. By-the-by, as we happen to be discussing these delicate subjects, let me ask you something. Have you altered your will yet?”

Henry, startled and angry, returned that it was no business of Anthony’s whether he had or not.

“My dear fellow, I shouldn’t allude to it if it were not for certain remarks you let drop the first evening I came. All I want to say is that if you have ever had any foolish idea of making me your heir you must give it up now. No, you sha’n’t put me off. This is really a serious matter. Understand once for all, Henry, that I absolutely refuse ever to have anything to say to this property. I refuse in my own name, and in the name of those who may possibly belong to me one day. I know what I am doing—Ruth trusts to me—my love is all she wants. Our lives concern ourselves alone—we have nothing to do with anyone but each other. For many reasons I *insist* on your looking into this matter at once, and if my name figures in your will strike it out—if there is any allusion to possible heirs of mine, cancel it. Do you understand?”

He spoke earnestly, even vehemently, so vehemently that Henry was surprised, and for a moment non-plussed.

“You take it in?” asked Anthony.

“Yes—I see your point of view.”

“And you agree?”

“I won’t bind myself,” cried Henry testily. “It is my own affair, after all, and—who is to come after me if you don’t?”

“My dear fellow, excuse me, it is my affair, too. The thing is impossible—even I can see that, though your mother told me just now I had not the instincts of a gentleman. You *must* see it. Come, you may as well promise and set my mind at rest. It would be easy enough in the future, remember, for me or mine to get out of this responsibility—but it will make me much happier if you will promise me not to urge it further. Why, there is Tom Alford-Cobham with a houseful of boys—they are only cousins in the twentieth degree, I know, but still offshoots from this family. You might adopt one of his baker’s dozen, if you are hard up for an heir.”

“Yes, I might, certainly,” said Henry, gloomily.

“Well, whatever happens, you won’t leave it to me or mine?”

“I will think about it. You certainly have made yourself undesirable as a successor.”

“Thanks, old chap; I knew you’d have the sense to see it,” cried Anthony, joyfully, walking on again, slowly followed by the Squire, whose face wore an expression of puzzled melancholy.

## CHAPTER XII

### BETROTHAL.

THE time that intervened between Ruth's definite acceptance of Anthony and their wedding was short ; looking back on it afterwards they said it had flown ; but it is doubtful whether a period of intense happiness is not as long in the actual passing as one of sorrow, and to Ruth the wonder and the glamour of it appeared to have no end. The long golden days, in every moment of which she seemed to taste afresh the joy and sweetness of life and love ; the nights, broken sometimes, so that she lay awake gazing with dewy eyes into the darkness, murmuring her beloved's name tenderly and prayerfully : or calm and restful, bringing to her, even through her slumbers, the consciousness of an immense dominating good—all were alike blissful, marvellous, and new ; the few weeks of betrothal seemed to prolong themselves immeasurably.

“ I am perfectly happy now,” she said one day to Anthony, who was eloquently describing their future life to her. “ I don't think I could ever be happier, even when we are married. You are so good—so good to me.”

He did not answer, and she looked at him with transitory shyness—one of those rare moments of shyness which still came to her, and which Anthony thought the sweetest, perhaps, of all her moods. For as a rule she was quite at her ease with him ; responding to his love and owning her own with characteristic candour and simplicity ; too large of mind, too open of heart, to hide what it seemed to her right that he should know.

Her surrender was complete, her love boundless ; pretence, disguise of any kind, was impossible to her ; she would not have known how to be coy. *Ruth* coy ! the very idea was incongruous. Yet with all her frankness and naïve tenderness there was a dignity about Ruth, a maidenly reticence, as it were the very bloom of virginal womanhood, which Anthony revered in his inmost heart ; he would have died rather than break through that innocent reserve. She had no fear of him ; and was troubled by no qualms as to the difference of rank between them—were they not all in all to each other ? He was about to give up for her sake kindred and position ; the fact did not distress her, because he told her she was worth a thousand such sacrifices, and in all humility and singleness of heart she believed him, and felt that she could never do enough to show her love. Her occasional fits of shyness came to her partly because she loved him so much, and partly because it seemed to her such a wonderful thing that he should love her as he did,

and because he was wise and clever and great beyond compare, and she wanted to please him always. Now and then, when he was silent, she feared she had said a foolish thing ; and sometimes Anthony purposely refrained from speaking, that he might see the questioning look in her dark eyes, the colour rush suddenly into the sweet face ; and then would come a timid query, explanations, reassurances—a whole lovers' comedy. Henry had once said of Ruth that she was a woman with the heart of a child ; but there were times when Anthony asked himself if she were not rather a child with the heart of a woman.

But the desire to tease her was not this time the motive of Clifton's silence ; a deeper thought, a painful thought, was pre-occupying him, and when presently her hand stole into his, and looking up he saw her face grave and wondering, he sighed.

“My poor Ruth—if you knew, you would not say I was good to you. You would think I was doing you a cruel injury.”

“An injury!” cried Ruth, and her fingers closed on his more tightly. “Oh, Anthony! How can you talk like that? You who love me so—who are giving up everything for me!”

“Dear child, if you knew what a wicked man I am, you would have nothing to say to me. Ruth, if I had the courage to tell you! Even now I feel the only right and honourable thing for me to do would be to go away and leave you—leave you in your innocence.”

“Leave me to break my heart!” she interrupted, indignantly. “Anthony, I could not live without you now. Don’t—don’t tell me anything. I would far rather not know, and if I did I would forgive—there is nothing I could not forgive you, dearest. Forget the past. Nothing, nothing can part us. You have repented, and I will pray for you and help you to be better. You said I could help you, did you not? And God is so merciful—oh, if you only knew”—she broke off suddenly, adding, half to herself,—

“I have only one wish.”

He looked at her inquiringly with eyes which had become suddenly dim.

“Only one wish,” she repeated. “You know what Ruth, my namesake, said once of old: ‘Thy people shall be my people and thy God my God.’ Dear Anthony, you have already chosen to belong to my people—oh, if you would only say some day, ‘Thy God shall be my God.’”

He shook his head, smiling, though his eyes were still full of tears; then he stooped and kissed her hand.

“I have forgotten all the texts I ever knew,” he said, a little unsteadily. “Is there not a verse somewhere which says, ‘Where is your God?’ But—I could kneel to *you*, Ruth! My sweet Ruth, my *Mercy!* Do you know the meaning of your name, darling? It is ‘mercy’—a blessed omen for me. And so,” hurriedly and agitatedly, “you are content

to take me as I am? You, you yourself, tell me to forget the past—You trust me—”

“I trust you completely,” said Ruth, deeply moved. “Never let these things be mentioned between us again. Oh, Anthony,” a little piteously, “can’t you see? You are all the world to me. I—cannot bear to hear you speak of leaving me.”

“I never will again,” he cried. “I could not leave you—I could never give you up. It was only a moment’s folly—remorse—I don’t know what—which seized me when you said I was good, and I thought if you knew!—”

“Hush!” said Ruth, and her hand crept softly upwards till it rested on his lips.

“It is over now,” he whispered at last, drawing it down and holding it between his own. “Our love is enough—it wipes away all old scores, doesn’t it? Your happiness is at stake as well as mine, so I need have no more scruples. Our lives are bound up in each other—and nothing on earth shall part us.”

In the silence which succeeded, the voice of a lark, springing up almost from their feet, rang out triumphantly; and raising their eyes, they followed the dark speck circling higher and higher in the cloudless blue. In all her after life Ruth could never hear the song of a lark without recalling that day. The warm air, spiced with a thousand aromatic scents and yet not languorous, for there was a fitful breeze stirring; a breeze that had swept over distant moors, and shaken the tops of larches and pines nearer at



hand, and now came, laden with the fragrance of heather, and the honey-and-butter perfume of sun-kissed gorse, and the gummy flavour of spiky green boughs, to fan the brows of these lovers. There was a field of clover near the bank where they sat, and bees were humming over plummy tufts of meadow-sweet. Ruth, looking up into heights of blue, breathed a voiceless prayer of thanksgiving, of petition—it was a habit she had fallen into lately when she was peculiarly alive to her happiness—and then her eyes were drawn down, past the waving green boughs so exquisitely defined against the sky, until they met the gaze of Anthony. Long, long afterwards the notes of a lark would bring back again this hour to her in all its richness and completeness, even though the bird shot up from a dreary stubble-field, and dropped his song from a cloudy, sullen sky.

Farmer Sefton's face was a study in itself at this time. "Nought," as he frequently repeated to Barbara, "could be fairer, nor speak han'somer nor Mester Anthony": the provision, indeed, made for his daughter in case of widowhood made the honest man open his eyes with astonishment and gratification. It was very nice, too, of him to promise to "give over gaddin' about i' furrin' parts" and to settle down with Ruth in his own home in Devonshire, which was being "done up beautiful" in her honour. But when all was said an' done it was nobbut a queer thing, Mr. Sefton opined, an' he couldn't no way

bring his mind to it. It did seem a pity as their Ruth couldn't ha' settled to wed in her own degree. Ah, he tow'd that to Squire hissen. He out wi' it plain to him—an' Squire shook's head an' sighed. "We mun hope it'll turn out better nor we think," says Squire. But theer! lasses was bad to manage, an' Ruth wouldn't be said by no one.

And so Bob's face changed its expression many times a day, and was by turns elate and doleful in the course even of an hour, while there remained a kind of background through these varying phases which was perpetually puzzled.

When the eventful day drew nearer, and Ruth was busy with her simple preparations, it occurred to Mr. Sefton that it was "nobbut reet" that he should appear in becoming splendour to give her away. Business, as it fortunately chanced, led him to the neighbouring large town shortly after this resolution, and having duly sampled corn, and ordered a supply of "muck" for the coming autumn, he betook himself to the shop of a certain large clothier, advertisements of whose "tailoring" had found their way even to walls and posts in the neighbourhood of Alford. On such an occasion as the prospective one he felt he could not trust to the village snip.

But when he found himself inside the huge mart, thronged with customers of the loud-voiced, haggling kind—the kind that "price" and finger an indefinite number of articles before deciding on one—honest

Bob became a prey to overwhelming shyness. Once that massive, heavily-booted foot of his was no longer set upon its native furrow he became a different man. And when a pert and perspiring shop-assistant inquired if he were being attended to, he gaped and rolled his shoulders for a moment or two before summoning sufficient assurance to reply.

"Now, then, hurry up," cried the youth impudently, "or else stand out o' the road, will you?"

"Now, then, hurry up yor'sel'!" returned Bob, simultaneously finding his voice and losing his temper. "I'll not ston' out o' no roads till I've gotten what I've coom for. *Now*, then! I want a suit o' cloo'es. Han you summat as'll about fit my figure?"

The man scanned the herculean proportions of the farmer in dismay, and shook his head.

"Not just ready-made, I don't think, sir," he said civilly, "but we'd run them up for you in no time. Our speciality is gentlemen's clothes, you know. Any make, newest style, best cut—everything, sir, from knock-about suits to dress-clothes."

"Dress-cloo'es," echoed Bob, rising to the occasion. "Ah, thot's my ticket. I want summat gradely—summat o' th' best."

"Oh, indeed," said the assistant, bewildered, but also impressed. "Well, sir, we can do it for you, in a better style and at a more reasonable rate than any other firm in England."

"Reet, thot's fair enough: the reasonabler the better—but still I'm for havin' th' best, yo' known.

It's for a special 'casion. Now, then—aren't yo' for measurin' me?"

"Certainly, sir—step this way. Tomkins!"

Big, beaming Bob, picking his way unwieldily through the crowded ware-rooms, was conducted into a dark, evil-smelling little private room, and presently measured for a swallow-tail coat, with a waistcoat and trousers to correspond; chuckling in his inmost soul at the thought of the fashionable appearance he would present at his daughter's wedding. He had no idea that such garments were generally reserved for evening wear; the term "dress-clothes" conveying to him merely a notion of superior smartness and gentility. On his way out a sudden notion struck him; and critically examining his wide-awake, which he carried in his hand, and which bore traces of unmistakable wear and tear, he intimated his wish to buy a hat "to match."

The enterprising shopman accordingly supplied him with a "Gibus," expatiating loudly on the ingeniousness and convenience of that particular make. Bob's astonishment and admiration knew no bounds.

"Eh!" he ejaculated, "I never see sich a thing in all my days! *Eh*, it's—it's reg'lar knowin'. Well, truly, it's a wonderful thing what contrivances people do think on. *Eh*, it's real clever—it is, for sure."

He occupied himself during some five minutes in shutting up the hat and making it spring into shape again; chuckling more and more loudly at each repetition.

“Well, well, well, to think on’t! Eh, my word, our Barbara ’ll ha’ summat to say when hoo sees it. Ah, yo’ mun put me up thot chap, Mester. Ha, ha, ha! How mich dun yo’ mak’ th’ lot?”

He fished up a small canvas bag from his capacious pocket, paid there and then in good hard cash, put on his wide-awake a little sideways, as became the fortunate possessor of so “knowing” a contrivance as his recent purchase—and finally went on his way, chuckling still.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### "MARRIED AN' A'."

THE wedding morning dawned fair and cloudless ; shimmering with heat as the day advanced. But Ruth walked alone to the little chapel, before the dew had dried upon the grass or the morning haze vanished. When she returned she found all bustle and confusion at the farm, and Barbara in her glory, turning everything upside down, and making ten times more noise than was needful. Ruth herself was very calm and happy, though when her eyes rested on her father a transient sadness clouded them. To her relief, however, Bob did not appear to be as much overcome as she had expected ; indeed, from the jokes he cracked, and certain spasmodic but jubilant winks and grins in which he indulged, his inward condition was evidently cheerful. He was, in fact, sustained by the remembrance of the dress-clothes carefully stowed away upstairs, and the anticipation of the joy and surprise which the sight of them would presently cause Ruth and Barbara. He winked to himself as he thought how "dark" he had kept his secret, and chuckled as he pictured their delight. As to the

crush hat—what would they say to *that*, eh? Ho, ho! Why, they'd never heerd tell o' sich a thing.

Barbara was the first to complete her toilet, and came downstairs clad all in rustling silk; her Paisley shawl neatly folded over her arm, to be assumed at the last moment—it was a broiling day, but Barbara would have died rather than go out of doors “in her shape.” The strings of her bonnet, a towering erection, which for some inscrutable reason she called a “Pompadour,” were pinned back “out of the road,” and her handkerchief, folded square, and smelling of lavender, lay with a pair of violet merino gloves ready on the table.

Ruth was the next to appear, her dress and little bonnet very unpretentious in make and material, but, at Anthony's request, white; and finally her father came slowly downstairs, pausing on the lowest step to enjoy the sensation caused by his attire. The shiny black trousers were perhaps braced rather high for elegance; the low-cut waistcoat displayed a shirt, snow-white, indeed, having been washed and “got up” by Barbara, but for that very reason scarcely as stiff as custom requires, and bulging oddly in consequence; the swallow-tail coat was very tight in the back and short in the waist.

“What dun yo' say to this, eh?” quoth Bob, looking from one to the other, his eyes nearly starting out of his head with pride and glee, his face scarlet, one arm outstretched almost as stiffly as the arm of a sign-post, the other tightly clasping his crush hat.

“Well, I never!” ejaculated Barbara, clapping her hands together. “Whatever han yo’ gotten on, Gaffer?”

“Father, you *are* grand,” cried Ruth. “What beautiful clothes, and what a new shape! I never saw anything like these before—I suppose it is the newest fashion.”

“Thou may say thot, lass,” replied Farmer, Sefton, descending the step and advancing into the room, where he turned round slowly, the better to enable his women-folk to inspect him. “Same as what gentry weers, th’ tailor-chap, yon, towd me. Well, Barbara, an’ what does thou say?”

Barbara walked round him, her hands on her hips, her head a little bent to one side.

“Of all the funny-lookin’ suits as ever I saw,” she began, “it’s the queerest. I ’ope it wunnot be th’ death o’ yo’ wi’ that theer skimpy little weskit. ’Twas a town-tailor made ’em, was it? Well, I will say, as poor Tommy Binks wouldn’t for shame’s sake be so sparin’ o’ th’ cloth. Look ’ere at th’ coat. It hasn’t got no sides to’t—nobbut a jacket wi’ tails tacked on. I wish t’ th’ Lord yo’d ha’ gi’en poor Tommy th’ job. He’d ha’ shapped ye summat more seemly.”

“Seemly!” echoed Bob, much nettled. “Tut, lass, thou doesna know. ’Tis th’ fashion, I tell ’ee—some as gradely gentry has—Thou’s never seen nought nor yeerd nought. They’re reg’lar dress-clooes same as Squire an’ Mester Anthony an’ all



has laid by for best. Sitho, Ruth, it's lined wi' satin."

He held out the flap of the coat, smiling with renewed good-humour and satisfaction.

Ruth stroked it softly, uttering expressions of admiration and approval the while.

"Well, I'll not say but what they suit ye," observed Barbara, presently. "But eh! They mun ha' cost summat—a sight o' money, I'll reckon. Didn't they, now?"

"Ah, they did," agreed Bob. "A goodish bit—but our Ruth's bin allus a good lass to me—an' I dunnot grudge it to her. Theer! I felt it nobbut reet when all was said an' done. Well—while we're agate o' talkin' o' fashions what dun yo' think o' thot?"

He suddenly produced the Gibus in its flattened condition, thrusting it forward on his outstretched palms.

"Goodness save us!—well, whatever has th' mon gotten howd on, now?" cried Barbara.

"It's an 'at," responded the farmer gravely, though he was purple in the face with suppressed mirth. "A dress 'at to match they cloo'es."

"My patience!" growled the old woman. "Yo' takken leave o' yo'r senses, Gaffer. Yon 'ill never stick a' top o' thot turmit yead o' yo'rs."

"I can't see how it *will* stay on," put in Ruth, a little anxiously.

"Yigh, it'll stick on reet enough," answered Bob.

“I’ll nobbut ha’ t’ howd up my ’yead an’ look neither to reet nor left.”

He balanced it insecurely on the top of his immense bald pate, winked, tipped it off, caught it as it fell, and then, with a roar of laughter, shot it into shape.

“How’s thot for an ’at, eh? What dun yo’ mak’ o’ thot? Ho, ho, ho, how th’ owd wench stares! Well, Ruth, did thou ever see aught so clever? See . . . now it’s shut, ready to carry under my arm, or to put under th’ seat i’ church an’ that. An’ . . . now we’n gotten it ready for my turmit yead, as Barbara calls it. . . . Eh, my word! it cost a deal o’ brass that ’at did, but thou’rt my only child when all’s said an’ done. I dunnot think it too much for thee.”

The sight of the jolly rubicund face beaming with satisfaction, the thought of the honour he was doing her, were almost too much for Ruth; she caught him round the neck, and kissed him, sobbing.

Presently the cab came which was to convey them to church; the party consisted only of Ruth, her father, and Barbara. Luke had announced that he wasn’t going to none of their weddin’s, and had gloomily betaken himself to the hay-field hours before, and no one else was invited—by the mutual desire of bride and bridegroom. This arrangement gave rise, however, to much indignation on Barbara’s part, and caused a good deal of secret disappointment to Farmer Sefton, who would have liked the neighbours to see him in his new clothes.

Anthony had walked quietly from Alford, and found himself at the church first. He was surprised, and not altogether pleased, when, as he was standing in the little porch waiting for Ruth to arrive, the priest who was to marry them sent a message to ask him to step for a moment into the sacristy. This old man had known Ruth from her childhood, and had been much distressed and astonished on hearing of the step she was about to take. Indeed, he had done his best to oppose it, but the girl, though moved by his disapprobation, did not suffer her resolution to be shaken by it, and Anthony himself had been so prompt in acquiescing in all the prescribed conditions, so earnest in his desire to fall in, as far as was possible to him, with Ruth's wishes, that the priest could not withhold his consent.

All formalities having been accomplished, Clifton did not quite see why he was sent for now, and appeared in the sacristy with rather a clouded brow.

"I just want to say one word to you, Mr. Clifton," said the priest, earnestly. "Only one word. I take such an interest in Ruth—she is a good girl, an innocent, high-minded girl, a treasure indeed. I want you to realize it."

"Surely no one could realize it as I do," returned Anthony, raising his eyebrows.

"Well, but listen a moment. You are taking a solemn step this morning; binding yourselves together before God for all your lives. I'd like you to think

about it a minute or two—it’s a solemn thing—a very solemn thing. Just step into the church, now, and ask the Almighty, in whom we all believe whatever our creed, to bless you and help you to be a good husband. I want you both,” he added, “to be blessed in your union, and to approach it in the proper spirit. There is Ruth, poor girl, praying and preparing herself with all her might for receiving this sacrament worthily. You know with us matrimony is a sacrament, Mr. Clifton—it is not so, I believe, in your Church.”

“I belong to no Church,” responded Anthony, quietly. “Our mutual love is the only sacrament I acknowledge—the only thing by which I am bound; and it is stronger than all your ceremonies. Have your ceremonies by all means, though, and your sacraments, too—anything that Ruth considers necessary and that sets her heart at rest; for me, personally, I should be quite content to do without any ceremony at all.”

The priest bowed and moved away, too much shocked to prolong the conversation. Good Heavens! into what hands was his innocent Ruth falling!

“For me,” continued Anthony, turning at the door, “Ruth herself is enough. I believe, and hope in, and love her—there is my creed. Do not be afraid of my not realizing how good she is.”

“The man is a pagan!” murmured the other. “Poor Ruth, poor child! What a difficult life is before her—so young too! It seems only the other day that I prepared her for her first Communion!”

The sound of wheels without announced the approach of the wedding party; and in a few minutes Anthony and his bride stood before the altar. He had no eyes for anyone but Ruth; how lovely she looked, sweet, and pale, and pure! . . . "I, Anthony, take thee, Ruth, to my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death us do part."

Beautiful solemn words! It was an impressive ceremony, after all. He could almost have retracted his hasty speech of a little while ago. Even to him, personally, there was a sacredness and charm about the rite which was binding Ruth to him for ever: the clasping of hands, there, before the altar at which she worshipped; the vowing eternal fidelity in set old-time phrases—there was a certain pomp and stateliness about it all which seemed to him only right and becoming where there was question of union with such a girl as Ruth.

Barbara stood a little behind, like an antiquated bridesmaid; she would not have knelt for worlds in this den of Popery. Moreover, as a kind of protection against possible snares, she had brought her Bible with her, and now held it well in view, her thumbs in their merino coverings planted side by side on its worn binding.

As for poor Bob, he looked rueful enough: the place and the ceremony reminded him of his dead wife. He also had been married in a Catholic

church, and the last time he had entered one had been at her funeral ; now he was going to lose his “wench,” and to be indeed alone in the world. Had the bridal pair been less absorbed in each other they would have been startled by a portentous “click” which presently resounded through the little edifice, making the heretofore rigid Barbara turn her head. It was “the Gaffer’s” new hat, the spring of which he had pressed, and in the friendly depths of which he now sought to hide his face and his emotion.

Well, all was over at last, and the newly-wedded pair set out to walk back to the farm across the fields ; this arrangement having been manœuvred by Anthony, who alleged that the air would restore the colour to Ruth’s pale cheeks, and who, indeed, bundled the farmer and Barbara into the fly, and desired the driver to go on, almost before anyone had time to realize what he was about.

“Well,” grunted Sefton, recovering his wits presently, “did thou ever hear th’ like o’ thot? Pretty cool, I call it. Thee an’ me’s the bride an’ groom, I s’pose, settin’ ’ere by we’reasel’s. He met ha’ let th’ wench ride—we’s not have her so long.”

Meanwhile Anthony and Ruth, forgetful of everyone in the world but each other, were walking along a little green path that skirted a cornfield. The golden wheat, now bending under its weight of grain, was the same which he remembered faintly tinged with yellow on the day he had followed Ruth across

the fields to the chapel they had just left. What a little time it was since they had first met, and now they were united for ever !

As they crossed the stile at the end of the field they came face to face with no less a person than Henry Alford, and paused in surprise.

"I thought I bade you an everlasting farewell after breakfast this morning," cried Anthony, laughing.

"Yes, but—I fancied you would in all probability walk back from the church, and I came this way on the chance. I wanted to see you, Ruth, and—wish you every happiness."

"Thank you," said Ruth, smiling, and taking his extended hand. Her face was blooming now, and, looking at her with his rather weary eyes, Henry thought he had never seen such an incarnation of youth and joy.

After a moment he drew a little case from his pocket and held it out to her. It contained a beautiful diamond ring.

"For me?" she asked. "Oh, how good of you—how kind to think of me!"

"Let us see if it fits," said Henry, taking it from the case and trying it on one after the other of the girl's fingers. It would only fit that already encircled by the wedding-ring; and Anthony smiled as he saw how quickly she drew the glittering trinket off again, and restored it to its case.

"It is a beautiful present," she said, shutting

it up hastily. “I am very grateful to you, Mr. Alford.”

“Good-bye,” said Henry, standing aside to let them pass.

“Good-bye,” echoed Anthony, “I wish you were as happy as I am. How about the folly?” he added, in a lower tone, as he brushed past.

But Henry only smiled.

“She will not wear it,” he muttered to himself as he watched the receding figures.

Anthony was laughingly commenting on his cousin’s generosity, and Ruth answered that it was certainly very nice of him to have given her such a pretty little thing.

“A pretty little thing,” repeated Clifton. “I wonder if you have any idea of the value of that little thing, Ruth. Let us see. Guess.”

“Diamonds I know are costly,” said Ruth, considering, “and these are big ones. This ring may be”—making a great effort of imagination—“perhaps almost worth five pounds.”

“Five pounds! you blessed baby!” ejaculated Anthony. “Fifty would be nearer the mark.”

“Please carry it for me, then,” cried Ruth, drawing it from her pocket. “I might lose it—I don’t like having to take care of anything so valuable.”

“But you must wear it; then it will take care of itself.”

“I don’t want to wear any ring but yours—certainly not on that finger.”



She spoke with an assumed air of wilfulness, which delighted Anthony; but, when on turning a corner they came in sight of the farm, her mood changed.

The old red house looked cosy, placid, and home-like as ever with the smoke curling lazily upwards; the pigeons were walking up and down the roof, birds flitting from tree to tree in the orchard, where a brave show of ruddy and yellow fruit adorned the boughs, the hens were clucking and scratching beneath the yellow corn-stacks. How strange that someone else would feed them this evening; all the dumb things would be looking for her, but she would be far away. Her place at the table would be empty, her chair stand against the wall: the old home was home no longer.

Anthony saw her bright face shadowed for a minute and divined her thought, but before he could speak she turned and clung to him.

"I have *you!*" she said.

END OF PART I.

## Part II.

### CHAPTER XIV.

#### AT HOME.

“ANTHONY, I have got a surprise for you. Do come. Tea’s quite ready. What do you think I did this morning?”

“I can’t guess,” returned Anthony, sinking into the arm-chair his wife wheeled forward for him. “This *is* luxury after our long tramp through the snow! Are you not glad I made you come out, you lazy person? Now you will enjoy your cosy room, and your fire, and your tea, much more than if you had stayed indoors toasting your toes all day. Well, let us hear the mystery—you seem very much elated.”

“Perhaps I have reason to be elated—and perhaps I am not so lazy as you think. Is the butter good, Anthony?”

“Yes, very good. Why are you retreating behind my chair?”

“But isn’t it *particularly* good—‘extry,’ as dear old Barbara says? *I* made it, Anthony—in the Devonshire way. You are not angry, are you?”

Her hands rested on his shoulders, and now, leaning forward, she dropped a little airy kiss on his forehead.

“I am not sure,” he answered, solemnly. “I think you should have asked my leave, especially as this is not the first time the question arises.”

He had not yet lost his delight in teasing her ; and was never more pleased than when he succeeded in evoking a momentary flash of temper. Her penitence was so speedy and so sweet ; it was such pleasure to caress and chide together, and then, with laughing eyes, forgive. But Ruth was always desperately ashamed of her little ebullitions, and felt a good deal of diffidence in again reverting to any subject about which she and her husband had had a dispute. The subject of butter-making was one in point. On first arriving at their Devonshire home, Friarsleigh, where they were now installed, after travelling about for nearly a year, Ruth had amused him by her joy in seeing cows, and pigs, and chickens once more ; announcing with rapture that she was longing to learn how to make butter after the manner of the country. Thereupon Anthony had pretended to be aggrieved, telling her he believed that while he had been endeavouring to entertain her with foreign life and scenes, she had been secretly hankering after “shippons” and dairies, and regretting her bed-gown and her clogs. Ruth had been very nearly reduced to tears on that occasion ; but now she was beginning to understand

her husband's ways, and was seldom alarmed at his mock severity.

"Come here, and let me see if you are duly contrite," he continued, stretching out a lazy arm, and drawing her round in front of his chair. "You look like a butter-maker, I must say," laughing, but surveying her with tender admiration.

Ruth had "fined down" a little since her marriage, and the beauty of her form was shown to advantage this afternoon in the softly-flowing white tea-gown—her ordinary evening attire—which she had assumed, to save time and trouble, on her return from walking.

"I have not told you all, yet," she said, laughing with him; "I made the bread too!"

"Ah, this is too much," returned her husband in deep tones of would-be indignation. "The bread! This passes!"

"I thought you wouldn't mind," she cried, joyfully. "I *knew* you wouldn't mind! Yes, I am not quite so easily taken in as I used to be, you see—I can tell when you are making believe, and when you are really angry."

"As if *you* had ever seen me really angry, child. The cook was angry, though, wasn't she?"

"No, she wasn't. I managed so well. I asked her to let me try if I could make butter in the Devonshire way. It's very simple, you know, and saves a great deal of trouble, but I think our Lancashire method much cleaner—I can't do with so much handling."

Anthony nodded, amused at her earnest tone ; it was evidently a matter of no small importance in her eyes.

“Well, Mrs. Hanley was really most kind and obliging, and thought I managed wonderfully. Then, when I was leaving the dairy I had to pass through the kitchen, and there was the dough all running over the pans and smelling so delicious ! I really couldn’t help it ; I tucked up my sleeves, and scooped out a handful or two, and kneaded and twisted, and in two minutes there was the sweetest little cottage loaf ! Do take another piece, Anthony.”

Anthony imprisoned the hand which was on its way to the bread-plate, and shook his head.

“Ruth, you are a lost woman ! Mrs. Hanley will never respect you again.”

“Oh yes, she will. She stood by me, advising and approving, and told me in the end it was not at all bad for a first attempt !”

They both laughed.

“The best of it is,” Ruth went on, “her loaves did not rise half so well as mine. May I make the bread sometimes, Anthony ?”

“You may do any earthly thing you like—except feed the pigs and wear clogs ; those are the only amusements I forbid.”

They now discussed the cottage loaf, Anthony loud in his expressions of approval, and inwardly amused at his wife’s pride and delight ; and pre-

sently, tea being over, he withdrew to write a letter—an important letter to his agent, which, as he told his wife, must go by the next post—while Ruth set to work to renew the flowers in her vases.

The conservatory at Friarsleigh ran the whole length of the house ; all the reception rooms opened into it, and it had, moreover, a door at either end leading to the garden. It was at all times bright with flowers, the primulas, cyclamens, and hyacinths with which it was now filled making a kind of spurious spring within its precincts, which contrasted strongly with the snowy waste without.

Snow seldom visits southern Devonshire, but when it does there is a good deal of it. It lay inches deep that January day over garden and fields, making furry outlines to the branches of the larger trees, and white, oddly-shaped hillocks of the shrubs. The moon had not yet risen, but the snow caused all objects to be easily discernible. Ruth stood for a moment looking out on the dreary white expanse. Then she began to fill her basket. As she passed the study window, which, like those of the drawing-room, and little dining-room, opened into the conservatory, she tapped at the pane and nodded. Anthony looked up, smiling ; watched for a moment or two the white figure moving to and fro among the flowers, and then returned to his task.

A lamp stood on a bracket in the conservatory

just opposite the window near which he was stationed, and as Ruth passed and repassed, selecting and snipping, her figure cast a momentary shadow across his table ; it was pleasant to Anthony to have her proximity thus recalled. He paused, smiling to himself, as the shadow came and went ; but after a little time it came no more.

“ Her task is done,” he said, and went on writing more diligently now.

Never before, surely, was there so sweet a wife, so adoring a husband : it seemed to Anthony that every day spent in Ruth's society discovered to him new heights and depths of love. Sometimes, indeed, Ruth was almost frightened at the strength of his passion for her ; and tried timidly to suggest that she was not worthy to be worshipped thus. But Anthony scouted the idea with such wealth of caresses and tender words, and his devotion was, moreover, so sweet to her, that her remonstrances were soon silenced, and she even secretly rejoiced in her power over him, thinking it might lead him in time to higher things. Indeed, there were apparently grounds for her hope : since their marriage Anthony had in many ways altered for the better. He had grown softer, gentler, less restless ; he displayed a generous reverence not only for all that was high and noble in the natural order, but even in the supernatural, as expounded by his wife. He often accompanied her to church, patiently and lovingly watching her as she prayed ; he led her on to talk of matters appertain-

ing to her Faith, meeting her wistful glance with a tender smile, and encouraging her to proceed when she paused, startled at her own temerity. What wonder that she should fancy her prayer already granted, and think he was insensibly turning to God ! She could not understand that his appreciation of her faith and piety were merely æsthetic. He admired them as he admired her beauty ; he loved her innocence and her goodness because they went to make up that whole which he called his wife. It was pleasant to hear her talking so sweetly of the things she held holy ; he liked to watch her face the while, to see the light in her eyes, the colour come and go in her cheeks ; he was touched to the heart's core by the glimpses she gave him of her pure soul.

But now and then some word or act of his would startle her, and awaken within her strange doubts and fears. One day, for instance, coming into her room, he took up a little gold crucifix which he had given her shortly after their marriage, and which she had just laid on her dressing-table.

"This is beautifully modelled," he said. "It was a chance my coming across it. I thought it would be exactly what you would like."

"Indeed it is," said Ruth. "It is my greatest treasure. I always wear it next my heart."

Turning round the next moment, she caught sight of her husband pressing the crucifix to his lips, and flew to his side.



"Oh, Anthony! Oh, my dear love!"

She threw her arms round him, her face transfigured, tears of rapture in her eyes. Anthony felt suddenly ashamed.

"Did you not say you had always worn it next your heart?" he said, quickly.

"Then it was—for my sake you kissed it?"

"Yes, it was for your sake. Do not look so sad. Is it not well to be loved as I love you?"

"Oh yes—it is very sweet, very blessed. But, love, there is something higher—Oh, I wish, I wish you could see it! There is a greater good than the tenderest human love. Oh, if I could only make you see it—if you would look beyond me, higher than me—"

He stopped her earnest speech with kisses.

"I cannot look higher," he whispered. "You are my heaven!"

Ruth sighed, and then, meeting his ardent gaze, she smiled: with all her spirituality she was very human.

Twice she had been to the Warren Farm and each time her husband had accompanied her; taking his place quite naturally in the primitive household there, and inspiring as much affection as awe in his father-in-law's breast. If he felt bored on these occasions, he was careful not to show it; a proof of delicate tenderness which did not escape Ruth. Her father had not yet visited Friarsleigh, but held out distant hopes that "in summer belike—arter hay's cut an'

that, we's see ;" while Barbara bashfully requested the couple to "git along" whenever they renewed their invitation to her, but was none the less grateful and elated.

With each return to Friarsleigh Ruth had felt a fresh rush of happiness: this was their home—now they would begin their life together anew.

## CHAPTER XV.

### A STRANGER.

WHEN Ruth had filled her basket she paused a moment before returning to the drawing-room, to look forth once more into the desolate outside world. How dreary it was, how cold, how ghostly ! What a contrast to the world within, *her* world, warm, bright, flower-scented, overflowing with love and happiness. Every day brought her and her husband more closely together ; he would surely soon be one with her in soul ; and then, indeed, her cup of joy would be full.

What had she done, thought Ruth to herself, still gazing dreamily over the snow-clad landscape, what had she done to deserve such blessedness ? Why should she have been thus singled out when there was so much misery in the world ? Broken hearts, lives forlorn ; at that very moment how many human creatures were wandering shivering in the bitter night ; homeless, shelterless, cast off, it would seem, by God and man ! Ruth shivered too as she tried to imagine what it would be like to be out in the night, with that dark sky overhead, that icy wind whistling in one's ears, the snow sending creeping

chills through the numbed limbs—death in the heart! . . .

Ah, what was that moving yonder over the pathless waste? A dark figure stumbling slowly forward, pausing from time to time, and then advancing again. It was approaching the house. Who could it be? Surely none of the servants abroad so late and on such a night. A beggar, perhaps. Ruth wished he or she would move more quickly, that she might hasten with alms and succour. The creature should at least be warmed and fed before braving the wintry dark again. Anthony would laugh, as he always did, at her softness of heart, but he himself, as she knew, would be first to desire her to be lavish in such a case as this.

It was a woman; Ruth could see at last—a woman walking rapidly now, her draperies fluttering, her head bent down as she fought with the blast.

Ruth went quickly to the green-house door, intending to desire the stranger to go round to the back of the house, where she would meet her and attend to her wants; but, as she opened it, the woman raised her head and paused.

Ruth paused too, a little startled. The new-comer, as she could now see, even in the dim light of the distant lamp, was no beggar. She was warmly clad—even with a certain finery; there were feathers in her hat, and her tippet and muff were of costly fur. What could she want? She must surely have come to Friarsleigh by mistake.

She stood in the doorway for a moment without speaking, and then thrust forward her head so that the light fell across her face. It was a good-looking face in its way, with very full red lips and narrow bright eyes; but it was marred by streaks of paint which had been smeared and dabbled by the snow. Not a young face, though the dress of its owner and the elaborate arrangement of the abundant reddish-gold hair were both of juvenile fashion.

"Can I come in this way?" she asked. Without waiting for a reply she stepped across the threshold, and then stood still, staring the while at Ruth with curious intentness.

"I want to see Mr. Clifton," she said. Ruth drew back a little; something about the woman's manner repelled her—what could she want with Anthony?

"Mr. Clifton is engaged," she answered. "He is writing letters and does not wish to be disturbed."

"I won't keep him long—I just want ten minutes with him. Ten minutes will do it."

Ruth hesitated. The new-comer's assurance, a certain impudence in her smile, a perceptible defiance in her tone roused in her an unaccountable sense of aversion and fear. What could have brought her there—what could she have to say to Anthony? Ruth felt—she knew not why—a strong objection to their meeting.

"It is so late," she said. "Why do you come at such a curious time? Do you want to see Mr. Clifton particularly, or can you leave a message with me? I am Mrs. Clifton."

The other burst out laughing; a vulgar cackling laugh.

"Not if I know it!" she cried, and laughed again; but after a minute's pause she composed herself.

"Well—are you going to fetch Anthony?"

*Anthony!* The colour leaped to Ruth's face, and her heart beat almost audibly. Was it possible that her husband had ever been intimate with this creature?

"You must state your business," she said, briefly, her indignation lending sharpness to the words. "I will not have Mr. Clifton disturbed without necessity. What is your name—what do you want?"

"I'm not going to tell *you*. You had better call Anthony—you had, indeed; else there'll be a row, and then you'll be sorry."

Ruth was fast losing her self-control; but her repulsion and increasing wrath served only to increase her determination to prevent this woman from forcing herself into her husband's presence.

"I do not intend to call Mr. Clifton," she said, resolutely. "If you have any business with him, send him a letter. You have no right to push into the house in this way—"

"No right!" interrupted the other with sudden, startling fierceness. "Perhaps, my fine madam, I've more right to be in this house than you!"

"Now you really must go away," said Ruth, all her young blood up. "Go at once, or I will ring for the servants. There is not the least use in making a disturbance here. You are an insolent woman and

you must go away. You can write to my husband if you want to."

"Yes—I daresay. And you'll take good care he doesn't get the letter."

"I am going to ring the bell," said Ruth, moving quickly towards the inner room.

"Well, do ring. Ring! I'll tell your precious servants something that will surprise them. Perhaps they'll think twice before they turn their master's wife out of doors. Ah, you may stare, but it is the truth. I am Anthony Clifton's wife—his lawful wife—I've got my lines to prove it. And you—you threaten me and order me out of the house, do you? Who are you, I should like to know?"

Ruth paused, thunderstruck—ashy white. *Anthony Clifton's wife!* Then with a sudden rush of passionate relief she recovered her self-command. Why, the woman's effrontery had for a moment robbed her of her common sense. His wife—she dared to call herself his wife, to her, *Ruth!* And Ruth was actually so foolish as to let herself be taken aback! His wife! The woman was either mad or the most inconceivable impostor. But there must be an end of this. She must not be allowed to say such things. Ruth was turning in fiery indignation, when a gesture on the part of the new-comer suddenly arrested her. She had stretched out her ungloved left hand, on which the wedding-ring was conspicuous. Her whole manner had changed, and the fury in her face had now given way to an expression of malevolent triumph.

"Ask Anthony," she said, quietly. "Just fetch him here, and see what he says. It's thirteen years since we met, but I think he'll recognize me."

Ruth stood as if turned to stone; she tried to speak, but no words would come. A great dread gripped her heart, a dread which gathered strength and intensity every moment.

"You fetch Anthony here—you call him, and he'll tell you all about it. You thought he was *your* husband I daresay—but you see I happened to have the start of you: *I am Number One.*"

Ruth fell back against the wall, almost swooning for the first time in her life. Oh God! what horror was this?

"Call him," repeated the other, nodding her head, "call him if you don't believe me."

But Ruth did believe her. The awful sickening conviction was borne in on her that the stranger was speaking the truth. The truth! Then she *was* Anthony's wife, come back as it were from the grave to break his heart—it was characteristic of Ruth that even in this extremity of anguish her first thought was for him. He had believed this woman to be dead—of course he believed her to be dead, and fancied himself free—and now. . . . It would kill him! Oh Anthony! Anthony! how would he bear it?

Even as, in her despair, she asked herself this question, she heard the study door open, and his footstep cross the adjoining room.

"Ruth, what have you been about all this time, and who on earth has been talking to you?"



She started forward, conscious only of the frantic desire to spare him. He would have to be told, of course, but not suddenly, lest he die of the shock. Heaven help her to break the terrible news wisely and gently!

The woman had also heard him approach, and stepped quickly towards the open French window.

As Ruth advanced Clifton caught her swaying figure in his arms, but—she had seen his face.

*Anthony knew!*

For a moment or two she could not tell what happened; she knew that Anthony was speaking, though she scarcely recognized his voice; she felt his chest heave beneath her head and his encircling arms tremble. She listened to the stranger's tones, first raised in shrill anger, then sullen; reiterating certain phrases which Ruth heard without comprehending. All at once something seemed to snap in her brain and the full extent of her misfortune overwhelmed her. That woman yonder was Anthony's wife—his *wife!* What, then, was she?

She raised her head, and looked at him, making a futile effort to disengage herself.

"Anthony!" she moaned, "Anthony!"

"Darling!" he cried, answering the agonized query in her eyes. "*You* are my wife in deed and truth. She—is nothing to me. I was trapped by her while I was still a boy—fooled into a marriage which was no true marriage—"

"Oh, yes, it was. Come! You don't try that

game with me. I am your lawful wife, married by a clergyman of the Established Church, and everything quite regular. It's all down in black and white, and can be proved any day."

"I say it was no marriage," repeated Anthony, hoarsely. "I was a boy—I did not know my own mind—she was already old in infamy. She had not been my wife three months before I found out what she was—the vilest of the vile—and left her in disgust. I have never seen her since, but I have heard of her—of her shameful doings—"

The other interrupted with a sneer: "I heard a thing or two about you if it comes to that."

"Oh, hush, hush!" exclaimed Ruth, wringing her hands; "I can't bear it—I won't hear any more. Oh, Anthony, send her away—send her away! I must think—Oh, what shall I do?"

"Go!" cried Anthony, turning to the new-comer. "Go, at once—do you hear?"

"Not if I know it," retorted the woman. "Look here, I don't leave this house till we come to terms, Anthony. You can stop the supplies, I know, but I can have you up for bigamy, so you had better mind what you are about."

"You will gain nothing by it," said Anthony. "On the contrary, you lose everything. You will rue this day, I warn you."

"You think so—do you?" said she, impudently. Then, leaning against the window-frame, she folded her arms, and stared at him.

“What are you driving at?” he cried at last, irritably. “What is it you want?—for heaven’s sake say it and go.”

“I thought you’d come round,” she exclaimed, triumphantly. “What do I want? I want money! I’ve never interfered before, have I? I’ve let you go your way, much as you’ve let me go mine; but when I found out you’d actually set up another Mrs. Clifton, I said to myself, ‘I’m on in this scene!’ You thought me safe enough in India, but things get out, you see, and your lawful wife is not to be put off with a pittance while your—fancy—is living on the fat of the land. I couldn’t afford such a tea-gown! . . . No, no, I’m on in this scene, I tell you. You’ll have to fork out, Anthony—you must increase my allowance if you want me to keep quiet.”

“It’s too late,” he said, between his teeth; he looked as though he could have killed her where she stood, for Ruth, though she was trembling in every limb, had withdrawn herself from his embrace and stood a little apart from him.

“Not a bit too late! We can settle our business without anyone being the wiser. I’ve been most careful, I assure you—nobody knows what’s up. I’ve been very quiet over my researches. Why, you fool—it was easy enough to catch you! I’ve been up north and made inquiries there, and then I came here. You were rather rash, weren’t you? To set up your little establishment in your own home. I’ve been a few days in this hole of a village looking after

you. I saw you both coming in from your stroll to-day—so lovey-dovey.”

“Oh, Anthony, make her go, make her go!” urged Ruth, frantically. The words stabbed her—the proximity of the woman was insulting—unendurable.

“All right—I’ll go just now—perhaps. I wouldn’t be too stuck-up if I were you, Number Two. If I chose to hold out for my rights, it’s you who should be sent packing, remember. Well, Anthony, what are you going to do for me?”

“D— you!—will you go?” cried Clifton, striding towards her.

The expression of his face cowed her; for a moment a flash of physical fear was visible on her own.

“Well, come and see me, will you?” she asked, with assumed carelessness, backing towards the door as he advanced. “You’d better—really. Don’t you try to give me the slip, that’s all. I’m at the inn, you know. Ask for Mrs. Hartop.”

At last the nightmare of her presence was removed, and Anthony returned to Ruth.

She stood quite motionless, framed by the blossoming creepers, all the flowers round her, the basket of spring blooms overturned at her feet. The lamp behind her shone on her bent head, the outlines of her white face, the folds of her dress.

He drew near impetuously, but paused as she looked up; something in the expression of her face seemed to forbid his nearer approach.

"Anthony—I cannot understand!"

He looked anxiously at her. "You are very angry, my poor love?"

"Angry! Oh no—but I don't understand—Anthony!"—with a sudden pitiful cry—"tell me—I want to know everything."

"Darling—you heard what she said. It was when I first went to India. I was only a boy—and she—I did not know then what she was. But in a few months I learned by chance—and cast her off with loathing. No one knew I was married to her—though I *was* a hot-headed idiot I had sense enough to keep it secret. Even while I was ignorant of her character I knew I should be ruined if it got out that I had married so much beneath me. Afterwards I paid her to hold her tongue and keep away from me. She was glad enough to get rid of me on those terms—and so we each went to the devil in our own way. As for me—"

Ruth looked at him piteously.

"I was mad with shame and fury," he went on rapidly, "I played fast and loose with life, Ruth. I gave up my career—which might have been a brilliant one—and did all kinds of wild and wicked things. The thought that I was bound legally, but not justly, to a woman whose name had been a by-word for years before I met her—bound for life—for the circumstances did not admit of a divorce—the feeling of having been duped—Oh, Ruth, I cannot describe what frenzy it was! It seemed to rouse

every evil passion within me—to let loose a thousand devils. I had sunk low—very low when I met you—”

The expression of her eyes, which were still fixed on his face, did not change, but she heaved a little sigh.

“—and for the first time knew what it was to love a woman with an absorbing, devoted, and—yes, I will say it, a pure love. Oh, Ruth, my Ruth, since I have known you I have never harboured a thought you might not share. You have uplifted me, drawn me out of myself, taught me to see the beauty of goodness and purity. *You* are my wife! The accident which gave that woman the right to call herself by my name does not really affect us. You are mine, and I am yours, for ever and for ever. You will not let her or anyone come between us, will you?”

Ruth's lips moved, but no words came; her face looked dazed and stricken, and in her eyes was still that wondering pain which pierced him to the heart.

“This is killing you, and I—I have done it! I who would give my life for you!”

“Poor Anthony!” said Ruth, very gently. Then she put her hand to her brow. “We must think,” she added, faintly.

“My sweet, I was a brute to deceive you, but I felt I could not live without you, and I knew I could make you happy—I thought you need never know.

But my whole life shall be a long act of atonement. If I loved you before, I will love you ten times more now—”

“Stop—stop. You must not speak to me so. Oh, Anthony, I must go—you know I must go!”

“Go!” echoed Anthony, passionately. “Leave me, Ruth?” He checked himself and continued more gently, “My poor child, you don’t know what you are saying. You cannot leave me now. You—we have gone too far. How could you go home? What would your father think? What would everyone say?”

His heart smote him as he saw the tears spring to her eyes; but her scruples must be conquered at any cost. He went on, hastily,—

“Be reasonable, Ruth. No one need know about this woman. She has her price—she dare not make the thing public. I will take means to prevent her ever disturbing us again. If you like, we will go away together, you and I, and begin the world anew in a strange place where there can be no painful associations. Dear, all places are alike to me when I have you.”

“How can I stay with you? You know I cannot—it would be a sin. I am not your wife.”

“Before Heaven you are my wife—if there be a Heaven, if there be a God, you are my wife. Are you not bound to me by the most solemn tie that can unite woman and man? Did you not swear before your altar to cleave to me till death? You

are bound to me even by the laws of your own religion, surely—and I—I recognize no bond except the supreme love which unites me to you.”

“Oh, Anthony, hush! it would be wrong—you don’t want me to do wrong? You who—who used to say I helped you to be good.”

In her voice what pathetic incredulity—in her heart what desperate clinging to a shattered ideal!

“I take it all on myself,” cried Anthony, wildly. “If there be sin, let it be on my head! Your God will hold you guiltless, love—you cannot struggle against your fate. We are made for each other, and you know it. You who believe in a power which rules all things wisely, ask yourself if it could be right to separate the two parts of a perfect whole. Reason itself supports me. Surely you can see, Ruth, how senseless it would be to leave me merely because of the foolish ceremony to which I submitted years and years ago, impelled by self-will and mad passion. Neither I nor the woman to whom it was supposed to bind me had the smallest reverence for it; my motives I have told you—hers were selfish, cunning, and greed—the man, the clergyman who gabbed his formula over us, *you* would not even acknowledge to be a priest. Is such a mockery of a union as this to be weighed for a moment with the union I contracted with you? A union which I swore in my inmost heart should last till death—which becomes closer, more sacred every day that we live. If there be truth—”



"Oh, hush," she groaned—I can't argue, I can only feel. I—know I must go."

"So this is your love!" he exclaimed bitterly. "You who told me so often there was nothing you could not forgive me! Did you not even stop me when I could almost have confessed—"

"But I didn't know!" interrupted Ruth, with a burst of piteous weeping. "Oh, Anthony, how could I know?"

"You told me you would rather not know—you said you would forgive me anything—and I was fool enough to believe you. You talked so much of love and trust I did not think you could be hard and narrow-minded. But your love is not strong enough to make you sacrifice a foolish prejudice; your trust—what does it consist in? You set up your judgment against mine, you refuse to bend your will to mine, though this means life and death to me. What is your love worth? You wreck my happiness for a quibble?"

Even though he shook with passion, his words being scarcely articulate in his frenzy, he was conscious of the infamy of thus reproaching the woman he had wronged; throwing in her teeth the innocence of which he had taken advantage, denying the love and trust of which she had given such pitiful proof. But he would stop at nothing at such a moment—violence, cruelty, insincerity—anything was permissible that might soften her or shake her purpose. Better to fall for ever in his own esteem, and even in

hers, than to give her up. He *could* not give her up. Never had he loved her so madly as now, though he showed her no mercy.

Ruth looked at him with the startled, wounded look of a favoured child which has received an unexpected blow. Like a child's, too, was the quivering lip, the frightened pause in her weeping, but it was the anguish of a tortured woman's heart that escaped in the cry,—

“Oh, Anthony!”

Anthony fell on his knees, clasping her dress, and pleading desperately for pardon, for mercy; imploring her at last with sobs to stay with him, she who was his love, his life, his salvation.

“If you drive me away from you, you drive me to perdition. You deliver me over to evil; you wreck me, body and soul. I am lost for ever if you cast me off. Ruth, Ruth, do not cast me off. Say you will stay with me!”

His hot tears were falling on her hands; his face, disfigured in his passionate grief, was upturned to hers; his arms, creeping upwards, clasped her waist.

“Love, one word. You will not leave me? You will not leave me, Ruth?”

For one moment everything went from her except the consciousness of her love—her overwhelming love—and his sorrow.

Stooping, she flung her arms about him and pressed her face to his. Her tears were on his cheek, her kisses on his lips—but it was only for a moment.

Then with a stifled scream she pushed him from her.

“Oh, my God, what am I doing? Let me go!”

“I will never let you go. You are mine, heart and soul.”

He would have caught her in his arms again, but she eluded them, and rushed wildly away from him, out of the door, out in the snow, staggering forward she knew not whither, and at last falling on her face.

Anthony gazed for a second or two at the white motionless heap, and then approaching with rapid steps, raised her without a word and carried her into his study.

“I must go,” she repeated desperately. “I *will* go, I will not stay another hour in the house!”

She sank into a chair, for the moment too faint to stand. Anthony stood looking down at her sullenly, his face set and grim, his frame trembling with anger and impotent passion.

“I must go!” said Ruth once more, with a kind of wail.

“Go, then. Make your own arrangements. I will not interfere.”

He crossed the room, and sat down at his writing-table, with his back to her. He heard the rustle of her draperies as she rose and walked to the door; the handle rattled under her fumbling uncertain fingers, and then the door closed behind her. A bell rang, and he could hear the maid hastening to her room

in response; then hurried steps overhead, the girl descending the stairs again.

"She is ordering a fly to take her to the station," he thought.

He wondered idly what the servants would think, what Bob Sefton would say when his daughter arrived to-morrow morning in the grey dawn—she could only catch the night train northwards, though she was in such a hurry to leave—what would Henry say when he heard? It mattered little. She was going, going in spite of his entreaties—breaking his heart and her own for the sake of a whim—a scruple! Sacrificing him remorselessly to her obstinate bigotry. Let her go—she was not the woman he thought her.

Hark! now came the muffled sound of wheels without—there was her step on the stair, crossing the hall, pausing just outside his door. A long pause. Anthony's heart beat audibly; he half rose, listening with strained ears, watching the doorway with starting eyes. She would come in—her heart had failed her at the last—sweet, tender Ruth! She would come and throw herself on his bosom and tell him she could not live without him.

Ruth, meanwhile, on the other side of the door was wrestling with deadly temptation; the feverish energy which had enabled her to accomplish all necessary preparations for her journey had deserted her now; her clogged feet refused to bear her past his threshold. He was there—a few paces away from her; if she went in she would see him—but she must not go in,

she dared not go in. She must go, now, at once without so much as a good-bye !

It had always been her custom to report herself to Anthony before absenting herself even for a short time from the house. She would scarcely have betaken herself to the garden or the poultry-yard without first running in for a moment to tell him where he would find her "in case he might want her," and to drop a hasty kiss on the dear head bent over book or blotter.

And now she was going—for ever, and he would want her, and pine for her, and she must not say good-bye !

Close to her, hanging on a cloak-rack, was the coat he had worn that afternoon when they went for their last walk together. There was the flower she had given him still drooping from the buttonhole ; on that sleeve her hand had blithely rested. With a sudden gasping sob she caught hold of it, and kissed it, and then walked blindly to the open hall-door. Anthony heard the sob, the retreating steps, and remained, as it were, transfixed. The outer door closed with a sound which echoed through the house ; now came the thud of a horse's feet, the roll of wheels. She was gone !

## CHAPTER XVI.

### FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

“COOM t' yo'r breakfast, Gaffer—eh, did a body iver see sich a mon? What are yo' doin', lookin' out yon? Is th' stacks afire? Whativer is 't?”

“Theer's a car drivin' up this gate-on.”

“A car! Th' mon's moiderin'! A car i' th' lone, afore it's leet! It'll be Luke startin' wi' that load o' taters he 'as to take to market this mornin'—an' late too. I'd sauce him for bein' sich a lay-i'-bed if I was yo'.”

“Nay, lass, th' lad's started this two hours. It's a car, I tell 'ee. I've got e'en in my 'yead as well as thee. Coom an' look for thysel'. It's a car an'—by the mass! it's turnin' up our way. It'll be our Ruth coom to surprise us!”

“Our Ruth! Why hoo's nobbut just gone!—it's not above three weeks sin' Christmas. Eh, dear o' me! An' room niver ready, an' nought i' th' buttery but pork—an' Maggie i' th' middle of her wesh.”

“Dom th' wesh! The wench is welcome as how 'tis. . . . Eh, bless thy heart, my bonny lass! Thou's coom, has thou? Thou'rt welcome an' thy master,

too. But how's this? Hasn't he coom wi' thee this time?"

"Not this time," said Ruth. She was clinging to her father so that he could not see her face.

"Well, it was real 'andsome on him to let 'ee coom again so soon. Has thou th' brass for driver? Theer! Now, mester, mind how yo' turn, yon, and pull the gate to arter yo'. Now then—let's have a gradely good look at thee. Bless thy bonny face, thou'rt tired, I reckon; thou'rt nobbut pale!"

"Yo'll not ha' coomed for lung, I reckon, Mistress Clifton," put in Barbara, who occasionally liked to treat her former charge with great ceremony. "Yo'n brought nobbut a small box wi' yo'."

"Well, hast thou niver a word for feyther? How's all yonder? How's 'usband, eh?"

"Father, I'm so tired!" pleaded poor Ruth. "I've been travelling all night. Mayn't I just come in and have a cup of tea? I'm too tired to talk now."

"May thee have a cup o' tay. Ay, sure! Thou can have twenty cups if thou's a mind. In wi' thee, Barbara—mak' a fresh brew. Is kettle boilin'? Well, lass, an' whatever brought thee travellin' all neet, eh?"

"I wanted to be—here sooner," said Ruth.

The old man marked her white weary face with uneasy surprise, jogging Barbara's elbow as she passed, and mutely inquiring by means of various jerks of the head and raisings of the eye-brows if she knew what was amiss. Barbara shook her head

stolidly, and plied her young mistress with tea and toast in silence. When she saw that Ruth was somewhat restored, however, she planted herself in front of her.

“Out wi’t,” she said, resolutely. “As well fust as last. Summat’s amiss an’ thou mun tell us.”

Ruth put down her cup with a trembling hand, and looked from one to the other; taking a desperate resolve the while.

“Father and Barbara, if there is anything amiss I can’t speak of it. I can’t! and I beg you not to ask me. If you love me, don’t ask me!—let me alone.”

“My patience!” exclaimed Barbara. “Did any one ever hear th’ like? What’s he bin doin’ to thee—eh? to break thy ’eart that gate. Gaffer, he’s bin abusin’ her for sure! He ’as, or hoo’d never ha’ left him.”

Gaffer struck the table with his great fist, and swore that if Mester Anthony had been “abusing” (*i.e.* ill-using) his wench, he’d make him smart for it, he would, let him be Squire’s cousin fifty times over.

“He’s a leet-minded, low-livin’ wastril! that’s what he is!” resumed Barbara, with energy. “I wish to the Lord, lass, thou’d never clapt e’en on him.”

“How dare you, Barbara?” cried Ruth, jumping up with cheeks suddenly crimson. “I won’t have you speak of him like that—I won’t hear a word against him.”

“Well, but see thou, lass, thou mun tell us what’s to do. I’m fair moidered between yo’. Wheer’s thy



'usband, an' why dunnot he coom wi' thee?—what's he doin' away fro' thee if thou'rt in trouble? An' whaiver's amiss that thou can't name to us, eh?"

"I am not going to tell you," retorted Ruth, with a passion which startled them both. "Not anyone—not even you, father. Oh, dear father, don't be angry, don't! I couldn't bear it. Oh, father, father, my heart is broken!"

She ran to him, twining her arms round his neck and kissing him, sobbing. Poor old Bob hugged her in return, and stared aghast at Barbara, his jaw dropping, his face pale under all its sunburn.

"Don't 'ee now, my wench," he said, stooping over his daughter after a pause, "see thou, thou'lt kill thysel' if thou doesn't give ower. Eh, how hoo does sob, an' all of a shake! Eh, dunnot, Ruthie, dunnot! thou'lt break thy feyther's 'cart, for sure. Eh, my wench!"

"Why, Ruth, whaiver is to do?" Barbara was beginning, innocently enough, when the farmer turned on her, glad to find some vent for his complexity of emotion,—

"I wunnot ha' th' lass moidered an' barged at fro' mornin' till neet, does tho' 'year? I wonder at 'ee—that I do! A body'd think thou'd ha' a bit more feelin' in thee at this time o' day—thou's owd enough. If our Ruth has a mind to keep her trouble to hersel' let her alone, wilta? Theer! Who's gaffer i' this house? Bob Sefton, I believe—so keep that theer long tongue o' thine behind thy teeth, wilta?"

“Yo’r all gone silly together!” said Barbara, setting to work to clear the table with much unnecessary rattling of crockery and whisking of skirts. “I’m gooin’ to feed pigs—an’ if yo’d a bit o’ sense in yo’r noddle, Gaffer, yo’d give ower croodlin’ ower th’ lass an’ let her lay down. Thot’s what I think—but theer! if I can’t so mich as say a word wi’out bein’ sauced, I’ll howd my tongue—as isn’t so mich longer nor other folks’s when all’s said an’ done, I tell yo’, Mester Sefton.”

“Wilt thou lay down a bit, Ruthie?” asked the farmer. “Wilt thou, lass, on thy own little bed, thou knows? See thou”—speaking soothingly, as though to a child, “coom wi’ feyther, an’ lay thee down an hour or two, an’ thou’ll be better when thou wakkens. Eh, what red e’en—an’ all they tears on thy poor cheeks! Bide a bit till we wipe ’em away.”

His own weather-beaten face was wet as he bent over her, mopping at her cheeks with his big red cotton handkerchief.

“Don’t ’ee cry, lass, don’t. Feyther’ll see as no one interferes wi’ thee. No one shall ax thee nought, nor say nought as can ’urt thee. Theer now—coom to thy bed an’ rest thee.”

His hands were trembling and awkward, and the handkerchief coarse and redolent of tobacco, but, oh, how grateful was his rough tenderness to Ruth! She kissed him many times, trying brokenly to thank him, and at last suffered him to lead her away.

In consequence of her father’s determined attitude

of protection no one in the farm precincts worried Ruth with questions or wondering comments on her sudden arrival ; even poor old Sefton himself refrained from alluding to her trouble, though, as the days passed, and Anthony neither came nor wrote, he was sorely exercised in his mind.

At last he resolved to consult Henry Alford.

“ He knows pretty well th’ kind o’ lad yon is, an’ happen ’ill be able to tell me what’s amiss wi’ him an’ our Ruth,” he thought. “ An’ Squire’ll keep it to hissel’. He isn’t iver one to be sayin’ mich.”

One afternoon, therefore, having “ cleaned him ” and assumed his second-best coat, he betook himself to Alford Hall, and was duly ushered into Henry’s study.

“ How do you do, Bob ? Sit down ; I’m glad to see you.”

Mr. Sefton nodded, cleared his throat, gradually lowered himself on to the extreme edge of a chair, laid his hat and stick on the floor, recovered his equilibrium by slow degrees, laid a hand on each knee, and finally remarked in husky tones that it was a nice mild day for th’ time o’ year.

As a cold north wind happened to be blowing, and there were about six inches of snow lying on the ground without, Henry laughed, and observed that he could not say he had found it so himself.

“ For th’ time o’ year, I say, sir,” reiterated the farmer, with dignity. “ Janoowary, yo’ know, we reckon th’ cowdest month of all.” He paused and

cleared his throat—"Eh, I've knowed soom terrible cowl Janoowaries—I have that."

Henry smiled.

"Year afore last," continued Bob, as an afterthought, "the very wells was froze."

There was a moment's silence : the Squire waiting in quiet amusement for the farmer to state the object of this visit ; and Bob staring about him vaguely, repeating "the very wells was froze," as though to give himself a countenance.

"Can I do anything for you, Bob?" asked Henry, presently.

"Nay, Squire, thank ye, I've nobbut jest looked in, I may say. Jest looked in." He coughed behind his hand. "I 'ope Mrs. Alford keeps 'er 'ealth. I—reckon ye'll be hearin' now and again from Mester Anthony."

"No, indeed, Bob. I am sorry to say he never writes to me. But, of course *you* hear all the news from Ruth."

"Well, that's just wheer it is, Squire. Our Ruth's coom whoam."

"Come home, has she? It is very soon to pay you a visit again. They were both staying with you for Christmas, weren't they?"

"Ah," said Bob, "they were. But my lass, hoo's coom by hersel' this time—an' hoo's seemin'ly in a bit o' trouble."

Henry turned his chair round so as to face his visitor more directly.

"Trouble! What is it—did she tell you what was wrong?"

"No, hoo didn't. That's it, sir. Hoo wunnot tell no one what it is. Hoo gets agate o' cryin' if we ax her, an' hoo says plain as hoo wunnot tell."

"That is strange," said Henry, his face almost as anxious as the father's. "I'm afraid it does not look well. Has her husband been unkind to her? I can hardly believe it."

"Nor I neither, Squire. When they was here a two-three week ago he couldn't bear her out of his seet. It was 'Ruth, Ruth,' fro' morn to neet, an' th' lass hersel' seemed as blithe as a layrock. They'n happen had a few words over summat—an' my wench coom her ways a-whoam in a bit of a temper. An' yet I cannot think it, Mester Alford, I cannot, I've never known our Ruth keep it up agen no one—never! Hoo'll be a bit quick now an' again, an' out wi' a sharp word, but it's ower in a minute, an' then hoo'll coom wi' tears in her e'en to mak' it up."

"Bob, you must get her to tell you what is the matter. It must be a terrible thing for her to keep it to herself like this."

"It's easy to say 'get her to tell yo','" replied Sefton, dolefully. "But hoo *wunnot*, I say, Mester Alford; hoo'll not say a word—hoo hasn't named her husband sin' hoo coom to th' 'ouse nobbut once, as hoo very near killed Barbara for callin' him—summat as wasn't altogether respectful. 'How dare

'ee?' hoo says, 'I wunnot bide to 'ear a word again him,' says hoo—'so theer.'"

"Just like her!" murmured Henry to himself. "Well, Bob," aloud, "I am as much at a loss as you. I might perhaps write to my cousin. Shall I? Or would Ruth object, do you think?"

"Well, Squire, theer's no tellin' wi' wenches. Hoo met be mad wi' me for tellin' yo', and wi' yo' for writin'. Happen best to leave it. I thought yo' might ha' had a line fro' Mester Anthony, an' 't 'ud ha' set my 'eart at rest, yo' knowen, if I could get any notion o' what's to do. But theer, it cannot be 'elped. I'll say good arternoon, Squire, an' thank ye."

Henry meditated long as to the possibility of taking some step which might bring the couple together. Ruth's character, and the undoubted ardour of Anthony's love, rendered it difficult to guess at the motives which had caused them to separate—perhaps something had come to light regarding Anthony's former life which had shocked and outraged the girl: he could not surely have broken faith with her since their marriage? But let it be what it might, the result would be the same—Ruth would break her heart and no one durst interfere. Did ever anyone yet come between husband and wife without making matters worse?

His cogitations ended in a deep sigh. There was nothing to be done.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### A FACE AT THE DOOR.

THE weeks passed slowly, slowly ; the snow melted, and February rains softened and vivified the land ; there was a bloom upon the tree-tops, a sprinkling of swelling buds on the hedgerows, and the old-fashioned borders under the windows of the Warren Farm were gay with crocuses. The first early brood of downy chickens was hatched ; birds were singing in the yet leafless boughs of the orchard during the lengthening soft grey evenings ; a few lambs had already made their appearance. In another week or two Spring would have actually come, and there would be a general awakening of all things that slumbered and waited still.

As for Ruth, who shall say what those expectant days were for her ? To her alone they brought no hope, no promise, only an added intensity of life which increased her pain. She said to herself in all sincerity that her grief was ever present to her, and yet as a matter of fact she had frequent moments of forgetfulness, and it was the return of memory that brought the bitterest pang of all. Her existence had

been so closely bound up in Anthony's that there were times when their separation seemed an unreal, impossible thing. His name rose to her lips a hundred times a day—she would look round expecting to see him ; run to the door in answer to his call. "What will Anthony say ?" was her first involuntary thought on hearing or seeing anything new ; and she continued as of old unconsciously to form her very impressions according to his standard.

And then the ever-recurring awakening ; the being brought up short, as it were, before a wall of silence—the sudden forlornness, the sense of immeasurable distance, of absolute loss ; it was the very bitterness of death which came thus daily, hourly, to this girl all untutored in the ways of life. Sometimes the craving for Anthony's presence was almost unendurable ; she felt as if this hunger of the heart would drive her mad—there were moments when she would throw up her arms to heaven feeling as though she could scream aloud. She had lost him—she was nothing to him, nothing, nothing ! She must not even cherish the memory of their love—she must, in so far as in her lay, banish the thought of him. The bitterness of death ? Better death, a thousand times !

One evening, after a day which had seemed unusually long and full of suffering—for it had been a day of beauty, and its freshness and brightness and sweetness had rendered Ruth's struggles all the harder—she sat at the kitchen table cutting up



potatoes for "sets." She had now taken her old place in the household, and worked hard from morning till night. Her father, coatless and bootless, smoked his pipe in the chimney-corner; Barbara was kneading dough in the adjoining buttery by the light of a dip candle. The kitchen was lighted only by the glowing coals, for, though it was "the edge of dark," no one in their senses could want a lamp to smoke by; and Ruth, sitting near the window, could still see clearly enough in the waning daylight to manage her sets. The cat lay like a pincushion on one side of the hearth; "Shep," the collie, who had crept in, unnoticed by his master, was outstretched in a shadowy corner; the bright coppers on the wall winked as they caught the flickering flame; the kettle sang cheerily on the hob; everything was cosy and homelike, and seemed to breathe of peace.

Presently a step was heard on the path without, and Ruth started, pausing in her work.

"How foolish I am!" she said to herself with a sigh—"always expecting, always fancying!"

Then came a tap, a somewhat hesitating tap, at the outer door.

"Coom in!" cried Farmer Sefton, rousing himself suddenly from his nap—he had begun to doze over his pipe. "Why, Barbara, thou's niver bolted door?"

"I have bolted door, though—likely to, wi' all they tramps about, an' Luke out o' th' road. Ruth, see who it is, ther's a good lass—my 'ands are all messed wi' dough, an' Maggie's cleaning her."

Ruth laid down her knife, and rose ; stepping quietly into the dark passage and drawing back the bolt.

A man stood without in the dusk—shadowy unreal to Ruth's bewildered eyes. He came forward quickly as her white face appeared in the doorway, and stretched out his arms. She could hear his breath coming pantingly, and he spoke almost with a cry.

"Ruth, Ruth, I cannot live without you ! Let me in !"

She looked at him for a moment, transfixed ; and then—shut him out into the night, locking and bolting the door with feverish haste.

"Oh God !" she breathed, falling back against the wall.

"Who is't, Ruth ?" called Barbara from within. Shep came pattering out of the kitchen, and sniffed at the door ; Ruth could hear the thud, thud of his tail against the wall. He recognized the new-comer.

Once again the hand without tried the latch, and the voice said "Ruth !" but she did not stir, and presently the steps were heard again, moving away slowly, and the dog whined.

"Who is it, lass ?" asked Bob, "what art doin' yonder ?"

Ruth made a sudden effort to collect herself, and returned to the kitchen, swaying as she walked.

"It was—a man !" she said, sinking down into her chair.

"A tramping chap, I'll be bound. What's to do wi' thee? Was thou scared on him?"

"His face—scared me," said Ruth, with a catch in her voice.

"Well, poor chap, he was clemmed, like enough—Give him a lump o' bread an' send him packin'."

"He's gone."

"What! thou's made sharp work on him, then. Thou met as well have gi'en him a bit o' bread as how 'tis. See, call him back, poor lad. He'll not ha' gone so fur yet. It's bad to be sat in th' midst o' plenty while other folks is famished. Give him a call, lass. Barbara, holler to him fro' thy window theer."

"Barbara, I forbid you!" shrieked Ruth, starting from her chair. "Let him go, I tell you, he—he must not come back."

"Well, I never!" ejaculated Barbara. "What art thou puttin' thysel' i' sich a stew for, eh? He'll not heyt us, will he? But we's let him go if that's all. See, he's powlerin' about yonder—not up to mich good I doubt—th' lass is happen i' th' reet on it, Gaffer—"

"What art thou moiderin' about?" growled Bob sleepily; then rousing himself a little, "Is yon chap not gone yet, saysto? What mak' o' chap is he—young or owd, or what? An Irishman happen, or a gradely tramp?"

"I cannot reetly see—nobbut a dark shape wi' a white face. Eh, how he ston's lookin' back at th'

'ouse! He could do wi' a two-three of our hens, I reckon, if they was anyways handy. Theer! now he's movin' off, an' a good job too—he's had a sup too mich I doubt—he can scarce carry himsel'. Yon he goes staggerin' along—heh! heh! He's tummlt sideways agen th' hedge. Theer! he's out o' th' road at last. He's gone, Ruth—he's gone fur good, dosto 'year?"

"Gone fur good!" Oh, yes, Ruth heard—and understood.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### A REMONSTRANCE AND A PRAYER.

ONE does not die of sorrow, any more than one dies of love, and Ruth was, moreover, endowed with such perfection of physical health and strength that no merciful bodily weakness came to help her by dulling her mental agony. Her life had to be lived through hour by hour, her sufferings to be endured pang by pang; and a casual observer would have detected no outward signs of the ordeal through which she was passing. Mrs. Alford, indeed, calling to see her about three months after her arrival at the farm, informed her in somewhat scandalized tones that she looked exceedingly well; though subsequently pausing, she surveyed her with a puzzled look. She missed something: Ruth was changed in some indefinable way. There were no lines in her soft oval face; the curves of the mouth were as tender as ever, the eyes as gentle; there was as much grace and dignity as of old in her movements, if less elasticity. Something had gone from her—something had died in her, but Mrs. Alford's perceptions were not sufficiently acute to enable her to identify it.

Indeed, it would have been difficult for anyone to realize that the girl who stood before her in the full beauty and vigour of her one-and-twenty years had lost her youth.

"Sit down, Ruth, sit down," resumed the lady, with a gracious wave of her hand. "This chair for me? Oh, thank you. Never mind closing the window. How sweet the lilac is! Yes, I have come to have a little chat with you, Ruth—you look very well certainly; this place seems to agree with you; but really, you know, it is not right of you to leave Anthony to his own resources for so long."

Ruth drew a deep breath: the flush which had called forth Mrs. Alford's encomiums faded quickly, and she looked up trembling.

"In fact, my dear Ruth, I am going to scold you. You have evidently quarrelled with your husband—left him in a fit of temper, I suppose. Yes, you see, I draw my own conclusions—and it is really very wrong of you. *Very* wrong. If you desert him like that, you throw him into temptation—you cannot be surprised if he gets into bad ways. And how foolish it is, after all! He is your husband, and whatever cause of offence he may have given you, your only chance of happiness lies in making the best of him."

Ruth was still silent; there was a look in her eyes which Mrs. Alford did not understand. She closed her own, which was a habit of hers when forced to say anything disagreeable.

"When I heard of your return to your father's

house I at once guessed what had occurred—of course I know what Anthony is, unfortunately”—with a sigh—“he was a bad boy for many years before he married you, and I suppose”—sighing again—“he has had another outbreak of—naughtiness. When I heard, therefore, that you had come back so suddenly I—ah—guessed. But I did not feel called upon to interfere. As you know”—opening her eyes for a moment and then shutting them up very tight and shaking her head—“I did not approve of your marriage—I considered it foolish and unbecoming in every way. Therefore, I really did not feel *called upon* to notice your return, and presumed that you would speedily make up your little differences. But this morning I received a letter from a very dear friend of mine at Monte Carlo, where it seems Anthony now is—and really, the account she gives of him is such that I felt I could no longer refrain from endeavouring to bring you to a sense of your duty.”

Mrs. Alford now opened her eyes, and sat upright.

“A letter!” said Ruth, hoarsely. “Where did you say Anthony was?”

“Do you mean to say you don’t even know where he is? Dear, dear! This is shocking! He is at Monte Carlo. You have heard of Monte Carlo?—the gambling place, you know. A dreadfully wicked place, my dear. My friend goes south every year for her health; she has a villa near Monte Carlo, and

often goes to the place itself for a few days at a time—for a little change, you know. The other day she actually met Anthony—it was a great shock to her, as you will hear. Dear Lady Basylford! I hope it may not have been too much for her.”

Ruth gazed at her with fascinated eyes while she produced and unfolded the document in question (which was written in a fine old-fashioned hand on foreign paper), and adjusted her *pince-nez*.

“Let me see . . . ‘accomplished our journey without much fatigue owing to the precautions of Karl, a German courier, whom we were fortunate enough’—no, that’s not it! . . . ‘My cough has been much less troublesome of late, but I find the cold winds after sunset very trying’—so she goes on. She is exceedingly delicate, poor Lady Basylford! It was most kind of her to write to me, but she evidently thought it her duty. . . . This page is all about her daughter’s engagement—Ah, here it is. ‘*Apropos* of matrimony, did I not hear some time ago that your nephew, Anthony Clifton, had married and settled down at home? I was so *rejoiced* at the news, for I knew what a trial he had been to you ever since he left England. I fear, however, that it must have been a false report. He is here now, and I regret to tell you, my dear friend, I hear most unfavourable accounts of him. He has managed to make himself notorious in more ways than one—I hear the most extraordinary tales of his doings—they say that at the tables he is like a man



possessed. As for his friends—of both sexes—I am assured they are perfectly *impossible*—’”

“Does that mean that he keeps bad company?” asked Ruth, tremblingly.

“Evidently. Dear Lady Basyford purposely speaks lightly, but—”

“Lightly!” cried the girl, clasping her hands together. “Do people, can people speak lightly of such things?”

Mrs. Alford peered at her over the gold rims of her *pince-nez* for a moment, and then continued,—

“I met him this morning on my return from a stroll. It was then nearly twelve o’clock, but he was in evening dress, haggard, not shaved, his shirt crumpled—he had evidently been up all night. His face looked—I can’t tell you what it looked like—I assure you it made me feel quite *ill*. Had he not been pointed out to me, I should never have recognized him as the nice gentlemanly boy I used to know long ago at Alford. You may imagine what a shock it was to come across him in such a plight! But as soon as I had in some degree recovered, I resolved to let you know *at once*, that you may, if possible, take steps to bring the misguided young man to a sense of his conduct.’”

The old lady now removed her eye-glasses, folded the letter, and restored it to her pocket; then she looked severely at Ruth.

“Is not this a terrible state of things?”

“It is—terrible.”

"I am glad you feel it at least, because—I really must say it frankly"—here she closed her eyes again—"it is all your fault."

Ruth was silent; and Mrs. Alford, opening her eyes a little way, saw that her face was white and fixed as marble.

"Unfortunately, my dear Ruth, I cannot think otherwise. You can see it for yourself. Anthony is evidently far more reckless than before his marriage. Heretofore—we—his friends may have had reason to suspect that he was not leading a very steady life, but he never openly disgraced himself. Now he evidently doesn't care what he does—he is perfectly callous. I can but conjecture that this change is owing to your having left him. Tell me now, candidly, was it with his consent that you left him?"

Silence.

"Was it? I insist on an answer."

"It was not," said Ruth, in a low voice.

"Then what can you expect?" returned Mrs. Alford sharply. "I must say I am surprised at you, Ruth. Of course you are young and ignorant, but still I should have thought your own sense would have told you that a man of Anthony's character, and antecedents, is *bound* to go wrong if he is abandoned like that by his own wife. I always thought you were a good girl, but how you can reconcile it to your conscience deliberately to drive a man to evil—"

"Oh, don't say it!" cried Ruth, throwing out her

arms. "Don't—don't! You don't know what you're saying—indeed you don't."

"Well, really," began Mrs. Alford, rather angrily, but she paused, touched at the misery in the girl's face. "I know what I am saying too well," she went on, presently, in gentler tones, "but I believe—you poor unfortunate child! I do believe you have not the remotest idea of what you are doing. I am willing to think it was more folly on your part than anything else that made you take this rash step—and after all you may repair it yet. He must be saved, and you must save him. You must go at once to him, or tell him to come back to you."

"Oh, but I can't—"

"Hush, hush, hush. Don't be a foolish girl. You *must*. Your mother would tell you so if she were alive—now you must listen to me as though I were your mother."

She had taken Ruth's hand and was patting it: the difference between the Lady of the Manor and Bob Sefton's daughter was forgotten; for the moment Mrs. Alford remembered only that Ruth was her nephew's wife.

"My dear child, you are young and know nothing of the world. You think, I suppose, that you are a martyr, but I assure you it is very wrong and foolish of you to bear malice against your husband. Many wives have a great deal to forgive—believe me, it is best and wisest to forgive always. With all his faults I think my nephew loves you, Ruth. If you are

generous with him now, he will in all probability turn over a new leaf. Come—make the effort. You took him ‘for better, for worse,’ you know, after all, and are bound to make the best of him. Promise me that you will write to him to-day and tell him to come back.”

“I can’t,” said Ruth. “Oh, no—I can never see him again.”

“Then I’m afraid you are a cruel, revengeful girl,” cried the old lady, the very bow of ribbon on her hat trembling with her anger and agitation. “Either you are very wicked or Anthony is very wicked—he *must* be frightfully wicked if you, his own wife, can’t forgive him”—

“I do forgive him,” began Ruth, impetuously. “I—he—oh, don’t blame him!”

For a moment she was almost tempted to tell the truth; she could not bear him to be condemned—he thought himself justified in his action with regard to her; he was not capable of seeing it in its true light. But who, besides herself, would make allowances for him, would pity his blindness and pause before condemning him? Not his aunt, certainly; and then his secret, should *she* be the one to betray it? Ruth closed her lips resolutely: better that she should endure than that he should be dishonoured.

“I certainly will blame him,” cried Mrs. Alford indignantly, “and I blame you too. You are both equally bad—that’s what *I* think. He is disgracing himself and disgracing the family, and you—the only

one who could prevent it—won't. Just because you won't humble yourself before him."

"God knows," said Ruth, brokenly, "how gladly I would humble myself for him—to the very dust. I—can't help it if you don't believe me. I must submit: I cannot see Anthony again, but I would give my heart's blood to save him. Can nothing be done? Oh!" she cried, wringing her hands, "can nothing be done? Could not the Squire go to him? they used to be like brothers once. He could influence him perhaps. Oh, do ask him—*do*, I beg of you."

"My dear Ruth," said the old lady, turning very pink, "I think you must be a little crazy. Really, it is the most charitable assumption I can make. You won't move a finger in aid of your husband, you persist in neglecting your obvious duty, and you expect my son to follow him into his—his haunts" with terrible emphasis—"to be laughed at for his pains. Do you suppose Anthony would pay any attention to him? No, indeed—as he has found out too often before. I certainly will *not* ask Mr. Alford to undertake such a journey on such an errand. There is no use in arguing the matter any more, I suppose—" rising—"Good-bye—I only hope God will touch your heart."

"He sees my heart," cried Ruth, with sudden passion. "God is merciful—more merciful than men. He knows! Oh, my God, *You* know."

Mrs. Alford turned at the door, moved, startled by

this sudden outburst ; but Ruth had sunk on her knees by the table, burying her face in her hands.

She knelt there long after the old lady had left her, utterly crushed at first by her misery. Anthony had thrown himself into evil courses—he was going, as he warned her, to perdition, and she was powerless to save him. What was her own wretchedness, her loneliness, her agony of loss, in comparison with such a calamity as this ?

It was characteristic of the girl, of the largeness and generosity of her nature, that Anthony's treatment of her had caused her to feel for him neither indignation nor contempt. Her love was so great that it had stood even the crucial test of the knowledge of his deceit. She had taken him at his own valuation, accepted with entire simplicity his explanation of his conduct ; too upright and truthful herself to be persuaded into wrong-doing, she was nevertheless willing to believe that he was convinced of the justice of his point of view. The incoherent account he had given her of his former mode of life had impressed her vaguely ; it grieved her to hear him say he had been wild and wicked, but she could compassionate and to a certain extent excuse him. Her own vivid faith entered so largely into her life, that she could conceive it easy for anyone to fall who had no religion to guide and sustain him. Then his passionate, impulsive nature, the torturing sense of disgrace—poor Anthony ! it had doubtless been hard for him to keep straight.

But now—with what full deliberation he seemed to turn to evil—with what recklessness of consequences, what impious determination to sin, as it were, for the sake of sinning ! Ignorant though Ruth was of the ways of the world, and understanding but imperfectly Lady Basylford's letter, the picture that lady had drawn of Anthony nevertheless filled her with horror : it was vividly present to her now. She could see him walking along, shameless, in the glaring southern sunshine, with his disordered dress, his unshaven face—oh, that handsome face, which could look so bright and so tender ! A rush of tears came to her eyes ; her heart yearned over him with passionate longing and sorrow. Oh, to save him from his degradation—to save him !

Presently she raised her head and threw out her arms.

“My God ! You are there, and You hear me ! You will give me strength. I will bear—what You will. I will not complain. But You must save *him*. You made him, You can save him, You *must* save him, Lord !”

The very extremity of her anguish gave her a sudden inexplicable sense of spiritual exaltation. She felt, as it were, in touch with the supernatural, free to make terms with her Creator—it was as though she had caught and clasped His chastening hand.

“You owe me his soul, Lord,” she murmured, pantingly. “I will submit. I will suffer whatever

You see fit. But I must have his soul—I will have his soul. You know, my God, I only want it for You—You will save him!”

When Barbara looked in a little later she found her young mistress still on her knees; her face was very pale and her eyes wet, but she greeted the old woman with a tremulous smile.



## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE CLAIMANT.

SUMMER came and went, a summer wet and dreary enough to suit Ruth's mind ; the long bright days with their cruel memories would have been too hard to bear. She liked better to stay indoors, busy, very busy, while the rain dripped without, and the wet leaves beat against the open casement, and the sweet rich odour of damp soil floated through the house. Outside were only grey cloud-heaped skies, wet grasses, slippery paths—it was better so. Sometimes, late in the day, sheer bodily craving for air and exercise forced her out-of-doors ; but when the sunset suddenly flamed in the west, driving the heavy clouds apart or building fairy palaces amid their gold and purple splendours ; when evanescent peace and beauty fell upon the storm-vexed world, and the rustling leaves and moist grasses glittered in the passing glory ; when, through the stillness, sounded faintly sweet the voices of the evening, children's laughter a long way off, lowing of cattle, bleating of sheep, the trickle of water, the calls of birds—then Ruth would come flying homewards to the ingle-nook, and ply her

needle feverishly ; glad when the lamp was lit and the beauty of the night shut out.

Then came autumn days, and all the land was golden as on the October morning, two years before, when Ruth had walked back from Brooklands Chapel with Anthony beside her, and the wedding-ring on her finger. Autumn was bright and brief that year, and winter came early ; dragging its weary length away amid snow and fog, and ushering in the latest and most inclement of springs.

One cold boisterous March afternoon Farmer Sefton and Luke were busy a-field—Maggie having taken their “ baggin’ ” to them—and Ruth sat listlessly by the fire, her hands idle for once, her eyes looking sadly into the embers.

She heard a knock presently at the outer door, and Barbara, with muttered grumbings, leave her work in the back kitchen and proceed slowly along the passage.

“ It’ll be Tommy Birch’s Joe, come fur th’ milk. If ever I’ve my hands full that lad ’ll coom moiderin’ me.”

But apparently it was not Tommy Birch’s Joe, for a parley ensued.

“ What’s thot yo’r sayin’? Ah, our mester has a da’ter, an’ hoo do live ’ere. Mistress Clifton, ye mean? Ah, hoo’s here reet enough. What dun yo’ want wi’ her?”

Then a voice which Ruth recognized too well.

“ Oh, she calls herself Mrs. Clifton, does she?”

"Hoo ca's hersel' by her name. Hoo *is* Mistress Clifton. What met yo' be wantin' of her?"

"I'll tell her when I see her. Let me in, I tell you. It is freezing here."

"Let her in, Barbara," cried Ruth, suddenly rising and going to the door.

There stood the woman—Anthony's wife.

She pushed past Barbara and Ruth, and made straight for the inner room, uttering an exclamation of delight as she caught sight of the fire.

"How warm you are here!" she cried. "How nice and warm!"

She was on her knees in a moment on the hearthstone, stretching out her hands to the blaze.

"Eh!" said Barbara. "Mak' yo'rsel comfortable—do. Well, Ruth, hoo met's weel set as kneel, doesn't thou think? Has thou niver a cheer for her, an' what's gotten thy toongue, lass? Yon's a friend o' thine, isn't hoo?"

"I think you had better go upstairs," said Ruth, speaking in a loud hard voice, and addressing her visitor. "My father will be coming back from his work presently—he always sits in this room. Will you come up with me?"

"The parlour, lass! the parlour!" suggested Barbara, in a scandalized whisper. "Eh, whatever art thou thinkin' on? Th' fire's laid an' all. I'll put a leet to't in a minute."

"No, I think we'd better go upstairs. Will you come?—quick, please."

“Mrs. Hartop” obeyed the imperative summons, and Ruth breathed more freely when she had ushered her up the narrow stairs. She could not brook the idea of her father meeting this woman, hearing her perhaps revile Anthony. No, she must say her say, whatever it was, to Ruth alone! let the farm-folks wonder and grumble as much as they liked—they should know nothing.

Mrs. Hartop followed her guide into the little bedroom where Ruth could alone count on absolute privacy—a narrow little room, carpetless save for a rug beside the bed, and another by the hearth, papered with a plain old-fashioned paper, the window and bed curtained with white dimity. Plain, severe, and bare as it was, it was nevertheless suited to Ruth. Its simplicity, its spotless cleanliness, were characteristic of her; and the flowers on the chimney-piece and in the window-seat, and the little altar in a corner with its crucifix and statue of the Blessed Virgin, were further tokens of her presence.

But the visitor looked round in disgust; the grate was fireless; there was not even an easy chair.

“Ugh! no fire!” she said, with a shiver.

“I will light one in a minute,” said Ruth, quickly closing the window; then kneeling by the grate, she put a lighted match to the twigs and shavings within.

The other watched her, shuddering with cold, and after a moment, with an impetuous movement, tore off a blanket from the bed, and, wrapping it round her, sat down on the couch she had thus disordered.

“I’m not going to be frozen,” she said, defiantly.

Ruth looked up for a moment in astonishment, but went on with her task in silence. Mrs. Hartop watched the shapely hands deftly busying themselves, and presently broke into a laugh as she caught sight of the ring gleaming on the third finger of the left one.

“You wear a wedding-ring still, I see,” she said, “and call yourself Mrs. Clifton—though you did go off in such a virtuous tantrum, and make Anthony so mad with me. You’re not above pretending to be what you’re not, and wearing a ring you’ve no right to. Aha! there was nothing too bad for me, was there? What was it he called me?—‘the vilest of the vile’!—but all the same I’m the wife. I’m entitled to wear his ring and call myself by his name. You aren’t. You said I was an impostor, didn’t you? Who’s the impostor now, I should like to know, *Mrs. Clifton?*”

Ruth did not reply for a moment; the taunt stung her to the quick. It was true—that was the worst of it. She had no right—no shadow of a right, to call herself by Anthony’s name, to wear his ring on her finger. She had clung to these outward symbols of a union which did not exist, to save herself and him from needless dishonour—but the woman was right in saying she was an impostor.

“Have you come here to tell me this?” she cried, rising, after a pause, and looking at her visitor.

“No, I haven’t. I’m very glad, to tell you the

truth. If you'd let people get wind of the story it would have been all up with me. I haven't said one word about it to anyone—not a living soul except yourself. I wish you'd tell Anthony so. He's been awfully mean to me. He's treated me shamefully! Couldn't you put in a word for me with him? He thinks a lot of you—he'd do anything for you, I'm sure. And after all, I think you're bound in common justice to do something for me. If it hadn't been for you he wouldn't have turned on me like this."

"What do you mean? What—do you want?" asked Ruth, shrinkingly. She could not bear to hear this woman pronounce Anthony's name, much less to discuss her own circumstances with her; but she must put an end at once to the preposterous idea of her interfering between him and—his wife. "I have left Anthony Clifton, as you know," she added, more firmly. "We do not correspond. I do not even know where he is."

"You're just as spiteful as he is," cried the visitor. "It's a plot—you both want me to starve. Oh—it's—it's infamous!" She broke off suddenly, and to Ruth's surprise and distress burst into tears.

"Of all the mean dirty tricks," she sobbed—"the shabbiness of it! He leaves me to starve—and I *am* his wife. I *am*—but because you leave him he vents his spite on me. He wants to kill me—to get me out of his way so that he can have you back."

The tears poured down her miserable painted face. Ruth saw that she looked ill and haggard, and was

much thinner than when she had come to Friarsleigh. It struck her, too, that she looked older—ten years older—quite an elderly woman, in fact.

“This beastly English climate is killing me,” she said, “but what do you care—what does anyone care? As for Anthony the sooner I’m choked off the better pleased he’ll be. But I’ll live—I’ll live to spite him, if it’s in the workhouse.”

“I don’t understand,” said Ruth, struggling with mingled feelings of repulsion and pity. “Why do you not go back where you came from? Why are things worse for you now than before?”

“Why? Because that mean villain has stopped my allowance. He told me I’d rue it, if you remember, and he’s keeping his word. Not one sixpence can I get hold of since that unlucky day when I hunted you up. He has taken his business away from the man who used to pay me—and I can’t even find out his address. My money’s all gone—and I don’t know which way to turn”—beginning to sob again. “I’ve sold my jewellery—I’ve even pawned some of my clothes; I have hardly a rag left. Oh dear! oh dear! What shall I do, what shall I do?”

She threw herself sideways on the bed, burying her face in the pillow and weeping convulsively. It was the very lowest form of human wretchedness, no doubt—this selfish, cowardly dread of bodily privation and discomfort; but Ruth watched her with profound and shocked compassion. How sordid it was, how revolting, how terrible! And Anthony

—how could he, how *could* he have stooped to this? Her very soul shook with passionate regret and shame. Of course she could conceive that Anthony had had no thought beyond the mad fury of the moment when he had decided on cutting the last tie which connected him with the woman who had twice wrecked his happiness. He would be done with her—he would cast her off for ever; he did not foresee the misery that would ensue. He did not know—he could not think it would lead to this; actual want, broken health, physical distress of every kind. But it was wrong—oh, it was wrong! He should have known, he was bound to think of the fate to which he was condemning this miserable creature. After all, she had a claim on him which he ought not in justice to disregard.

There was a long silence. Mrs. Hartop gradually grew calmer, and at last turned her face a little sideways on the pillow, and heaved a long sigh of exhaustion.

“What a nice comfortable little bed this is,” she observed. “I’m tired to death—I should like to go to sleep here. The bed at my lodgings is disgustingly hard and lumpy. However, I suppose I may consider myself lucky if I’m not chucked out in the street.”

She took up a corner of the sheet, and pressed it to her hot face. “Nice fine sheets—too good for a farm. White and soft and cold like the snow that day at Friarsleigh. Do you remember?”



Remember ! Ruth could still feel the chill ; could see the blinding whiteness as she sank into it with that bewildering sickening anguish.

"White and soft and cold !" repeated the woman vaguely, stroking the sheet, "like the snow—or like yourself. When I saw you that day I thought I had never seen such a piece of whiteness."

"Not cold, though," said Ruth half to herself. "God help me—not cold."

"You had a white dress on, too," continued the other without noticing. "Awfully prettily made," she went on with more animation—"the sleeves were lovely. I think that put my back up more than anything, to see you cocked up there with every luxury while I was kept so tight. I say," suddenly sitting up, "you must have lots of things that are no use to you here. I wish you'd give me some."

Ruth was so much taken aback by the cynicism of this request that it was a little time before she replied.

"There is nothing of mine that you would care to have—I did not take anything away from Friarsleigh."

"Well, you *must* be a softy ! I'd have taken all I could lay hold of—I'm sure I should. I'd have got all I could out of Anthony. After all, he treated you shamefully, too, didn't he ? It's worse for me than for you, though—you've got a home anyhow, and a father. I've nothing—and no one."

She began to whimper again. "He's a brute—

that's what he is. Oh, what is to become of me! *Can't* you help me? Don't you really know where he is?"

Ruth shook her head.

"Then I can't think what I shall do," went on the other desperately. "You were my last chance. I've been up to Alford Hall and I saw Anthony's cousin and an old woman—his aunt, I suppose—but they either couldn't or wouldn't tell me anything. I didn't let them know who I was, of course—I knew my only chance with Anthony was to keep his secret, but you should have seen how they looked at me, particularly the old lady! Then I thought I'd come to you—I thought I'd get you to tell Anthony that if he'd only pay my fare back to India, and give me ever so little just to keep me going, I'd never trouble him again. You two might make it up—I mean it. Honour bright!"

Ruth did not answer, and Mrs. Hartop slowly got off the bed.

"I suppose there's no use in my staying. Haven't you got *anything* that would do for me? Couldn't you even spare a warm skirt and some linen? I've hardly anything to put on."

Ruth crimsoned with fierce shame, shame for herself and the womanhood shared with this wretched creature, who saw no indecency in thus begging from *her*; shame, far more bitter, for Anthony, who had brought her to this pass. She hastily opened her cupboard and began to hunt among her store for

such garments as would be likely to meet Mrs. Hartop's requirements. The other watched her eagerly ; but with gathering discontent.

"They won't be much use to me if I am turned into the street, will they ?" she said, presently. "I wonder—could you lend me a little money? My landlady is clamouring for her bill, and what to do I don't know. You might let me have some—you've got everything you want."

Ruth took out her purse ; it contained but a few shillings.

"This is all I have," she said. "I have to ask my father for anything I am in need of. I have nothing of my own."

The woman came forward eagerly. "Oh, do ask him for something for me," she cried. "Even a fiver would carry me on for a little while. Is he in yet? Ask him, do. I'll wait here till you come back,"

"No," said Ruth, sternly. "That I will not do."

The peevish weeping began once more, mingled with weak, broken railings against Ruth, against fate, against Anthony, chiefly against Anthony. His shabbiness, his meanness, his cruelty—all the old litany over again ; it almost drove the listener mad. And this impotent anger was not altogether uncalled for—the thought was terrible, there was a certain justice—a foundation of truth in these complaints. Ruth could not endure it—she must do something to wipe out this slur on his name. The woman whom he had married—and cast off—must not starve. But

what could she do? She would not ask her father for money for such a purpose, and she had none of her own, no valuables—for she had brought with her from Friarsleigh none of Anthony's gifts save the little gold crucifix. Then a sudden thought struck her; one costly trinket was hers to dispose of as she wished. The ring—the diamond ring which Henry had given her.

She took it from the little case where it had lain ensconced almost ever since she had received it, and turned quickly round.

"See, you can have this. I will give you this. You can get a good deal of money if you sell it."

Mrs. Hartop looked in amazement at the flashing stones, and the glowing face above them.

"Are they *real*?" she asked, in tones tremulous with astonishment and a kind of awe.

"Yes. They are diamonds, and very valuable, I believe. You can sell the ring."

"You are *giving* it to me!" she said in amazement. "Oh, what a beauty! I never saw such a beauty."

She slipped it on her finger, turning it about, and watching the sparkle of the gems.

"Don't I wish I could keep it; I never had one like that in my palmiest days. If Anthony hadn't been so shabby I needn't have sold it," she pursued inconsequently, "but"—with a regretful sigh—"it will keep me going for a long time. It's awfully good of you—it really is"—looking up in a flutter of exultation and pleasure. "You must be a good sort!

I wish I'd never interfered with you—on your account as well as mine. I do indeed."

There was real gratitude in her face, but Ruth, sick at heart, had averted her eyes. How little she had thought—when Henry had given her this ring, and Anthony had rallied her on her ignorance of its value, and she had refused to wear it on her "wedding finger"—of the use to which it would be put.

"Well, I'd better go!" observed Mrs. Hartop. "Is that my bundle? I'll carry it under my cloak. You've been awfully good to me, really. Good-bye."

Ruth piloted her downstairs again, and out of the house, and across the yard, drawing a long breath of relief when she was out of sight.

## CHAPTER XX.

### A TOKEN.

THE dull blankness of Ruth's life was undisturbed for the next five or six months. The inhabitants of the farm had grown used to her presence amongst them, and almost ceased to expect that she would ever leave them again ; the neighbours had long ago settled among themselves that Ruth didn't get on so very well wi' th' gentry-folk, adding darkly that everyone knowed what mak' o' chap Mester Anthony were, an' 'twasn't to be expected as the match 'ud turn out well. It was not—no, indeed, an' happen 't 'ud ha' bin better for Robert Sefton if he hadn't have had sich notions about th' lass, sendin' her to a nuns' school an' that, an' bringing her up to look so high. But, eh well ! poor lass, when all was said an' done she took it very well, she raly did. Never no grumblin's—and, Maggie, yonder, said she was agate o' workin' same as if she'd never left th' place. So by common consent—though the good folks shook their heads commiseratingly when they met Ruth, and looked incredulous and sympathetic when, in reply to their inquiries as to how she found hersel', she averred that she was

well—they did not bother her with questions or make unpleasant remarks in their usual straightforward fashion, on the subject of Anthony Clifton. Except, indeed, for the ineradicable pain in her own heart, the memories and longings constantly demanding to be struggled with and crushed, her union with him, the brief sweet days of their life together, might have seemed to her a dream.

One morning, however, one memorable morning, the postman brought a registered packet to Ruth. It was directed in a strange hand and bore a foreign post-mark.

She stood still in the yard where she had taken it from the man's hand ; the August sunshine pouring down on her uncovered head while she turned the packet over and over, unable to muster up courage to open it. What could it contain ?

At last she broke the seal. There was a letter inside, and, folded within, a small object in a separate wrapper. Ruth, with trembling fingers, uncovered it ; it was a wedding-ring.

She looked at it, fascinated, as it glittered in the sunshine. Then she turned to the end of the letter ; the signature was unknown to her. Finally, after a furtive glance round to make sure of being undisturbed, she began to read it. It was from the captain of a sailing vessel in which Mrs. Hartop had some time before taken passage for Calcutta, and it said—that she was dead.

The shock, the surprise of the tidings—the momentary horror which Ruth felt at this unexpected end

—were speedily lost in a transport of joy. A tide of joy so great, so overmastering, that it burst all bonds, swept away all barriers. Anthony was hers again; she might love him now—she might return to him! Oh, she was glad, she was glad! With every fibre of her being she rejoiced. Was it really true, though—was it quite certain there was no mistake?

The paper fluttered in her fingers as she read it once more.

The writer told her that Mrs. Hartop appeared to be in an exhausted state even when she had first come on board: the doctor had subsequently discovered that she was suffering from advanced heart-disease. The violent sea-sickness resulting from a spell of stormy weather had caused her malady to make fatal strides, and she had died, after a few days' illness, and been buried at sea. Her last request had been that Mrs. Clifton (whose address she gave) might be informed of her death; and that her wedding-ring might be forwarded to her.

"Tell her," she had said, "I send her a ring in exchange for the one she gave me when I was starving. She helped me when everyone else cast me off—tell her I want to do her a good turn now."

That was all. A sob rose in Ruth's throat.

"Oh, poor creature! how wicked I am to be glad! Oh, my God, forgive me—and have pity on her."

She went indoors, shocked and sobered, a great awe and compassion mingling with her deep unquenchable



joy. She was to be happy—her long trial was over at last ; but that other poor woman had died forlornly and miserably as she had lived : gone with all her sins upon her before the Judgment-seat of her Creator.

Nevertheless—the human in Ruth asserted itself strongly this morning—in a few minutes her intense personal happiness carried all before it. To be able to think of Anthony without fear or scruple, to allow free scope to the great love which she had tried so hard to stifle ; to feel young, hopeful, *happy* again, how strange it was ! how exquisite ! Then the thought struck her all at once : there was nothing to prevent her seeing him now ; she might go to him any moment—here, in the hollow of her own soft hand, she held that which had kept them apart. Soon—in a few days, she would be his wife again, really his wife, to part from him no more. Oh, what compensation she would make to him for the suffering she had been obliged to cause him ! She would soon show him *now* that it was not from want of love she had left him ; she would prove to him once more that she trusted him with her whole heart, that she was ready to place her life in his keeping. As for his doings during their separation—here a shade crossed her face for a moment—there should be no inquiries, no confession ; all should be wiped out and forgotten. When she and Anthony were together again he would return to his better self : and she would love him so much and make him so happy that in time—in God's own good time—her prayer

would be granted, and they would kneel side by side and worship at the same altar.

But while she stood dreaming thus time was passing, and she must find out where Anthony was that she might set off at once to join him. Who could give her his address? Mr. Alford, perhaps. At all events, he would advise her.

To Alford Hall, therefore, Ruth betook herself after a hasty toilet; walking hurriedly, and astonishing Henry when she was ushered into his study by her flushed cheeks and excited air. But there was no mistaking the look of radiant joy on her face.

"Mr. Alford," she said eagerly, even before he had loosed her hand, "I have come to you for help and advice. I want to find Anthony—I am going back to him."

Henry was too much taken by surprise to speak for a moment or two, but presently he said, gravely,—

"I am very glad, Ruth, since it makes you happy."

"Oh, I am happy—more happy perhaps than I ought to be. Yes, I am free to go back to Anthony at last. There was—something between us, and now it is gone. It is his secret, so I cannot explain more fully. And I—I want to go to him as quickly as I can, but I don't know where he is! Can you tell me?"

"I am sorry to say I do not know his address—but I could perhaps find out. I could write to his agent—he must communicate with him, I suppose—"

“Write?” interrupted Ruth. “Couldn’t you—couldn’t you telegraph? I want to set off at once.”

Henry did not reply immediately. He left his seat and began to pace up and down the room, pausing at last before her.

“I will telegraph if you wish, and let you know the result at once. But I think—it would be better for you to write to Anthony just to announce your intention of returning to him. It might not be wise—to take him by surprise.”

“Oh, but I can’t wait!” she cried, almost petulantly. “It is so long since I have seen him; nearly two years! I—I couldn’t wait.”

“Well, I will telegraph, and send the answer on to you immediately. Now, Ruth, try to calm yourself a little. Things may not go quite smoothly all at once; you must be prepared”—he paused hesitatingly, “I do not like to dash your hopes, heaven knows, but still—the last accounts of Anthony caused us a great deal of anxiety.”

“Oh, yes, I know; I will not try to defend him. I know there was no excuse for him—but—when we are together again things will be different.”

She paused, then seeing the doubt and trouble in Henry’s face, broke out vehemently:

“You think badly of him—but you do not know him—you cannot judge him. Only I know him at his best. I know what he *could* be if he chose.”

Henry looked at her for a moment, and then said with a certain irritation,—

“Perhaps I do know only the worst side of him. But still some things cannot be condoned. I don’t know how you can love him as you do—trust yourself with him again after—what we have heard.”

“It makes no difference to my love!” cried Ruth, with flashing eyes. “I can grieve—I can suffer—but I cannot leave off loving him because he has done wrong—and I do trust him in spite of everything. That is one reason why I want to go to him myself—not to wait to write. When I—when we parted he said I did not love him nor trust him. I want to show him that I do!”

It was all incomprehensible to Henry; but there was no gainsaying her. With a sigh he returned to his table and wrote out the telegram. “I will bring the answer to you myself,” he said, when he had finished and shown it to her.

“And meanwhile I can be packing,” returned Ruth, smiling as she rose. When she left the room Henry sighed more deeply than before; and then, ringing, despatched a servant with his message.

Two hours later he appeared at the Warren Farm with the answer. Ruth was standing at the gate watching for him.

This was the reply:—

“Last address given: ‘Poste Restante, Spa, Belgium.’”

“It will not take long to get there, will it?” asked Ruth, eagerly. “It’s not very far. If I started to-night, how soon could I be there?”

“There will be no use in starting before to-morrow morning,” said Henry. “See—I have made out your journey for you”—showing her certain calculations on the back of the telegram. “Now, I have a proposition to make. If you are bent on going, let me accompany you. You cannot undertake such a journey alone—and then I could make inquiries for you at Spa, and arrange a meeting for you with Anthony—‘Poste Restante’ is a vague address. If he has left, I could find out where he has gone. I am—old enough to be your father, you know, and being Anthony’s cousin, I am yours too.”

Ruth paid no heed to the little niceties by which Henry sought to gloss over the unusualness of his proposal. She was deeply grateful and much relieved. In spite of her eagerness and determination, she had felt bewildered and full of a thousand fears and qualms. Now this kind, grave squire, Anthony’s cousin and her friend, had volunteered to be her escort and protector during her journey; he would take care of her like a father, smooth away all difficulties—only leave her when she and Anthony were re-united. Her eyes thanked him even more than her words. In her gratitude she had a momentary impulse to give him her full confidence; to divulge the nature of the obstacle which had kept her and her beloved apart. But she checked herself. Henry might judge Anthony more harshly than he deserved, and besides—Ruth in her own way was very proud. Why should he or anyone know the misfortune and disgrace which had befallen her in the past?

It was arranged that they should start early on the following morning, meeting at the station. Ruth agreed to write to Anthony at the Spa post-office to announce her coming, on the chance of the letter reaching him before their arrival.

"He will, perhaps, meet us at the station," said Henry. He felt a little more at ease now that Ruth had accepted of his companionship. Whatever happened, he would at least be at hand to guide and shield her. But when she smiled he averted his eyes; her joyful confidence troubled him.

After he had left her she sat down to write to Anthony. A short letter, written with shaking fingers, and blurred with happy tears. Her heart beat fast as she directed it, picturing to herself his surprise and delight, as he recognized her writing; then, hearing her father's voice, she ran down to him with her letter in her hand.

"Read that," she said, placing the sealed envelope in his palm, and pointing to the superscription. Bob spelled it out slowly, and, turning round, stared hard at Ruth.

"Eh, lass!" he exclaimed. "Thou's—thou's wrote to him, has thou? Well, an' art thou thinkin' o' gettin' good friends wi' him again?"

"I'm going to him!" cried Ruth, and stooping over her father's chair she kissed him. "All is right between us at last, father—and I'm going back to him."

"Well, I think thou'd do better to bide where thou art, then," retorted Bob, getting very red and frown-

ing. "I've never axed no questions, but I reckon he's used thee ill, my wench. Why—he's never so much as sent 'ee a line sin' thou's bin here, an' he's ne'er coom to look for 'ee, nor sent 'ee a bit o' brass to put i' thy pocket. I dunnot think so mich on him—I dunnot trewly. Bide wi' thy feyther, Ruth—it'll be best for thee. It will that. Thou's had enough o' husban's, an' gentry's careless ways, I doubt. Nay, nay. Bide wi' feyther, lass."

Ruth, with gentle words and caresses sought to win him to her way of thinking, and finally broke to him that it was on the very morrow she was leaving.

Farmer Sefton's indignation was so great that it actually deprived him of words; and when Barbara brought in the evening meal she found Ruth almost tearfully cajoling him, while the Gaffer, with one elbow raised to keep her off, and jerking his head back out of reach whenever she tried to embrace him, was responding with the surliest of grunts to her attempted endearments.

"What's to do here?" inquired Barbara, peremptorily.

"Eh, nought to speak on," replied Bob, pushing his chair back a little further, and looking fiercely sarcastic. "Mistress Clifton 'ere's fur startin' for furrin' parts to-morn, that's all. Hoo fancies hoo'd like another turn wi' *him* yonder."

"Who?" asked Barbara. "What are ye talkin' about?"

"Why, who dost thou think? Who were it as took our lass off afore, an' abused her, an' packed her off awhoam wi' her heart broke?"

"Eh!" cried Barbara, clapping her hands. "Hoo's never thinkin' o' takkin' up wi' Mester Anthony again, sure?"

"Who else? He's bin a gradely 'usban', thou knows. Took sich a dale o' thought fur her, didn't he? *Dom* th' raskil!" ejaculated Bob, hammering at the table. "Hoo met ha' bin dead an' buried for owt he cared."

"An' he's comin' back, is he?" asked the old woman, looking in amazement from one to the other.

"Nay, but our Ruth's set on traipsing off to him. *Theer!* What dost think o' that?"

"Eh, thou never says, Ruth! Thou couldna do't. Thou'lt never be sich a noddy. However has thou gotten sich a notion i' thy 'yead? Thou doesn't mean it, sure. An' to-morrow!"

"Yes, to-morrow. Mr. Alford is going to take me," said Ruth. "Oh, father, don't be angry! Don't let him be angry, Barbara. He's been so good to me."

Bob snorted.

"Ah, thou thinks a dale o' that now, doesn't thou? Let her be, Barbara. If hoo wants to go—hoo will go. Dunnot trouble thysel' about thy feyther, lass. We're none so ill fur a pinch when thou'rt in a bit o' trouble, but at arter it's o'er thou can turn thy back on us. When yon wastril gives thee the sack again



thou'lt happen be glad thou's gotten folks o' thy own. Well . . . how long am I to sit 'ere lookin' at an empty cup, eh?"

"I'll fetch tay in a minute," said Barbara, pausing with her hands on the table. "Eh, Ruth! Well, to think on't! To-morn! An' is Mester Alford travellin' wi' thee, saysta?"

"Yes," answered Ruth, "he said he'd come. Dear father, I can't bear to part bad friends! Do forgive me. I can't help going!"—with a sob—"If you knew what I have suffered all this time!"

"Fetch th' tay!" cried Sefton, rattling his cup. "Theer, Ruth, go and sit thee down. I'm about tired o' this. If thou mun go thou'lt go. It'll be reet enough. Happen it wunnot be fur so long. But we's be allus pleased to welcome thee back, thou knows,"—melting a little—"an' thou can write, an' that. . . . An' 'ere's our Luke, fair clemmed, I'll uphows yo.' Come thy ways in, lad. Could 'ee do wi' a bite o' summat, thinksto?"

He laughed boisterously, and, as his daughter moved away, wiped his eyes with his sleeve.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### “JOURNEYS END IN LOVERS MEETING.”

It was afternoon when Henry and Ruth arrived at Spa. For the latter part of the journey they had both been very silent, the girl overpowered by tumultuous emotions of joy and expectation, Alford a prey to increasing doubt and fear.

Anthony did not meet them at the station, and for a moment Ruth's face clouded over—what if he should have already left the place ?

“He probably did not get your letter,” observed Henry, noticing her disappointed look. “They would not deliver it, you know, and he may not have called at the post-office.”

“He will be all the more surprised,” said Ruth.

She stood gazing about her eagerly while Henry collected the luggage and secured a carriage. On their way to the hotel he glanced often at the beautiful face beside him transfigured in its tender anticipation—the eyes aglow, the delicate nostrils dilated, the lips parted in a happy smile—and his heart sank lower and lower. Heaven grant that she be not disappointed—Heaven bring this expedition to a prosperous end ?

Henry had engaged rooms in a certain semi-private hotel overlooking one of the least frequented allées, and there they presently arrived. Tea was brought to them in the pretty sitting-room on the first floor, but, as Alford remarked, Ruth could scarcely force herself to eat a mouthful. He himself swallowed a cup of tea hastily, and then rising, answered the question in her eyes.

“ I am going out to make inquiries—I shall not be long. His name will probably be among the list of visitors which they publish weekly in these places. I will soon hunt him up if he is here.”

She smiled at him gratefully, and when he went downstairs stepped out on the balcony. Everything in the outer world combined to increase the intoxication within her; the balmy air, the flowers, the sun-gilt leaves of the creeper beneath her hand. Now her eyes rested on the huge oleanders covered with blossom which grew immediately under the balcony, and now wandered away to the green avenue, so quiet, almost deserted at this hour. The tranquility here was heightened by the faint medley of sounds in the distance—a hubbub of voices and laughter, gusts of music borne ever and anon to her ears. Through the leafy screen she could catch glimpses of women’s gay-coloured dresses, children’s little figures darting about; groups of people going and coming. The whole place seemed to be glowing and pulsing with life; and the girl’s own consciousness of youth and joy and vitality quickened and grew every moment.

Henry had not yet left the hotel : he had perhaps found a list of visitors at the office. But from her post of vantage she could catch him as he came out, and ask if he had heard any news ; and then—she would watch and wait until he came back—bringing Anthony with him ! . . . How beautiful that music was ! Mingling with it came the sound of a woman’s laughter from the allée below, silvery, delightful to hear ; then a murmur of voices, and then the laugh again, apparently nearer. A party of people were slowly making their way down the shady path. Ruth saw the flutter of draperies, the gleam of a white parasol catching the light between tree and tree.

Henry’s voice beneath the balcony recalled her wandering attention.

“Ruth, it’s all right—he’s here still. I’ve got his address.”

“Thank God ?” breathed Ruth fervently.

“I am going straight there now—I hope to—”

He paused suddenly, and she saw his face change. Following the direction of his eyes she observed that the group which she had been idly watching a moment ago was now close at hand. And in its midst was one figure, at the sight of which she uttered an involuntary shriek and stretched out her arms.

“Anthony, Anthony !”

Simultaneously Henry stepped forward : “Your wife is here !”

The whole party came to a standstill : there were three or four men and one woman. But Ruth had

no eyes for any save that central figure which detached itself from the group and came forward. She could scarcely see its face, giddy as she was with exceeding gladness—but she leaned over the balcony, her arms still extended, her voice unsteady,—

“It is I—I have come. Oh, come here, Anthony—come to me!”

He brushed past Henry, and looked up.

“What does this mean?”

Was that *Anthony's* voice, so harsh, so cold? Was that his face, uplifted, unsmiling—unrecognizing, it would seem?

Ruth clutched the leaf-grown railing, her eyes large with incredulous pain, her heart seeming to stand still within her.

Anthony gazed at her steadily for a moment; and then turned to Henry. “Will anyone explain?”

His cousin, utterly confounded, had no words to tell him even the little that he knew.

In the silence that ensued the music floated towards them, dreamy, passionate, yearning. Ruth uttered a little cry.

“Anthony—do you not see that it is I?”

Anthony raised his eyes once more; there was no love in them—oh, God! not even pity! Only scorn and anger.

The lady who had been walking by his side now broke into a laugh again; and Clifton, looking round, echoed it, bitterly.

“We were talking of comedies just now, Madame,”

he said in French. "You did not expect to see me so soon take part in one."

"Say rather a tragedy," was the response, and the speaker, tilting back her parasol, looked up with mocking eyes.

Ruth's miserable gaze met hers.

Was this the explanation of the change in Anthony—was it because of this bright-eyed laughing creature that he loved her no more? With an unspeakable pang Ruth realized how lovely she was! She had never even imagined such brilliant beauty—and then, the exquisite dress, the air of importance—distinction—this little lady evidently considered herself a personage. Ruth had a vivid inward presentment of the contrast which she herself must afford, clad still in her plain travelling dress, her head uncovered, her face doubtless weary and travel-stained—she, who had never been self-conscious in her life, was jealously, violently, self-conscious now—Ruth, the farmer's daughter from Little Alford, a common village girl—what had she to hope for if this high-bred beauty was her rival?

The young men who had formed part of the lady's train, standing a little on one side, feigned to be occupied in talking to each other. Henry was absolutely dumfounded, his wits scattered, incapable of interfering by word or action. The strain became unendurable, and Anthony, after chafing for a moment or two, approached the lady and touched

“Madame, you will be bored. Shall we go on?”

She turned round sharply.

“But no,” she replied, in English, speaking loudly and deliberately; “this is most interesting. I did not know you had the happiness of being married, Mr. Clifton. Am I not then to make acquaintance with your wife?”

Her black dancing eyes flashed with something more than curiosity; there was evident pique in tone and expression, and the smile with which she concluded was perceptibly forced.

Anthony flushed, frowned, tapped his foot impatiently, but uttered no word.

Then Ruth, with a little start, drew herself up. Her eyes sought his face in one last appeal, but he met her gaze stonily—and then she spoke:

“I am not his wife—I came to tell him that his wife was dead.”

She did not wait to see the effect of her words. She got away somehow—away from them all, out of the sunshine into the cool dim room. Then—she did not know what happened.

She found herself lying on the floor, with Henry bending over her, when she became once more conscious of herself and her misery. After staring at him a moment blankly, she threw up her arms to hide her face. Henry knew now—Henry knew that she was not Anthony’s wife—oh, the shame of it!

“You are better,” he said, “drink a little of this water. Let me help you on to the sofa. There—”

assisting her to rise and supporting her across the room—"now lie quite quiet for a little."

"Oh, yes," said Ruth faintly. "I'll be quiet, there's nothing more to do. I—I needn't have been in such a hurry, need I?"

Henry said nothing; but he stood looking down at her with such agony of pity that her despairing composure gave way before it.

"It's all over, all over! Oh, take me back—take me back to father! Take me home!"

Her whole frame shook with sobs; the tears burst from her eyes; she covered her face with her hands, but the burning drops forced themselves through her fingers. Henry saw them drip on to the floor; he saw her bosom heave, her white throat flush—and stood helpless before this convulsive, passionate woman's grief. It was a new and terrible experience to him; he had never seen the like—he did not know what to do—it was horrible that she should suffer thus and he be unable to comfort her. Once he made a step towards her, crimsoning to the temples; but arrested himself, biting his lips. At last he could endure it no longer, and with a wistful backward glance went very softly to the door, and left her to herself.



## CHAPTER XXII.

### CHERCHEZ LA FEMME.

HENRY spent the next hour in pacing up and down the allée in front of the hotel, seeking to reduce to some kind of order the chaos of his thoughts.

This was the time for action, for prompt and decisive action, and he it was who must next move in this most delicate matter : but how could he plan, much less take, any decisive step while his heart and brain were in such a tumult of wrath and wonder and grief?

What *was* this tangle in which he suddenly found himself involved?

Ruth Sefton and Anthony Clifton were not man and wife—from her own lips he had heard it—and she had added that his wife was dead.

It was inexplicable—inconceivable! How had it all come to pass? How could his cousin have gone through the ceremony of marriage with poor Ruth while this wife of his was alive? He did not know (it was to be hoped) that she was still living—of *course* he did not know, Henry told himself, dismissing the momentary doubt which occurred to him

with a quick flush of shame—but it was culpable, criminal in him not to have made sure that he was free before approaching this innocent girl. Who was his mysterious wife? Where had she entrenched herself? How was it that he had never dropped a hint of a former marriage? It was doubtless no very creditable one. Stray words and expressions of Anthony's recurred to Henry now with new meaning, and he suddenly remembered the woman who had come to Alford in the early spring to make inquiries about his cousin. She had forced herself into his study, plied him persistently with questions, gone away reluctantly. He remembered her—the woman with the insolent manner and the painted face whom he had been so eager to be rid of—and in a flash the conviction came to him—*that* was Anthony's wife!

He saw his way a little more clearly now. She had doubtless tracked the couple to their Devonshire home, and Ruth, poor Ruth, learning the truth, had fled heart-broken to her father! Of course—it was the only thing she could do. And then, managing in some inexplicable way to hear of the woman's death, she had sought out Anthony, eagerly, joyfully, expecting to be reunited to him without loss of time. Knowing her so well, Henry could realize the workings of her mind. Anthony's behaviour was less easily accounted for. Those ugly rumours about him—his reckless seeking for new and hitherto uncongenial forms of dissipation—his carelessness of dis-

graceful notoriety, were these his methods of drowning the grief which he shared with such a noble woman as Ruth? Surely the thought of the misfortune he had unwittingly brought upon her, the mere memory of her love, should have stimulated him to be worthy of her even in their enforced separation!

But then—what part did the little black-eyed foreigner play in this complicated drama? This pretty, well-dressed doll, with her artificial laugh, and practised airs and graces! She was no more fit to be compared to Ruth than gaslight was to starlight, and yet, in her presence, Anthony seemed to have no thought, no care for the faithful, beautiful creature whom for more than a year he had called his wife.

While he thus wrathfully pondered he had unconsciously wandered to the further end of the allée, and suddenly found himself close to the fashionable promenade, now rapidly thinning, for the dinner hour was drawing near. He paused for a moment, vacantly watching the still animated scene, and was preparing to retrace his steps when he was arrested by the sound of his own name.

“Hallo, Alford, is that you?”

Turning sharply, he recognized one of his country neighbours, a certain Roland Shireburn, a pleasant young fellow who had recently come into a property near Alford and taken to himself a wife.

Henry, summoning up the most genial air he could muster on such short notice, submitted to be intro-

duced to the lady—a pretty little Saxon of the round-faced, blue-eyed order, and also to a young man who formed part of the party, and whose accent betokened that he was an American.

“Still honey-mooning?” inquired Alford, making the remark for the sake of saying something.

“Oh, dear, no! Why, we’ve been married nearly three months,” said the little wife, with an assumption of matronly dignity which would have amused Henry at some other time; but it irritated him now, as did also the delighted husband’s conscious air. How could he feel sympathy for the billings and cooings of these prosperous young people when a few hundred yards away Ruth was breaking her heart!

“The missus and I have come here for a little spree,” observed Shireburn. “We’ve been working so hard, getting everything ship-shape at home, we felt we deserved a holiday. The painters are in the house, you know—such a nuisance! And we are adding on to the stables.”

“And Mr. Rickards kept tempting us with such delightful accounts of Spa,” put in Madame, with an arch glance at the young American. “It was really he who inveigled us away from our duty. He’s an *habitué* of the place, you know, and he’s going to take us everywhere, and put us in the way of everything. We are going to have a real good time, as he says, aren’t we, Mr. Rickards?”

“Well, I want you to,” said he.

"Oh, look, look," cried Mrs. Shireburn, "there's that lovely woman we saw at the Casino yesterday. I forget what her name is, but I think her perfectly beautiful, don't you, Mr. Alford?"

Henry, following the direction of her eyes, saw the dark-eyed little lady who had been recently in his thoughts.

Anthony was not with her—only one man, indeed, walked beside her, while she herself appeared absorbed in the care of a little old lady with a wizened face and diamond ear-rings whose palsied hand rested on her arm.

"What is her name? I forget," went on Mrs. Shireburn. "She's quite the queen of Spa, isn't she?"

"Her name is Madame Roudoff. Her husband was a Russian, but she herself is a Greek, I think. That is her aunt. The little Roudoff is touchingly devoted to her in public. Yes, I think she has everything pretty much her own way here. This year, at least, she is *the* acknowledged beauty. Last year she was in mourning for her old husband, and though she was very effective with flowing black draperies and moist eyes she hadn't scope enough."

"She wore a lovely dress last night," interrupted Mrs. Shireburn. "Exquisite old rose satin and *such* lace! So beautifully made too—she looked like an old picture just stepped out of its frame."

"Ye—es," agreed Rickards, drily, "I guess I should like her best in a frame."

"You don't seem to admire her?" said Henry, turning towards him quickly.

"Admire her! Oh, of course I admire her! Everyone does. If you come to Spa you've got to admire Madame Roudoff. But it's easy to see that none of the idiots in her train have such a profound fatuous admiration for her as she has for herself. That's why I think she'd do better in a frame. The *rôle* would suit her to perfection—to be hung up in a prominent position for people to look at, you know, and have nothing to do all day but say 'Aren't I lovely?' Whereas, as it is, that little soulless wretch manages to accomplish a good deal of mischief. There was a duel here last week between two of her adorers—both foreigners—so we rather laughed at it, but all the same one lad—she likes 'em young as a rule—got badly hurt. Then there was a Yankee chap—rather a good fellow. He was getting desperate, so I took him in hand myself and shipped him off home to his folks. They think no end of him—but I doubt if they'll be able to do much with him for a good bit now."

"Has she any particular admirer?" put in Henry, in an odd, harsh voice.

"Well, till lately she was pretty impartial—kept 'em all well in hand, you know. Snubbed any luckless youth who ventured to make more open advances than his fellows, and was very much astonished and wounded whenever a poor fool proposed to her. She has different ways of discuss-

ing the subject of matrimony—sometimes she frankly declares that she will not be caught again in that trap—‘I have already had enough of it,’ she says. ‘I have been married—married! There never was a woman so much married as I. Ce pauvre Roudoff! Il ne me lâchait pas d’une semelle!’ But occasionally it suits her to play the disconsolate mourner. The pretty little handkerchief comes out to hide those wicked black eyes of hers—and she reminds the remorseful wooer in broken tones that it is only a year—since she lost—her Alexander!—and that though she seeks ‘distractions’ still—it is not delicate—he will understand. When it comes to this the suitor generally retires, feeling himself a brute beast.”

“Well, but—has she changed her tactics lately?” persisted Henry, as the other stopped to laugh.

“Curiously enough she has taken the most ridiculous fancy to a man whose chief attractions seem to be his villainous reputation and his indifference to her.”

“Indifference!” exclaimed Alford, eagerly.

“Well, he evidently didn’t care a button for her to begin with, but I think of late she has managed to get round him. It was an extraordinary thing. When the fellow Clifton—he’s an Englishman—arrived here, nobody took the least notice of him. Nobody in society, that is—we are not *too* strait-laced here. ‘À Spa on s’amuse’—as they say. Everyone knows everyone that is the least bit knowable. The Bel-

gian aristocrats actually throw down the barrier which usually separates them from everyone that is not 'noble.' If people are smart, and amusing, and fairly respectable, they may for the time being be admitted into 'notre monde.' But we draw the line somewhere—and we were going to draw it at Clifton, but Madame Roudoff wouldn't have it. 'Il me plait,' she said. 'Il a quelque chose de farouche—de sauvage. C'est un tigre, tandis que vous autres, messieurs—ne vous fâchez pas'—with one of her most charming smiles—'vous me faites un peu l'effet de petits singes!'"

"How *rude!*" ejaculated little Mrs. Shireburn, deeply scandalized. "And were *you* there, Mr. Rickards?"

"And so," he continued, addressing Alford, without appearing to notice the interruption, "she not only annexed him—but she floated him, whether he would or not. She simply took possession of him, and trotted him about everywhere. He used to look bored at first, and then she made up to him more than ever, and now he seems to like it. He's always in her pocket, I know. 'Beau Tigre,' she calls him."

"Will she marry him?" asked the lady, still in shocked and awe-struck tones.

"I don't know, I'm sure," with a short laugh. "Perhaps he won't ask her."

"Did *you* ask her, Rickards?" said Mr. Shireburn, with a sudden outburst of ponderous north-country wit. "Was she sprightly or doleful with you, my boy?"



Mr. Rickards had certainly displayed an intimate acquaintance with the doings and sayings of the wayward beauty, and had moreover described them with a mixture of unction and bitterness which justified the supposition that at least in the past he had been under her spell. But if such were the case, he was too well seasoned to betray himself; and, surveying his friends without "turning a hair," replied tranquilly that he hoped soon to have the pleasure of introducing them to Madame Roudoff, who would, he guessed, be happy to give them all information herself.

"I don't think I want to know her," said the young wife, shaking her head till her fluffy fair fringe danced on her pretty, unintellectual brow. "I don't think she can be *nice*. I shan't allow *you* to know her either, Roland."

The dispute which ensued between the couple, with its feigned indignation and jealousy, its hackneyed jokes and stale retorts, aroused once more sensations of disgust and irritation in Henry, and, taking his leave hastily, he turned away. He had found out something at least; he knew the name and character of the woman who seemed at present to be mistress of Anthony's unstable affections; he knew that his admiration of her had been unwilling, the result of a determined siege on her part, of countless wiles, continued flattery. Could it really be that Anthony had let himself be gulled by such a little soulless wretch—as that man called her—while Ruth lived and loved

him? To Henry it seemed an impossibility. He hoped—he was almost convinced that this fancy was only skin deep, and that a strong remonstrance on his own part, an interview—if he could bring it about, between the divided couple—would result in a good understanding.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### BROUGHT TO BAY.

ANTHONY was looking out of the window when Henry approached his hotel, and his face darkened as he watched him cross the road.

He had been expecting this visit, and had purposely remained indoors to receive it; and yet at the approach of the familiar spare form and thoughtful face, he rose to forbid admittance.

Why should he submit, after all, to be hectored and browbeaten by this strait-laced cousin of his—teased with reproaches and pleadings at second hand? Henry had evidently constituted himself Ruth's champion, and was coming doubtless to take him to task for the past, to point out his duty in the future.

"I'll be hanged if I'll stand it," muttered Anthony, crossing the room towards the bell. But he paused half way, shrugging his shoulders. "After all, the subject must be gone into sooner or later—there are some things I want to know. As well thresh it out now. It makes no difference to the main issue."

"Does Monsieur receive?" said his man, opening the door.

Anthony nodded and returned to his chair.

In a few minutes Henry was ushered into the room. He advanced hesitatingly, discouraged by the expression of the other's face. When he was near enough he extended his hand.

"I should have thought we might have waived that ceremony," remarked Anthony bitterly. "I wonder, now that you know the whole story, you should vouchsafe me your immaculate fingers."

Henry drew back his hand and sat down.

"I give you my word, Anthony, that I know nothing whatever about this business. I heard—you did—what Ruth said this afternoon on the balcony; but otherwise I am completely in the dark."

Anthony cast a swift ironical glance in his direction; and raised his eyebrows incredulously.

"How is it, then, may I ask, that you suddenly appear in the *rôle* of knight-errant—the escort of injured innocence?"

The tone was almost insulting. Henry flushed.

"Your wife—I cannot think of her as anything else, Anthony—came to me a few days ago, radiant with joy—she who had been till then so dejected and miserable—and asked me if I could find out your address, as she wanted to go back to you. She said there had been something between you, but that now it was gone."

Anthony threw back his head with a short laugh; then, sitting upright, looked once more at his cousin, his lip curling, his nostrils dilating. Henry, more

and more incensed at his manner, found it difficult to preserve his self-control, but for Ruth's sake made a strong effort.

"She told me nothing else. I did not know—no one knew—what had caused her to return so suddenly to her home. Neither did I guess why she showed such eagerness—such passionate eagerness—to go back to you—"

"She wanted to be *made an honest woman of*—is not that the cant phrase?" interrupted Anthony, with savagely sarcastic emphasis. "Oh, yes—I understand her. She thinks more of her good name, of her petty dignity, of her trumpery code of morality than of anything else in the world!"

"I wonder you are not ashamed to speak like that!" cried Henry, flushing with generous anger. "Because *you* have been unfaithful, is that any reason why you should despise her? She, at least, has been true—her love has never failed you. She was willing to take you back in spite of your guilty carelessness in marrying her while there was a possible doubt of the existence of this other woman; in spite of the scandalous reports of the life you have recently led—which reached her ears, mind you. It was on account of these," he added, suddenly dropping his voice, and speaking with a certain diffidence, "that, when I found her determined on setting out to rejoin you, I volunteered to accompany her. I did not wish her to take you by surprise—"

“Most thoughtful of you!” put in Anthony.

“I wanted, if possible, to avert the calamity which has actually befallen her,” went on Henry, with emotion. “I thought I might act as go-between—warning you, restraining her, arranging a meeting for you. Remember, I had no other thought than that of restoring a wife to her husband.”

“Well, my dear Henry, you have quite sufficiently explained yourself. I exonerate you of all motives except the most honourable and officious. Now you have found out for yourself that it doesn’t pay to act as go-between—”

“Nevertheless,” interrupted Henry, earnestly, “I am going to beg of you, Anthony, to follow your better instincts. Ruth has a claim on you which you cannot in honour put aside. You have wronged her—unintentionally, I know, but still grievously—”

“Don’t be too sure the wrong, as you call it, was unintentional,” retorted Anthony; suddenly leaving his chair, he walked up to his cousin. “Come, let us have an end of this. You quite mistake the whole case. I was fully aware when I married Ruth that—the other was alive. I looked upon my first marriage as no marriage; the woman, though I did not know it at the time—I was but a lad—was a notorious bad character. I left her, pensioning her off, on the condition of keeping our marriage secret. Then I had my fling”—grimly—“and was getting pretty sick of it when I

came across Ruth. She—well, you know all about *that* story. I felt—at least I thought, that her innocence and goodness would be the saving of me. I loved her with a passion I could not resist, and I resolved to win her.”

His eyes were looking beyond his cousin, his voice had sunk to a monotonous undertone ; the phrases came glibly as though he had often rehearsed them to himself.

“There was only one way of obtaining possession of her—I knew that. I must marry her. A ceremony performed after the manner of her own Church would satisfy her—it did no harm to me. I myself have no belief in forms of any kind—the cursed rite which linked me with the degraded wretch who wrecked my life before I was two-and-twenty sickened me for ever of them. But I believed in my love—I felt sure of myself and my own fidelity—I felt that the misery of my past gave me a right to clutch at the happiness within my reach. After all, a man has but one life—why should the consequences of a woman’s trickery follow me to my grave?”

Henry had turned quite white with anger and disgust, but had hitherto kept mastery over himself ; now, however, he broke out vehemently,—

“I never heard such wicked outrageous nonsense ! The trickery of one woman gives you the right to betray another ! You might as well say that because somebody has stolen my ring I am entitled to help myself to someone else’s watch.”

Anthony burst into a loud unmirthful laugh.

"Henry, you are right. I have been talking nonsense! I was almost melodramatic! If anything besides my natural sense of humour were wanting to make me see the ridiculousness of it, it would be your illustration—in your best Sunday-school manner! Henry, you will be Henry to the end of the chapter. Go it, my dear fellow—you are most entertaining."

"If you want plain speaking you shall have it!" cried Alford, rising too, and lifting his eyes scornfully to those which looked down at him from their superior height with an attempt at amused unconcern.

There was a moment's pause and then he said deliberately,—

"You have acted like a dastard, Anthony! I wonder you can bring yourself to own what you have done! I say nothing of the shock it is to me to hear that you—my flesh and blood—have stooped to commit a crime of the kind—a felony! But your conduct to Ruth—the baseness, the treachery! Good Lord!" cried Henry, quivering with anger, the words coming quicker and louder as he proceeded, "Good Lord! how can you dare to look me or any honest man in the face! You come across the girl an innocent, happy girl, and you deliberately set yourself to ruin her! You force yourself into her family for no other purpose than to dishonour it. Her people are honest, simple, upright folk, who



have always held their own and commanded respect. Do you suppose they are not as proud in their own way, as keenly alive to disgrace, as people in our rank of life? And you come among them in pretended friendship, you break their bread, and grasp their hands, and all the time you are planning how to take advantage of their guilelessness! I say you should be ashamed to look me in the face!"

Anthony had kept his eyes fixed on his cousin's throughout this attack, and did not avert them now; his lips were white and dry, but he forced them into a smile.

"Of course, I know such things have been done before," went on Henry; his indignation still at fiery heat. "The gentleman who ruins the peasant girl—it is a common story! But, nevertheless, a man may be straightforward even in his vices—there is a kind of pagan honesty—a distorted code of honour to be found even among men of the loosest morality. But this trumped-up story of yours—these flimsy, miserable excuses—Faugh! they make me sick!"

Clifton, astonished, confounded at the suddenness of the outburst, stung to the quick by the scathing contempt in look and tone, had no words to reply.

"You think to account for everything," resumed A'ford, "for your viciousness, your cowardly self-indulgence, your base and dishonourable usage of a sweet woman—by saying you have no beliefs. More shame for you if you have no beliefs! Do you think it is an extenuation of your other wickedness to say

you began by turning your back on your God? I say it is an act of treachery the more!"

Anthony laughed: there spoke the bigot and the Puritan! He felt more at ease when Alford took this tone—a tone which, emancipated and enlightened as he felt himself to be, he could afford to despise—than when he accused him of being wanting in the attributes common to all but the lowest of humanity.

A moment ago he had almost quailed before Henry; his scorn had awakened answering scorn in himself. He, who had been wont to despise this insignificant weakling of a cousin, had for a moment found himself envying his clean record, his unswerving rectitude; and had owned with rage and shame that he was the better man of the two.

But now he began to recover himself. What was Henry, after all? A narrow-minded recluse, a parson *manqué*, the devotee of a worn-out creed—a creed of which all men of deep thought and clear sight were shaking off the trammels—Anthony felt some complacency as he told himself this. How could Henry, with his passionless nature, his antiquated prejudices, his rigid standard of right and wrong, be a fit judge of the mode of thought and action of a man of the world? He knew nothing of the world—he knew nothing of life, of temptation—he was incapable of understanding the complex motives, the unaccountable impulses of such a nature as Anthony's. He could not realize how a man might suddenly find himself driven by the forces within him to take a

totally unexpected line of conduct, and how, though the results thereof might be disastrous, his intentions might be of the best.

It was useless to argue with Henry—he could not conceive, much less sympathize with, Anthony's point of view—but Anthony, remembering this point of view, felt better able to meet his eyes.

"Well," he said, with a little shrug of the shoulders, "suppose we take all this as said—what next?"

"You have got to explain your treatment of Ruth to-day. Your fancy for her is, I suppose, dead," said Henry, with bitter emphasis, "though, when you deluded her with this invalid marriage, you *thought* yourself sure of your own love and fidelity. Oh, my blood boils when I think of it! Poor girl, poor child! when I remember her happy face on what she fancied was her wedding-morning, so proud, so grateful for the honour you had done her! And you walking beside her with her trusting hand on your arm—you felt no pang of shame or remorse, though you were leading her to infamy!"

"Infamy!" echoed Anthony, involuntarily clenching his hands.

"Yes, infamy! This is no time for mincing matters. What was it you destined her to be? When a woman lives with a man as his wife, and is not his wife—what is she? Do you suppose I have forgotten our conversation on the day when you definitely settled matters? You asked me to alter my will—you did not think it right that a child of yours and

Ruth's should be the heir of Alford; from some curious notion of honour you drew the line at that. Why? Because you knew the stigma which would be attached to such a child—No—you cannot explain this away—your sophistries will not help you. You have been a coward and a villain, and you know it!”

Anthony drew in his breath with a sudden gasp. The accusation came as a revelation to himself; he could not repudiate it, but he would not have it brought home to him.

Choking with rage, he seized Henry by the shoulders—

“D—— you, do you think I will submit to this? Be off—I have had enough of you!”

Alford twisted himself free.

“I will not leave this room till I thoroughly understand your intentions. I allowed the girl to come to you. I even took on myself the responsibility of bringing her here. She must know before I take her back the position in which she stands. Up to this she has kept your secret for your sake and her own. No one knows that she is not really Mrs. Clifton—your wife. Now, however, it must be one thing or the other. No real tie binds you to her—or any woman. The death of your wife leaves you free—”

“Free!” interrupted Anthony, with a sudden characteristic change of tone. “Wait a bit. I want to take in that idea. I am a free man—I, who have been bound for fifteen years!”

“ Well, then, let the first use you make of your liberty be to atone to Ruth. Come, Anthony, you love her—you know you love her. All that is best in you is attracted by her. Make her your wife in reality—as she has been for a long time in name. Take away this crushing shame and misery which is killing her. You cannot,” he added, almost pleadingly, “ you *cannot* mean to forsake her now ! ”

Again a wave of ungovernable rage seemed to sweep over Anthony.

“ And if I did,” he cried, “ she would deserve it. Did she not spurn me when I besought her on my knees ? Did she not forsake me without a pang ? Did she not even shut her door in my face when I came hungering for a sight of her ? My love is dead, I tell you. Whatever there was in me that was attracted by her is dead. Perhaps I am a villain and a brute—but if so, it is her fault. She could have made anything of me—if I am what I am, it is because I—Oh, where is the use of arguing with a stone like you ! *You* would never understand the torture—the misery—the madness—”

He stopped, biting his lips ; the resentment, which had become the master-passion of his life since Ruth had left him, gathering fresh strength under the ignominy of Henry’s reproaches. Anthony was a proud man, and the loss of self-respect was more to him than it would have been to another in the same plight. His had been a nature “ nobly planned,” though it had not fulfilled its promise. It had origin-

ally taken a downward bent in rebellion—not from weakness; and though hardened and warped by excess, it still retained a certain fineness of fibre, a curious sensitiveness: the conviction of disgrace, the consciousness that his cousin despised him caused him agony—the more acute that, in spite of his powers of self-deception, he now felt in his heart of hearts that his conduct could not be excused. Henry's impeachment had presented it to him in an entirely new light; he had hitherto been persuaded that his dealings with Ruth before and after their union had been justified by the exceptional circumstances of the case; he had been sincere in his belief that he was deeply wronged by her desertion of him; that his anger was well called for, his faithlessness deserved. But now—he could not but own that Henry, unenlightened and prejudiced as he was, had made out a strong case. If *that* was how his behaviour presented itself to the world at large—why, then—though he would never forgive Ruth, never, never, take her to his heart, still he was no doubt bound to make her reparation.

“If she refused to live with you in sin you cannot blame her,” urged Alford, breaking in upon his thoughts; “be just to her, Anthony—surely you are still capable of seeing that she has a claim on you which you cannot put aside—if there is any remnant of truth and honour in you, you will marry her.”

“Very well, then,” said Anthony, “I will marry her. Now have the goodness to go away.”

His cousin stared; far more taken aback by his sudden acquiescence than he would have been by a decisive refusal. Clifton's face was pale and set, his eyes glowing under their frowning brows, his lips compressed.

Henry's heart sank: was this really for Ruth's happiness? But at least she was to be spared disgrace.

"If you will have the kindness to keep out of Ruth's way and mine for an hour or so," resumed Anthony, after a pause, "I will call presently and arrange the matter with her. I prefer to see her by herself, you understand."

"Naturally. . . . Come, Anthony, I hope this business may end well after all."

Anthony, for all answer, took him by the arm, propelled him—this time unresistingly—towards the door, opened it, and thrust him out on the landing.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### JUDAS.

WHEN Anthony found himself in Ruth's presence she was still reclining on the sofa where Henry had left her, no longer weeping now, but so exhausted that she was scarcely conscious of her surroundings.

Clifton had entered unannounced—having dismissed the waiter as soon as the latter pointed out the door of the room where she was, and paused to look at the motionless figure, the pale face, with its swollen features and reddened eyelids. Why were those eyelids closed? Had she, like the overgrown child that she was, cried herself to sleep? For a moment he felt some inclination to compassion, but he steeled himself against it. What was such grief worth after all? It arose merely from selfish disappointment. When *he* had wept at her feet—wept with a man's difficult, torturing tears, she had denied him!

Approaching a step or two, he called her by her name.

She sat up, looking round her with a dazed expression; then identifying him, she rose and advanced towards him. Something of the old admira-



tion unwillingly recurred to Anthony as he watched her movements; not even Madame Roudoff, with all her airy grace, could cross a room like that.

“What have you come for?” said Ruth, pausing a few paces away from him. Her delicate brows were drawn together, her face rigidly set in the effort to preserve her self-control.

So this was how she received him, now that he sought her out—the man she had professed to love devotedly! She knew how to weep for herself, but she could greet him without a tear, without a sign of womanly softness or weakness. Not even a reproach! Pah! She was no woman! The real coldness of her nature showed itself now. It was not worth her while doubtless to conceal it—she thought the game was played out.

“I have come about a matter of business,” he said coldly, “a formality which will soon be disposed of. There need be no pretence between us. We know each other now—thoroughly.”

Ruth did not reply. His tone was harsh with suppressed bitterness—his manner almost insulting. And this to her—to *her!* She set her teeth, and clenched her hands, lest she might cry out in her awful pain.

“You said this afternoon that the woman—my wife”—correcting himself fiercely—“was dead. Is it true?”

It was to make sure of his liberty, then, that he had come to her in her misery?—to make sure that

no obstacle remained which need hinder him from plighting his troth elsewhere. This was to be her reward for travelling to him in such hot haste ; her eager hope, her ardent desire outstripping even the rapidity of her progress ; from her own lips he was to learn that he was free to woo another woman.

“ It was true,” she answered quickly. “ I can show you the proof if you like.”

She took the captain’s letter from her pocket and gave it to him, first endeavouring to remove the enclosure ; but her trembling fingers bungled with the envelope, and the ring, slipping from its wrapper, fell on the floor, rolling to Anthony’s feet. He picked it up with a sarcastic smile, and laid it on the table. Ruth was a practical woman, certainly ! She had brought tangible evidence with her to substantiate her word. He crumpled up the letter in his hand without reading it. What did it matter how or where the creature had died so long as it was certain she was dead ?

“ Nothing like proof, is there ?” he said. “ Well, there can be no doubt on that point apparently—now let us come to business. You consider, I suppose, that I have treated you badly. I will not trouble you by explaining my point of view. Even if you did not know it already, circumstances are now so much altered that it is not worth while. You have a claim on me—I admit it—I now desire to see that justice is done you.”

Ruth drew back with a sudden swift movement,

startling in one who a moment before had stood like some stern statue of grief.

“Good God, are you going to offer me money?” she cried, hoarsely.

Anthony flushed, but more with anger than with shame.

“No—I know you better than that. You will have your pound of flesh. . . . Now, for goodness’ sake let us make an end of this, speedily. You were deceived by me in the past—led to believe that you were my wife when as a matter of fact you were not, to call yourself by a name to which legally you had no right. You valued these things—my love, my life’s devotion could not—as you proved—outweigh them. It is now in my power to make atonement to you. You and I could never, as you must feel yourself, resume our life together. We know each other too well. This—crisis in the past was certainly a revelation to me—it might have brought us closer together—as it was it separated us for ever. I could not live with you now to be haunted at every turn by the memory of my fool’s paradise—by the ghost of my dead love! But I can marry you—and then we can go our way hereafter without troubling each other. You will be Mrs. Clifton, duly and properly wedded, even if your husband is a scamp. Nobody will be able to point a finger at you, or breathe a whisper against you. You can return to your father secure in your unimpeachable respectability—your friends can blame the wicked husband as much as

they like—no need to stop their mouths now—but no one can say a word to disparage the virtuous wife.”

The sneering words were as nothing to the insolence of the tone. Ruth had turned a little away from him and he could not see her face. He came a step nearer—

“Well, I presume you agree?”

“No,” she said, without turning her head. “I refuse.”

Her manner roused all the devilry in him.

“Take care! Do not for the sake of a moment’s temper take a step which you will afterwards regret. If you decline my offer—which is by no means advantageous to me, remember you must abide the consequences. You must give up calling yourself by my name if you are too proud to take it in earnest, I will have no more shams, I warn you. Think well what you are doing. You must be prepared to endure a great deal of unpleasantness—”

“I can bear it,” interrupted Ruth, “with everything else!”

She faced him now with sudden, fierce indignation.

“Oh, have you not done enough—have I not borne enough from you that you must come here to insult me? How dare you put me on a par with that miserable fallen creature who is dead? How dare you think for a moment I would accept such an offer? . . . I came to you,” she added, after a pause, because I thought you loved me—and now that I

find you don't want me, I can go back. I can bear the shame—I could have borne everything but this. You might have spared me this."

There was a passionate grief mingled with her wrath which struck at Anthony's heart. For a moment something rose up within him—a power stronger even than his vehement resentment—was it love or hate?

"Ruth!" he said, huskily; and he laid his hand upon her arm. But she shook it off with a sweeping, impetuous gesture of dismissal.

"Out of my sight!" she cried.

He looked at her noble face, transfigured in its lofty anger, and a sudden rage of despair took possession of him: thus might a lost soul contemplate, at the moment of eternal separation, the beauty of its Creator. And then, without a word, he turned and left her, staggering a little when he reached the open air, for he felt giddy and sick, as one might who had just received a violent blow.

Ruth scorned him—then he must be lost indeed. Yes, he had seen scorn in her eyes—those sweet eyes which used to light up with such tender eagerness at his approach. How often, too, he had watched them soften when he caressed her. And sometimes they would sparkle with innocent gaiety, and sometimes be dimmed by transitory tears. . . . Well, there had been scorn in them this evening—and scorn for *him*! . . . Oh, to recall those last few moments—those hasty, shameful words! When he

had sought her, just now, convicted though he might be of gross misconduct, conscious of having set at defiance all received canons of morality, he could still hold up his head and brave out the situation. . But now he was dishonoured, disgraced, beyond hope of redemption—branded with an infamy which could never be effaced. Between himself and her there now yawned an immeasurable gulf ; by his own act he had removed himself from her—cut himself off from all goodness—all purity—all truth.

“Monsieur has dropped this.”

Some one handed him a crumpled paper which he did not at first recognize. He took it and turned it over—then he remembered it was the letter which Ruth had given him. Leaning against a tree, he spread it out and read it. He was free—yes, she was dead—but it was not that with which he was concerned. What was this at the end?

“Tell her I send her a ring in exchange for the one she gave me when I was starving. She helped me when everyone else cast me off—tell her that I want to do her a good turn now.”

Anthony understood by a kind of intuition : Ruth had succoured her enemy for his sake—that her misery might not be a reproach to him. Ruth, whom he had betrayed, cast off, insulted—surely no such outrage was ever devised as his mockery of reparation ! The kiss of Judas was scarcely less heinous in its betrayal. For a moment Anthony saw his own soul in its nakedness and ugliness, disrobed of the

cloak of self-esteem with which, for years, he had managed to conceal its disfigurements from his inward gaze. The vision was appalling, unendurable—he felt as if he could not behold it and live.

Henry's words recurred to him, now, with a distinctness that conveyed to his overwrought brain the impression of hearing them spoken aloud: "You began by turning your back on your God. . . . It is an act of treachery the more."

Treachery! Yes, he was a traitor, a Judas! He had committed the sin unpardonable alike by earth and heaven. In his passion of self-loathing he could even believe that there *was* a God, and that he had betrayed Him. Old fragments of forgotten religious lore returned to him now—he would fain have called upon the mountains to fall upon him, upon the hills to cover him, in the Scriptural phrases familiar to him as a boy. Oh, for oblivion—respite from this scorching shame, this intolerable pain! . . . Judas . . . "went and hanged himself with a halter." Well, it was a meet fate for a traitor—a traitor should not live. There were many ways in which a man could find speedy and secret death—death was best when life had become impossible. As for "the dread of something after"—what Hell could be worse than the consuming fire within him?

He quickened his pace, proceeding on his way so rapidly, indeed, that the passers-by looked round in amazement; but presently he was arrested by a hand on his arm.

## CHAPTER XXV.

### MADAME ROUDOFF.

IT was Madame Roudoff; flushed, panting, her bright eyes shining from under a lace scarf hastily thrown over her head, the silken folds of her evening *négligé* rustling with every rapid step.

“Enfin!” she cried; then, in her quaint musical English: “But where are you going, Mr. Clifton, with a face so tragic, and at such a pace? You make such great forks I had trouble to catch you up, Mon Dieu! what will people say if they see me running after you—and I who hold so much to the convenances! Where are you going?”

“I assure you, Madame . . . I don’t know!”

“I saw you from my balcony, you looked so—how do you say?—*défait*—*bouleversé*—that my woman’s curiosity was aroused. And also, I beg you to believe, my woman’s sympathy. Without pausing to reflect I slipped past my beloved aunt, who was making grimaces over her evening pill—*pour la digestion*, you know—and here I am. Luckily”—looking from side to side in fictitious alarm—“the place is deserted—there is no one to be scandalized



except a milk-maid and a couple of gamins. But all the same I cannot linger here. Come back with me—sans façons—we will have a little dinner à nous trois—my dear aunt is so much attached to you! And afterwards, while she is reposing and digesting, you shall tell me all your troubles, and I will console you.”

Clifton looked down into the pretty winning face; there was a certain anxiety in it for all her light tone which at another time he would have found flattering. But now the incongruity of the situation struck him as alike painful and ridiculous. He had been meditating self-destruction—and Madame Roudoff asked him to dinner! Well . . . why not? A tragedy was sometimes followed by a farce. This was certainly an anti-climax to his heroics!

He astonished Madame Roudoff by a burst of harsh laughter.

“Such an invitation is not to be declined,” he said, with exaggerated gallantry, as soon as he could sufficiently compose his features.

She feigned not to notice the strangeness of his manner, and turning, led the way to her villa with dainty tripping steps, beguiling the transit with a ceaseless flow of charming babble.

Madame Roudoff's aunt—an ancient dame with an unpronounceable name, was impatiently awaiting her return. She assailed her niece in her own tongue with amazing volubility, and, judging from the frequent reference to the watch which she held in her

shaking hand, evidently took her to task for being late.

Madame Roudoff, with a shrug of her pretty shoulders, replied in French—out of politeness to Clifton ; the old lady did not speak English.

“Voyons ! little aunt—you will forgive me, for see, I have brought a guest to dinner. Mr. Clifton—whom you are always so glad to see.”

“Mr. Clifton will not help me to digest,” retorted her relative. “Those pills that I am ordered should be taken half an hour before meals, as you know. It is now forty-five minutes since I have swallowed mine—the good effects will be mitigated. I shall sleep badly to-night.”

“Madame la Comtesse is served,” said a servant at this juncture, and Anthony and Madame Roudoff stood on one side to allow the terrible old lady to precede them to the dining-room. He was unable to offer her his arm, as etiquette would have enjoined, for the reason that it required the support and guidance of two trained attendants to pilot her to the dining-room. She could walk, not to say run, briskly enough in a straight line, and took a fair amount of exercise daily in the neighbouring avenue, leaning on her niece’s arm, while a stout man-servant followed at a little distance to assist in turning her round when she wished to retrace her steps. To reach, however, the dining-room of the pretty house which, in conjunction with Madame Roudoff, she had chartered for the summer, it was necessary to descend a flight

of steps and to turn one or two corners. Therefore, though the old Countess set off at a rapid trot for the goal in question, the united strength of the nurses was scarcely sufficient to enable her to accomplish the descent of the stairs, and the corners were rounded with a spasmodic suddenness most alarming to the beholders.

She herself was, nevertheless, quite composed, and by the time Anthony and Madame Roudoff reached the dining-room she had recovered her good humour, and was already at work on the *hors d'œuvres*. A special attendant stood behind her chair removing her plate as soon as she had emptied it, and replacing it by another course, without regarding the more leisurely progress of her niece and their guest. While they were discussing their *sorbets*, therefore, she was disposing of the last mouthful of her savoury ; eyeing their plates meanwhile with regretful glances, as though more than half disposed to begin again. Anthony deplored the fact of the digestive pill having been taken a quarter of an hour too soon, and thought it exceedingly likely that the Countess would *not* sleep very well.

The conversation was chiefly sustained by Madame Roudoff, who addressed herself exclusively to Clifton, with the exception of an occasional delicate reminder to her aunt.

“ A little of the sauce, ma chérie, is running down your napkin. . . . Encore une petite cochonnerie sur le menton.” From time to time, with a

“Permettez, petite tante,” she would lean forward and delicately remove the traces which each dainty invariably left on the old lady’s attire. The Countess received these tender attentions with a glassy stare ; scraping at napkin or chin with an uncertain spoon, or submitting to the operation performed more deftly by her niece, with admirable stoicism.

The fare was choice and exquisitely served ; the wines excellent ; the hostess delightful, seductive, and amusing ; altogether, though the presence of the aristocratic glutton at the head of the table rather marred the æsthetic effect, it was a repast for an epicure to dream of. Yet more than once Anthony found himself thinking of his first meal at the Warren Farm. The smoking bacon, the coarse snowy cloth, the homely figures of Bob and Barbara—and Ruth in her working dress—looking up with her sweet unconscious gaze.

“Dreamer !” said Madame Roudoff, tapping the table with her fan. “Je me tué à être spirituelle et vous ne riez pas !”

She was sitting a little sideways, one dimpled elbow resting on the table, an apricot in her plump hand. Meeting his eyes, she pouted.

“I will talk no more !” she said, and she bit into her apricot with a suddenness that would have been savage if it had not been so dainty ; her little white teeth doing quick execution, her eyes glancing roguishly towards Anthony every now and then. At last, twirling the stone into her plate, she jumped up.

“Let us go upstairs again. The dear aunt is nodding. Elle fera un petit somme, and meanwhile we can converse.”

The pretty drawing-room was deliciously cool at this hour—shadowy, dusky, full of delicate flower scents—an ideal lady’s bower. Madame Roudoff, with a rustle of her soft primrose-coloured draperies, sank into a low easy chair ; her hands clasped behind her head, her round chin tilted upwards with a certain suggestion of impertinence, an elfish malice in her eyes. Anthony sat opposite, awaiting her next move in expectant silence. She was amusing, and it was delightful to be amused ; after all, was not this the truest type of woman ? A beautiful toy—a thing to play with in a man’s lighter mood, to distract him in a weary one—a compound of folly and charm and naïve vanity, whose highest ambition was to please, whose keenest emotion was the consciousness of admiration. Anthony smiled lazily, and let himself drift ; the influence of his surroundings, the more potent spell of the enchantress opposite were beginning to make themselves felt. Madame Roudoff, detecting his approach to a comfortable and sympathetic frame of mind, suffered her lips to curl upwards a little at the corners.

Through the open window, or rather glass door, which communicated with the balcony, the soft air came in ; the roses climbing over the railing nodded, and pungent, spicy, evening scents were wafted from the garden below. Madame Roudoff’s villa was

situated at a little distance from the town itself; and Anthony, from his corner, could see nothing but a leafy, bowery outside world—a bird flitting occasionally with a drowsy chuckle across the clear patch of sky between tree and tree; yonder in the limpid greenish blue, a pale moon sailing up slowly.

Madame Roudoff's voice broke the stillness.

"This is the moment of confidences. What a pity you do not like speaking French. French is, as you know, the language of friends."

"Then *you* must seldom hear it—"

"What! dare you say I have no friends?"

"Madame, with you one's attitude is perforce that of a slave or a lover!"

"Ah—it is prettily said, that! I have also enemies—of my own sex. For the rest, c'est selon. Now let us speak seriously. I am grieved to hear, Monsieur, of your loss. I did not know you possessed a wife, therefore I am all the more surprised to learn that she is dead! Receive, if you please, my condolences."

Anthony's face darkened.

"There is no need, Madame."

She crossed her pretty feet, swinging the upper one carelessly—the buckle of the little pointed shoe scintillating as it caught the light—and eyed him slyly the while through her narrowed lids.

"Shall I felicitate you, then?" she asked, after a pause; her face was sparkling, dimpling—a wicked little smile hovering about her mouth.

"As you please," said Clifton, with one degree more of savage gloom.

"Grognon!" cried the little lady, sitting bolt upright; the foot tapped the floor, and the red lips were thrust forward sufficiently to form a distinct pout, but not so much as to be unbecoming. Then they smiled archly.

"My tiger is fierce to-day. You must be soothed, tiger. You must make 'patte de velours' when you are with me. Allons—what to do to make you draw in your claws? See—imagine to yourself that I am delicately scratching your left ear—is not that soothing?"

Crooking her little white fingers, she simulated the action in question. Anthony could not refrain from smiling, though her previous questions had irritated him.

"C'est ça, purr, then, great cat! I know how to take you, you see, for I am of your tribe. Some people say I am like a kitten. A kitten and tiger would make bon ménage together—better than the lion and the mouse in the fable—but I should keep the net fast round you—I would not nibble it and let you out."

With sudden gravity she leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands, and, after looking fixedly at Anthony for a moment or two, said with an earnestness that surprised him,—

"Mr. Clifton, why did you not tell me you were a married man?"

“How could I flatter myself that it concerned you to know?” he replied lightly, though the colour rose slowly in his face.

“You should have told me,” she said, still very seriously. “It was not fair—c’était tricher. But enfin—since she is dead! . . . I also”—with a daring change of tone, a swift upward glance inimitable in its mock gravity—“I also am widowed! My Roudoff, as you know, is no more!”

Anthony laughed softly: the little woman’s tricks were delicious—all the more so because they caught his fancy in the rebound from something hateful—terrible. In her presence he felt, as it were, rehabilitated: she at least was not exacting—she was content to take a man as he was: watching her engaging ways he could forget—almost!

“Behold me—all alone!” she went on. “Poor little me! When my beloved aunt has departed au petit trot into the next world, and I have elevated an obelisk of digestive pills to her memory, there will be a great void in my life.”

“It will soon be filled,” returned Clifton; “you have only to choose.”

“You really mean that—word of honour?” said Madame Roudoff; her eyes gleamed in the half light; the lace above her bosom fluttered.

“Certainly!” he replied. Throwing himself back in his cushioned chair he surveyed her with languid interest: what would the pretty creature say now? One never knew what to expect from her: in that,



perhaps, lay her chief charm. Her next move rather startled him: slowly raising herself from her half-crouching posture, and extending a small fore-finger, she pointed it at him.

"Then I choose—you!" she said, very deliberately. "We are unfortunate, both of us. Let us console each other."

"You are surely joking, Madame?"

"Of course I am joking"—throwing back her head with a burst of feigned laughter, but watching him sharply the while. "Ha, ha, ha, I frightened you, did I not?"

"La joie fait peur," said Clifton.

After all—why not? She had sought him out of her own accord—rescued him from himself; exorcised—or so it seemed to him—the fiend of despair which had taken possession of him. *She* did not despise him—he owed her gratitude for that. If life were to be lived at all, could it offer anything better? He had gambled with life in the past, as he once said to Henry. Now, ruined though he was, he would cast down this one stake more, and see what luck it would bring him. He was already bankrupt—and the venture could at least do him no harm.

"*You* are jesting now," cried Madame, resenting his careless tone, "and it is a bad jest."

Anthony stooped and took the little hand. How much smaller than Ruth's! A pretty little hand, but with no character in it! Then he looked calmly at the expectant face.

"Neither you nor I are jesting : I hold you to your word !"

"And that is all you say ? What a strange man you are ! Are you not going to tell me you love me ?"

"It goes without saying."

She laughed.

"Well, you are a curious creature—a monstrosity !—I think that is why I like you. You are a bad man, you know, Monsieur mon futur—you only want horns and—what do you say ? a split foot, to be a devil. But you take my fancy all the more—it pleases me that you should be diabolique."

Deep down in Anthony's heart came the echo of other words :

"You are so good—so good !"

Something in his face struck his newly-betrothed : withdrawing her hand she said quickly,—

"I was forgetting to ask : the woman on the balcony—la tragédienne, with the dusty dress and the white face—who is she ?"

There was a moment's pause ; then he said,—

"I should recommend you not to ask."

"That means that you will not answer my question ?"

He bowed his head.

"Well—you have an assurance, I must say ! However—let it be so. I will ask you no questions—As to that I can guess pretty well. Vous en avez fait bien d'autres, mon cher. But," with a little toss

of the head—"if I ask no questions, neither will I answer any. Neither now nor at any time—you hear?"

"Perfectly," said Anthony.

"Ah, but you must not take it so calmly—you must be jealous—the devil is jealous. You must be sometimes jealous, or I warn you I shall give you cause!"

How long ago was it—must he reckon by years or centuries?—since that sunny Sunday morning when he had first told his love to Ruth? "Be true to me," he had said, and she had answered, "I will be true."

"I will beat you, if you like," he said, restraining with difficulty the impatience that he felt: Madame Roudoff was less entertaining when she talked like this.

"No, I do not go so far as that—but you may fight a duel or two if you like. I shall bind up your wounds and you shall dry my tears. So—we shall get on very well; we shall amuse ourselves, you in your way, and I in mine. Apropos—you have some fortune of your own, have you not?"

"Not very much—enough for myself," with a frankness which equalled hers.

"That is all that is required. I keep my little purse for me, you see. A husband is sometimes extravagant and then—" she pursed up her lips, rapidly twirling the fingers and thumb of one hand with an expressive and quite indescribable gesture. "That would not

suit me. You must ménager your revenue, and make it suffice for your wants."

Anthony laughed, recovering his good humour in his appreciation of the little lady's naïve forethought. It was a delightful touch, that—and thoroughly characteristic. It tickled his fancy so much that he roused himself from his languor.

The conversation had certainly not been tender hitherto ; but presently Clifton began in a curious, spasmodic, artificial fashion to make love, or rather to pay compliments, to his future bride—she responding gaily and with evident pleasure. It did not take much to please her, Anthony reflected, observing the eagerness with which a particularly crude morsel of adulation was swallowed ; and she evidently liked him. Why, he could not conceive ; but the fact remained ; she liked him, she had selected him from among a crowd of real adorers ; she was not only tolerant of, but even attracted by, his defects. It was strange—but not unpleasant. His very indifference appeared to fascinate her ; that she was fascinated, and to a certain extent dominated, by him was no less evident than flattering to his self-love. As for her, she was undisguisedly vain—frankly selfish—half actress, half savage—oh, yes, he could see all her shortcomings plainly, but if he was good enough for her, she was surely good enough for him. They would rub along very decently, and amuse themselves, each in their own way, as she so candidly said—and she was certainly very pretty.

By-and-by the door behind them was flung violently open, and the Countess came charging in ; being only pulled up, with great exertion on the part of her attendants, when she was apparently on the point of precipitating herself out of the window.

“ Ah, ça, and our coffee ? ” she cried ; “ I was dozing downstairs and you have forgotten it. How dark it is here ! Ring, then, Célestine—you can let go my arm. Well, Héléne, what have you been doing all this time ? ”

“ I was sermonizing Mr. Clifton,” responded her niece demurely. “ He gambles too much—I tell him it is wrong.”

“ Aïe—so it is. Bring me my drops, Marie. What, you are not going, Monsieur ? Coffee will be here immediately.”

“ I have unfortunately an engagement, and must say good-bye, Madame. Au revoir, Héléne.”

He dropped his voice as he pronounced the last word, bowing over the little plump cool hand.

“ You can kiss it ! ” said Héléne, condescendingly. Her aunt and Marie were now entirely occupied with the drops.

Anthony kissed it with an external alacrity which belied his inward calm ; pressed it discreetly, and dropped it coldly.

“ Eight—nine,” said the Countess, presenting him with her left hand—“ Adieu, Monsieur—twelve. Be careful, Marie, you let them fall too quickly.”

Anthony went downstairs and out into the dusk.

The stars were shining overhead—the leaves rustling. He thought of how he had kissed Madame Roudoff's hand, and the remembrance came to him of a remark once made in his hearing by a cynical old Frenchman to a lady he had formerly admired :

“ There was a time, Madame, when your eyes had a certain effect upon me—but now, as far as I am concerned, they might just as well be baked apples.”

Why did this recur to him now ? Why was it that though, while he simply formed one of Madame Roudoff's suite he had experienced a certain pleasurable excitement in her society, now that she belonged to him he could not cheat himself into fancying himself in love with her ? All the passion in him was dead ; all power of loving—even of feeling deeply—was gone. Héléne Roudoff was very entertaining but—

“ Why the devil did I do it ? ” he said, and then he shrugged his shoulders. “ It is done now. I may as well make the best of it.”

He lit a cigarette and strolled along, very slowly. Here was the spot where he had stood this afternoon opposite Ruth's hotel. The balcony was tenantless now, but he pictured her there—bending towards him—

“ Anthony, do you not see that it is I ? ”

Was it to-day—only to-day ! A few hours ago. She was his then, if he had willed it. If he had hastened to her when she called him—in imagination he saw himself mounting the stairs, bursting open the

door—now she came flying across the room to him—  
Oh, Ruth, Ruth!

He flung away his cigarette, his face working.  
Looking at him now, one would not have said he was  
incapable of strong emotion.

What was she doing at this moment? Had she  
already left, or was she there behind one of those  
shrouded windows? Was her pillow wet with her  
tears—was she sobbing perhaps even as she slept?—  
or was she lying awake, looking with dry, burning  
eyes into the darkness? In any case she was lost to  
him—lost for ever! and he—was Madame Roudoff's  
affianced husband!

## CHAPTER XXVI.

“HAME IS BEST.”

RUTH and Henry started that same evening—they were already gone when Anthony scanned the windows of the rooms they had occupied. Henry's first glance at Ruth's face on his return to the hotel had told him that things were not well with her; and he was pondering in silence over her demeanour and endeavouring to guess what had occurred, when she astonished him by announcing briefly and imperiously her intention of at once setting out for home. Then he could not resist a stammering query—

“Has not Anthony called? Have you not—come to any arrangement?”

“We have arranged to part,” said Ruth. “Don't look at me so!” she added irritably—“don't speak to me! I can't bear it.”

She actually stamped her foot. Henry, startled and perturbed, made no further remark, and set about preparations for their hasty flight.

During the long hours of the ensuing journey they scarcely spoke to each other. Henry, looking at the



young face opposite to him, so white in the uncertain light, its apathetic misery contrasting so pitifully with its beauty, felt his heart burn with fierce resentment against the man who had wrought such havoc. But for Anthony, Ruth would still be happy, merry ignorant of evil, the joy and pride of an honest home—and now she was going back to announce her disgrace. She was innocent still—thank God!—she had passed unscathed through an ordeal which would have destroyed a weaker nature; but, though she was white of heart and pure of mind as ever, she had been robbed of her maidenhood, deluded with a mockery of wifehood—that which should have been the crown of her woman's life had been made the seal of her dishonour.

Several little circumstances combined to make their sad homeward progress even more distressing than it need have been. Just as a wounded limb appears to receive a larger share of raps and friction during the day than the sounder portions of one's anatomy, it appeared to Henry that the most trifling incidents of their journey conspired to increase the soreness of Ruth's heart. By what unlucky chance, to begin with, did Roland Shireburn chance to stroll by their hotel that evening, at the very moment when Henry was helping Ruth into the fiacre?

Deuce take the fellow! Henry's face still burned as he remembered his astonished, impudent gaze.

"On your travels again?" he had said, raising his eye-brows.

“Yes. My cousin and I are returning to Alford.”

He had jumped in, banging the door to after him, and congratulating himself on having got out of the difficulty rather neatly for a man too sincere to be able in an ordinary way to deal promptly with an equivocal position. But after a pause Ruth had said, decisively,—

“Mr. Alford, you should not have told an untruth. I am not your cousin, and you must not say so any more.”

At the station, again, why should that idle lad have begun to whistle the very tune played by the band a few hours before, when Ruth had first descried Anthony from the balcony? Ugh! how the shrill notes haunted one! Surely they must pierce Ruth like so many knives—but she made no sign, though Henry glanced towards her, every nerve quivering in unison with her pain. In the train, too, what evil fortune led the stupid, detestable English bride and bridegroom to seek out their carriage, and to regale them, of all people in the world, with a sight of their foolish young happiness? How often they had clasped hands surreptitiously, and eyed each other with hateful idiotic sentiment, bubbling over all the time with tender reminiscences—and how proud the little blue-eyed bride was of her wedding ring!

Henry, looking at the long slender hands lying loosely in Ruth’s lap, had seen that under the close-fitting glove of the left hand no circlet was defined.

Only once, however, did any change come over

the impassive sorrow of her face. Their travels were almost over, and they were rushing swiftly through English fields and woods; the only other occupants of the carriage being an old couple whom Henry had before noticed at Dover. Sturdy old people of the well-to-do mercantile class, returning to Manchester, as they informed Henry with the guileless garrulity of their kind, after a month's trip to the Continent.

"We 'ad to come back for a particular occasion," said the old lady, with a glance at her husband.

"Just so," assented he, chuckling. "Must be at home to-morrow."

Henry did not feel inclined to make any inquiries, and the pair settled down with evident disappointment in their respective corners. The old man presently snored; and Henry rustled his paper with some indignation; but presently desisted—Ruth was not asleep.

By-and-by they stopped at a station. The old gentleman sat up, yawned, rubbed his eyes, and looked out.

"'Cheap Trips,'" he began, spelling over an advertisement on the wall opposite, "'on Wednesday, the 12th, Thursday, the 13th'—I thought to-morrow was the 13th."

"It says Thursday, there," returned his wife, suddenly very wide awake. "An' to-day's Thursday."

"It's a mistake," said the other. "I'm sure it's to-morrow. To-morrow will be the 13th, sir, won't it?"—addressing Henry.

"No," responded Alford, "this is the 13th, Thursday—to-day."

"To-day!" echoed the pair, both together, and they looked at each other, and after a moment's pause the old man said,—

"Give us your hand, my dear. Our wedding-day," he explained, looking round. "Thirty-five years—and never a day that I wished it undone. Never a day, I may say, that we didn't get on better."

Henry gazed at the fat old hands clasping each other, and then at the honest, good-natured old faces. The husband was beaming—there were tears in the wife's eyes—then he glanced apprehensively at Ruth, and saw her face glowing and quivering behind her veil.

Well, it was over at last, and they found themselves on the plattform of their own station. The solitary cab stood there as usual—the cab which had conveyed Ruth to the train a few days before.

"I shall walk," she said quietly, when Henry would have assisted her to enter it. "I would rather walk, please. I can send for my things this evening."

Then she held out her hand in silence, looking at him for a moment; her eyes soft as they had not been since Anthony left her.

"Good-bye," she said, falteringly, at last. "You—did all—you could. I have not thanked you, but I—I feel—"

She could not complete the sentence. Henry

wrung her hand, endeavouring to convey into the pressure all that he dared not say.

Now she was alone in the familiar by-path which was a short cut to the Warren Farm. It was but a little way to traverse, and she wished it had been longer ; though she was so weary in mind and body. The ground seemed to heave beneath her tired feet, her aching limbs vibrated still with the motion of the train ; in her ears sounded the monotonous noises of wheels or paddles—she had been travelling incessantly for the last few days with that one brief interval of stormy pain, and yet it seemed to her that the quiet farmhouse, the kind and cheerful home faces, were more terrible than anything she had yet had to encounter. Her father's loud greeting—his cordial astonished welcome—oh, heavens, how should she bear it !

“What, thou’rt back, my wench !” He would be glad to see her—*glad !* She fell sideways against the hedge with a sudden dry sob. Oh, if she could die—die there in the fields—if God would take her before she told her father.

She suffered herself to slip down to the bank beneath, and lay there for a minute, looking up into the blue, clear sky as though expecting a miraculous bolt to fall on her in answer to her voiceless prayer ; her hands clutching the rank grass, her breath coming pantingly. And then a lark's song rang out overhead, and she sprang to her feet as though she were stung, and pursued her way like one

driven, flying from recollections more maddening than the anticipation of future pain.

This was her father's land now—she paused, looking round her with feverish dread. No—there was no one about. Ah, to be sure it was the dinner-hour! They were cutting the clover, she saw—and that was surely Joe Winstanley's mowing-machine and team of roans yonder in the corner of the field. It was, of course—her father had helped him last week, he was lending him a neighbourly hand now, for the weather was unsettled. These thoughts flashed through Ruth's mind even as her practised eye took in the details of the scene. She proceeded cautiously now—some of Winstanley's folk might be about, and might see her—there must be some one in charge of the machine, some one lying probably in the shade on the other side of the hedge—she did not want any stranger to catch sight of her and proclaim her arrival before she had seen her father.

Here she was at last—at home! Through the open door she could hear the sound of clattering plates and jovial voices. She crept behind a stack out of sight of those within: from the noise and bustle she could tell that her father was entertaining several people. She would wait a little—they would soon return to the field now; she could not go in till they were gone.

That was Nancy Winstanley who spoke last—she had probably come to help Barbara in her hospitable

duties—and Farmer Joe, himself, was there, and old Tom Lupton, her father's greatest crony, and several more—she identified them by their voices. She leant wearily against the stack—oh, if they would go, and let her creep indoors and up to her little room !

Now there came a shuffling of feet, and pushing back of chairs.

“Coom, Joe, another gill for luck's sake. Barbara, fill up. Now, Tom—I know thou'rt allus dry. Coom, lads, we's have a wet to finish wi'.”

Those were her father's hearty, cheery tones.

“Well, neighbour, here's wishin' thee luck, an' 'ealth, an' prosperity.”

That was Joe, and now old Tommy chimed in—when would they have done ?

“'Ear, 'ear. 'Ealth an' 'appiness to thee, Bob—an' same to thy Ruth.”

“Ah, we mun drink th' wench's 'ealth. Here, Barbara—fetch down yon bottle. Nawe—noan o' thy yaäle—now, then, glasses round. Eh, we mun drink her 'ealth i' gradely style—we mun that.”

The listener without caught her breath during the silence which ensued, a silence engendered by surprised approval of Bob's liberality, and broken only by the clink of glasses. If they knew !

“I won't say but what it was a bit of a trouble to me,” went on Sefton, “as hoo should be for leavin' whoam again. I'd welly made up my mind as hoo'd stop for good, yo' knowen. But theer—hoo were i'”

th’ reet when all’s said an’ done. ‘I’m gooin’ to my ‘usband,’ hoo says—an’ hoo seemed that pleased I couldn’t find it i’ my heart to gainsay her. It’s a mis’rable thing for a yoong lass same as her to be parted fro’ her ‘usband—it is, for sure—an’ if they’n happen had words one wi’ t’other it’s as well fur ‘em to mak’ friends.”

“Ah, ‘tis, lad—‘tis,” came Tom’s husky tones. “Mon an’ wife, thou knows—eh, ‘t ‘ud be cur’ous if they was never to fall out—my word, ‘twould be downright onnat’ral. An’ though Mester Anthony an’ thy Ruth is not happen same as gradely village folk I doubt they’n found out that for theirsels. Yo’ mun fall out—an’ yo’ mun fall in again—an’ thot’s matrimunny.”

“Yigh,” said Bob—“thou’rt reet, Tommy, an’ I will say’t fur Mester Anthony: he mayn’t be th’ ‘usband I’d ha’ picked fur my wench—I’d ha’ bin as well pleased if hoo hadn’t have looked so high”—the note of pride which crept into his voice pierced Ruth’s heart—“He may ‘ave his faults—I wunnot say but what he ‘as. But he thinks a dale o’ th’ lass—eh, he does! He sets that store by her, yo’d fancy hoo were the Queen of England—terrible fond of her, he is. Well, they’n coom together again, an’ I’m glad on’t.”

“Eh, thou may say so, owd brid,” commented Joe Winstanley, approvingly. “Coom, we’s drink ‘er ‘ealth an’ his too. Now, lads, be ready. Coom—Mester and Missus Clifton! Long life, ‘appiness,



an' prosperity—an' may we soon be gathered together on another j'yful occasion. A kirsening, I shouldn't wonder! Come—long life to 'em! Hip, hip, hip!

“Hooray!” cried the chorus of voices male and female; the formula was repeated, and the guests were standing waving their glasses and inflating their lungs in preparation for a final outburst, when a rushing figure broke through the circle, making its way with extended arms to where Bob Sefton stood.

“Oh, father, stop them!—stop them! They will drive me mad! I'm not his wife.”

She was in his arms now, clinging to him with all her failing strength.

“Send them away, father—tell them I'm—I'm not Mrs. Clifton. I thought I was—but he had another wife alive when he married me. I went back to him—when I heard she was dead—but—he doesn't want me now. I've no husband—I—Oh, father, father, forgive me—I've brought shame on you!”

Her voice trailed away in an inarticulate murmur; she hid her face on his shoulder and her clasp tightened round his neck.

A dead silence ensued; the neighbours first looking at each other aghast, and then staring with starting eyes and gaping mouths at Farmer Sefton. For a moment the old man was incapable of a word, but presently, looking round with a certain indescribable dignity, he folded his arms about his daughter.

"Well, lass," he said, "if thou hasn't a husband, thou's a feyther. Thou's a feyther, see. Never fret thyself—feyther's allus fain to see thee."

He paused and cleared his throat.

"Allus fain to see thee," he repeated, "an'—an' proud."

He sent another challenging glance round, and fell to stroking Ruth's soft hair.

Barbara suddenly flung her apron over her head, with a loud snuffle, but otherwise no one spoke or stirred. After a moment or two however, old Tommy Lupton, who was accustomed to come to the front on trying occasions—being renowned for his tact and wisdom—uttered an extraordinary sound between a cough and a groan,—

"Well, neighbour," he observed, "though this here's what yo' may call onexpected it's happen all for th' best. Thou'd ha' bin terrible lonely i' th' long winter evenin's wi' nobry nobbut owd Barbara for coompany, an' th' lass 'ull soon content hersel'—hoo will—thou'lt see—an' when all's said an' done hoo's as well rid o' yon—Eh, mon! but he mun be a terrible raskil to put sich a deceit on a decent wench."

"He's a dom villain!" chimed in Joe Winstanley, thumping the table with his heavy fist. "He's thot! Mester Anthony or no Mester Anthony. Poor wench!—an' her as allus held her 'ead so 'igh like. Dom him—he *is* a villain."

The veins on Bob's forehead swelled and his face, already red, grew purple, but he did not, as his

cronies expected, endorse or echo their sentiments. It had gone too deep with him for that. With his stricken child in his arms, he could no more have cursed her destroyer than he would have sworn at the ravisher Death, had he looked upon her in her coffin.

He glanced from one to the other of the familiar, commiserating faces without flinching, and after a pause, with a queer little one-sided jerk of his head, indicated the door. They gaped at him, uncertain of his meaning; and he, nodding again, pointed with his thumb, with a gesture which they could not mistake.

They filed out obediently, Tommy endeavouring to cloak the awkwardness of the situation by remarking that he wouldn't be surprised if it coom on smudgin' rain afore owt was long, and the others making a great clatter with their heavy shoes, and noisily coughing.

"Barbara," said Farmer Sefton, when all had withdrawn except the old woman, "clear out, wilta? And shut door arter thee."

The tone was too authoritative to be disregarded, and Barbara, dropping her apron, shuffled away in high dudgeon.

"Now they're all out o' th' road, my wench," said Bob tenderly, "there's nobbut feyther 'ere. Thou needn't think shame o' showin' thy face. Feyther'll stan' by thee."

Now that the strain of keeping up a brave front before his cronies was gone, he looked old and broken. The ruddy colour went out of his face,

giving place to a grey whiteness ; tears came into his eyes, and his big loose under-lip trembled.

“Eh, whatever mun I do?” he muttered to himself. “Hoo’ll break her ’eart. Eh, I’d welly as soon ha’ seen her i’ her grave !”

The big, shaking hand which had been stroking her hair, now began to pat her shoulder soothingly—as a mother might comfort a sobbing babe.

“Theer now—theer, my lass. Give ower. We’s—we’s be reet enough—thou an’ me. Thou was allus feyther’s lass, thou knows—allus feyther’s *favryite*. Thou’lt content thysel’ wi’ me—wunnot thou? Thou’lt bide wi’ feyther now. Eh, we’s be as ’appy !” said Gaffer, in a choking voice, while the tears rolled down his cheeks.

Ruth, lying in his arms, felt vaguely comforted. She had her father still—he would stand by her, *he* wanted her. Something of the old childish feeling of absolute faith and dependence returned to her now as she felt the familiar caress, and heard his soothing tone. Suddenly raising herself, she took his face in both her hands, as she had done so often in blithe bygone days, and tender broken words came from her, her lips in this supreme moment unconsciously shaping themselves to the dialect which they first learned to babble.

“Eh, daddy! Thou’rt good. My own daddy—I’ll allus be thy lass—I’ll bide wi’ thee !”

END OF PART II.

## Part III.

### CHAPTER XXVII.

#### PHILOSOPHY.

IT was with some embarrassment and a good deal of reluctance that Henry prepared for the inevitable explanation with his mother. Her wrath and surprise had been extreme when the recent expedition had been mooted ; what would she say to the result ?

To his astonishment, however, after a few amazed interjections when he first hinted at the condition of affairs, she listened to his recital in pensive silence. After a pause, during which Henry in his pained shame had averted his eyes from her face, she heaved a deep sigh and crossed her hands on her lap.

“ Well, Henry, perhaps it's all for the best.”

“ Mother !—*what* do you say ? ”

“ I say, my dear, that very likely it's all for the best. Marriages of that kind—*real* marriages I mean, of course—very seldom turn out well, and *you'll find*,” nodding sagely, “ that Ruth herself will come to think so. Indeed, she's too sensible not to look on the matter in the right light.”

“ My dear mother, you don’t know what you are talking about. Surely there could not be a more miserable position for any girl—especially a girl so proud and upright as Ruth.”

“ Henry,” retorted Mrs. Alford, oracularly, “ depend upon it, I am right. She will get over it, and probably marry some nice, respectable man in her own position, and be *far* happier. My dear Henry, you really don’t understand people of that kind ; things don’t trouble them as they would *us*, you know. They think nothing of—well, what *we* should consider drawbacks to a girl. Don’t you remember Jack Billington, and how poor Mr. Pennington argued with him, when he asked him to put up the banns, and how, at last, poor man, with tears in his eyes, he told him—all *about* the girl he wanted to marry. ‘ Ah,’ said Jack, ‘ I’ve ’year’d that a two-three times. An’ yo’ll shout us o’ Sunday, parson, wunnot yo’ ? Same as I axed yo’ ? ’ *He* didn’t mind, you see.”

“ Upon my word, mother, if you talk like that I shall begin to think *you* don’t mind. Is it possible you don’t see what a disgraceful affair this is. Even putting poor Ruth out of the question, can’t you realize what an awful thing it is for Anthony to have done ? Do you know that if Ruth chose to prosecute him he might be condemned to penal servitude for this ? ”

“ You needn’t shriek at me, Henry. Really I have never known you to excite yourself so. I am quite sure Ruth would never think of anything so foolish and unkind. It would do her no good, and would

show a very nasty spirit on the part of the daughter of such an old tenant of ours. As for Anthony, I washed my hands of him when I first heard he contemplated making this low marriage—and now that it seems it is no marriage at all—well really, I can't help thinking it is better so. I do indeed. . . . And now, tell me—when you took her to him he didn't seem inclined to—ah!—*really* marry her, did he? He had got over the fancy, I suppose—Just give me that thing there—no, *that*—no, not the paper-knife. I *wish* you would not stare at me in that idiotic way—I want my *knitting*. You know, Henry, it was a most ill-advised and quixotic proceeding on your part; and, whether you like it or not, I repeat that I think Anthony showed more sense than I gave him credit for. *Really, Henry!*”

The old lady suddenly dropped her knitting and stared with a flushed and astonished countenance at her son as he stalked across the room. Henry had actually let fall a naughty word—a very naughty word—and now went out banging the door after him.

The village people discussed the case with equal philosophy. There were at first a great many sympathetic enquiries at the Warren Farm, and not a little disappointment was felt at the taciturn attitude assumed by all its inhabitants. Curious matrons, pausing, hand on hip, to ascertain “However in the name o' *Fortun'* it all coom about,” felt baffled and indignant when Barbara replied that nought was

never named to *her* about it; Luke had never anything to say at the best of times, and Maggie could only gratify them by long-winded repetitions of such details as they already knew. Ruth, herself, kept almost exclusively to her room, and as for poor old Bob, the neighbours knew not what to make of his newly acquired reticence. Bob was one with whom, as a rule, it was quite possible to "make free." Even with regard to his private purse—the point of all others generally to be approached with caution and reserve—he had shown himself handsomely communicative. People knew that Farmer Sefton "hadn't done so bad wi' th' farm, takin' one year wi' another;" they heard that Squire had knocked a tidy bit off the rent, for improvements carried out by the tenant—they had even heard Bob mention one or two successful investments of his—and a man "couldn't be no fairer than that" it was universally allowed. But now—not a word on the most exciting topic which had ever yet aroused the curiosity of a village community. Only the shortest and most unsatisfactory answers were vouchsafed to their diligent queries whenever an answer was returned at all; honest old Bob most frequently shouldering past the enquirer with a silent glare.

Even Barbara in vain endeavoured to break through this new-found reserve, being repulsed with a fierceness which astonished as much as it offended her.

"Dunnot coom moiderin' *me!*" Gaffer said, one



day, pommelling the table with his big brown fist. "Thou's 'yeared what th' lass tow'd us fust off, an' thot ought to satisfy thee. Hoo said hoo wasn't Missus Clifton, didn't hoo?—well, then, hoo isn't Missus Clifton. But hoo's my Ruth, as how 'tis. If thou can mak' a shift to howd thy tongue, I'd be obleeged to thee—an' if thou connot—keep out o' my road, thot's all."

"Yo'll be givin' me notice next," grumbled Barbara. "Me as has wortched for yo' an' done for yo' all they years, an' bin same as a mother to yo'r Ruth. But I tell yo', Mester Sefton, yo' can notice me if yo'n a mind, but I'm a goin' to bide at Warren Farm till yo' carry me out feet first."

Gaffer was visibly affected by this speech, and though he had no answer ready, beyond a faltering, "Nay, nay, we's not goo so fur's thot," he threw, during the course of the evening, several deprecating glances in Barbara's direction, which seemed to petition for forgiveness; and when she, softened by these blandishments, and, moreover, genuinely moved by his distress, endeavoured to console him by preparing his favourite dish for supper, he evidently thought she was heaping coals of fire on his head.

"Thou'lt ha' me marred an' spoilt wi' all they dainty nifes," he said, diffidently.

"A mon mun heyt—trouble or no trouble," returned the old woman with affected heartiness. "A mon mun heyt to live, yo' knowen, an' yo' scarce 'ad a bite to speak on at dinner-time."

“ I haven’t mich ’eart to heyt, see thou, Barbara,” said Bob, shaking his head and screwing up his mouth into a round dolorous ‘O.’ “ I keep thinkin’ o’ th’ poor wench i’ her chamber yonder, an’ ’t seems as if my mate ’ud welly choke me.”

Barbara surveyed him with her arms akimbo. “ Well, Gaffer, see yo’, if yo’ get agate o’ clemmin’ yo’sel yo’ll be ill for sure, an’ whatever ’ull our Ruth do then? Hoo’ll be fair distracted. If I’re yo’ I’d get all ’at I could into me. I would trewly—so’s to keep strong an’ ’earty fur th’ lass’s sake. Eh, if I could tell her to-neet as yo’d made a proper supper hoo *would* be pleased.”

“ Does thou think it, lass? ” asked Bob, dolefully.

He stuck his fork into a large morsel, and paused.

“ Think it! I’m sure on’t,” retorted Barbara.

“ Well, then,” said Bob, meekly; and falling to straightway, he attacked the fare which she had set before him with a valour which rejoiced her inmost soul. Her old face creased itself into a thousand wrinkles of satisfaction; her eyes followed the progress of the farmer’s fork from well-filled plate to capacious mouth; her jaws unconsciously moved in unison with his.

“ Sit thee down an’ get summat into thyself,” he observed presently, pausing with his mug of ale half way to his lips.

“ Nay, I’ve had my tay, an’ I dunnot fancy aught else to-neet. Theer’s more i’ th’ dish, Gaffer, an’ it’s a sin to waste it.”

"Should I raly have another bit, thinks thou?" asked Bob, who had been polishing his plate.

"Yigh, I do think so. It's yo'r duty, Gaffer, I tell yo'."

"Theer's nought i' th' world as I wouldn't do fur our Ruth," sighed Sefton, extending his plate pensively. "Nought i' th' wide world."

"Well, yo' mun bear up, yo' knowen, fur th' lass's sake. Eh, whatever would hoo do wi'out yo'?"

"Eh, Barbara, an' whatever should we do wi'out thee, owd lady?" said Gaffer, resting his knife and fork on end, and looking up with moist eyes. "Eh, we'd be fair lost. Thou howds us a'together an' stirs us up, and keeps up a man's 'cart when he's down, an' thot. Thou's a gradely owd wench, Barbara, an' so I tell thee," cried Gaffer, enthusiastically.

"Ah, but I mun keep out o' yo'r road, munnot I?" retorted Barbara, with an unsteady laugh; and then she blinked her eyes, and sniffed a little. "Eh, mon, I know yo'—dunnot look so scared. I can tell yo' dunnot mean one half o' what yo' say—yo'r bark's a long way war nor yo'r bite, Gaffer. Well, happen I'll not get notice this time."

"Nawe, not this time—if thou'lt behave, thou knows."

Master and servant grinned, and nodded at each other with a little one-sided jerk of the head

which betokened the best possible understanding ; and by-and-bye Barbara removed the dishes with a good deal of unnecessary clatter, and Farmer Sefton made a great parade of lighting his pipe.

A few days afterwards she met him descending the stairs, stepping cautiously with an oddly shaped bundle under his arm. He looked anxiously from right to left, and finally beckoned her into the parlour.

It was so early that the old-fashioned shutters were still closed and the curtains drawn, but enough light penetrated through the chinks to reveal Gaffer's portly form and solemn face.

"What han yo' gotten theer?" inquired Barbara, in awe-struck tones. Bob unfastened his bundle and spread its contents on the table.

"It's they cloo'es, lass," he whispered ; "they dress-cloo'es, thou knows, as I 'ad fur our Ruth's weddin'. I cannot thooal th' seet on 'em, an' I'm bahn to mak' a shift to get rid on 'em."

"Reet," responded Barbara. "We's mak' a bon-fire yonder t'other side o' th' orchard, an' we's ha' them brunt afore th' lass is awake."

"*Brunt!*" ejaculated Farmer Sefton, forgetting to whisper in his scandalized amazement. "Eh, woman, whatever art thou thinkin' on? Dost thou fancy I'm such a noddy as to mak' a bon-fire o' these here fine cloth cloo'es? Why, jist feel o' th' stuff! It's mich the same as satin."

"Well, an' if it is same as satin, yo'd never ha'

th' 'eart to weer 'em," retorted Barbara. "I'd scrat 'em off yo'r back pretty quick if yo' did. Eh, my word I would! I could never look at yo' in 'em. They mind me o' th' poor lass's misfortun'—I couldn't ston' 'em."

"No moore can I, I tell 'ee," cried Bob, "but I'm noan bahn to brun 'em for all that. Eh, they cost a deal too mich—why, they stood me very near th' price of a fat pig! Nay—I'd never go fur to weer 'em again. Eh, dear, thou needn't think it—but I'm gooin' to town this forenoon, thou knows, an' so I'll mak' a parcel on 'em"—here Gaffer dropped his voice pathetically—"an' tak' 'em to a slopshop."

"Ah, yo' can do that," assented Barbara approvingly. "It's a good notion. But yo'll never get yo'r money back, yo' known—nawe, nor th' halt on't."

"Eh, well!" sighed her master, with a lengthening face, "I mun do th' best I can—an' thot's all. Troubles never come single, they say."

"Yigh, an' it's true. What's gotten th' 'at, Gaffer? Yo'll be takkin' it, too."

"Th' 'at?" said Bob hesitatingly. "Well, I didn't reckon on sellin' th' 'at, thou sees. Th' 'at isn't so partic'lar, like. Eh, once yo' get yon 'at i' shape an' ready to don, it's mich same as another 'at. An' it's an uncommon cur'ous thing—reetdown clever, thot 'at is. Ah, I've sattled to keep th' 'at."

"Well, I wonder at yo'—that's all as I can say," cried Barbara with energy. "If it wur me as 'ad a

lass served th' gate yon chap—he is a chap, an' a bad chap for all he's gentry—served yo'r Ruth, I'd think shame o' wearing a nasty new-fangled 'at as I'd bought me to weer when hoo're wed. Eh—if yon 'at was mine I'd tak' it out an' donce on't.”

Bob rubbed his chin deprecatingly. Barbara's words struck home—but how could he bring himself to part with this most cherished of his treasures ?

“I'd never goo fur to weer it, thou knows,” he repeated weakly, “an' it seems a pity when all's said an' done—but theer—we's see.” He rolled up his parcel hastily and made for the door. “Happen next time I'm in town—”

Seeing Barbara's relentless face, he retreated without pursuing the question further. As time passed, however, and the hated hat remained intact in his cupboard, Barbara took the law into her own hands, with the result that one day Gaffer came down with a very red face, holding a battered object in his hand.

“This 'ere 'at,” he said, in tones tremulous with anger ; “Soombry's bin an' made an end on't. Th' spring's broke, and it won't goo into shape no ways.”

Barbara put down the pan she was cleaning and faced him defiantly.

“Well, I'm glad on't.”

“Thou'rt glad on't, art thou ? Well, an' that's a nice thing to say. I'd ha' thought thou'd have had a bit more feelin'. Happen' thou's had a hand i' th'

wark? Barbara"—in a terrible voice—"out wi't! Hast thou bin doncin' on this 'ere 'at?"

"Nawe, I haven't—so theer! Doncin' indeed! An' me at my toime o' life, an' rheumatic an' all—it's likely."

She did not consider it necessary to add that on the preceding day, having carefully arranged it in position on a chair, she had sat down on it.

"Well, it's done fur, thot's what it is," cried the Gaffer; and he flung it across the kitchen. "But if it mak's thee 'appy theer's nought to be said, I reckon. Maggie, pick up yon, an' chuck it on th' dust 'eap."

He went away, Barbara looking after him, half regretfully; she had not expected her master to be so "taken to," but there was no use in crying over spilt milk. And when all was said and done it was a sin and a shame for Gaffer to keep yon queer-lookin' thing as hadn't brought no luck—neither to him, nor th' lass—that was sure.

So the Gibus hat was bestowed on a scarecrow, Maggie having reverently invested the most needy "boggart" in the neighbourhood with this last remnant of her master's finery. Gaffer consented thereto with a kind of grunt.

"Ah, as well mak' some use on't!" for, like a true north-countryman, he never sacrificed thrift to sentiment.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### SUNDAY VISITORS.

THE improvement in Farmer Sefton's spirits was, in spite of all Barbara's amenities, only transitory; as he said himself, how could a man keep anyways up when his wench was breaking her heart? Poor Ruth did indeed seem like the shadow of herself; even her bodily strength appeared to be sapped, and the determined spirit which had hitherto upheld her was unequal to cope with her present agony. She passed the first few weeks after her return home in a state of physical and mental collapse. Barbara could not understand it. That Ruth, the most stirring and active of lasses, should lie abed till half the morning's work was done—not sleeping, no—but staring straight in front of her, putting off the exertion of rising and facing another day as long as she possibly could; that, when she came languidly downstairs, she should sit with folded hands, watching the women-folk bustle about, but not offering to do a hand's turn herself; that, when her father and Barbara pressed her to eat she should comply, obediently enough, but evidently without appetite or



enjoyment, all this caused old Barbara to feel both puzzled and aggrieved. And so it came to pass that one Sunday afternoon when Ruth's aunt, Mrs. Mary Tyrer, drove round in her shandry, accompanied by her daughter Jinny Snippet, Barbara, being alone in "the room," was unable to restrain her irritation.

"Th' Gaffer's just stepped out, Mistress Tyrer, but he'll be in to's tay afore aught's long, an' Luke's powlerin' about somewheers—he'll not be fur off. I'm pleased yo'n coom—eh, I am!—an' so will our master be. Eh, I welly think sometimes as all this trouble 'ull be th' death on him. Our Ruth, see—ah, hoo's up yonder in her chamber—eh, my word he does tak' on about her, he *does*. It's mich if I can get him to heyt, an' he'll sigh an' he'll fret, an' he'll sit looking at her an' shakin's 'yead till he very near drives me silly."

Here Barbara got up and set an antimacassar straight on a chair ; then she wiped her eyes with a corner of her apron, and sat down again.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Tyrer had been removing her bonnet and "dolman"—as she was particular in designating her heavily-jetted Sunday mantle—folding her gloves, and smoothing over her sleek iron-grey hair. Then seating herself, and shaking out her skirts, she prepared to give Barbara her undivided attention.

"Yo' never say!" she ejaculated. "What's gotten th' lass? Hoo should be reet fain to be rid o' yon

ne'er-do-weel. See yo', Barbara, I never did howd wi' our Bob's ways wi' Ruth. He was allus thot foolish an' thot set up about her. What ever did th' wench want wi' nuns' convents? See now what's coom on't! I allus towd him hoo was sure to coom to harm. An' lettin' Mester Anthony coom danglin' arter her—him as we'd allus 'yeard sich tales about—eh, I mind how often I said to him, 'I wonder at thee, Bob, I do raly'—but he never took no notice."

Jinny Snippet, a pert, buxom, sandy-haired damsel, with a fringe almost dipping into her round blue eyes, and a silver locket four inches in diameter hanging round her neck, remarked, as she threw her feathered hat on to the table, that she never could see what there was in Mester Anthony for Ruth to be so set on him. Him with that brown face, an' all, an' getting on for forty year of age, folks said.

"I says to my brother," put in Mrs. Tyrer, sucking in her breath with comfortable appreciation of her own unfailing wisdom and righteousness, "I says to him when they was first startin' company-keepin': 'Never tell me,' says I—them was my very words—'never tell me as Squire Anthony means fair by thy lass. If he does,' says I, 'why doesn't he get married in's own church an' not i' yon Popish chapel?' I says."

"Ah," chimed in Jinny, "if he'd ha' got Mr. Pennington to marry 'em 't'ud ha' bin different. I know I'd never think mysel' half wed if our parson didn't do th' job."

"Ah, Jinny," retorted her mother, "we's have a fair an' square when *thou'rt* wed! Well, but, Barbara, Ruth's never frettin' hersel' for yon, still?"

"Well, hoo's frettin' hersel' for summat—an' frettin' us too, I tell yo', Mistress Tyrer. Hoo's getten feyther so's he's very near broken-'earted. I wish to th' Lord yo'd speak to her, ma'am. Hoo'd happen 'earken to yo'. Tell her," said Barbara, pausing with her apron half way to her eyes, "we's be all i' we're graves together soon if hoo doesn't shap' different."

"Well," said Mrs. Tyrer, slowly hoisting herself out of her chair, "I can but speak to her same as if hoo were my own lass—an' I am th' nearest hoo has arter her feyther—her feyther's only sister, yo' known. I'll speak to her—'tis but reet. 'See thou, Ruth,' I'll say, 'thou'rt neglectin' thy duty shameful. All as is past an' gone shouldn't trouble thee now. If thou's happen done wrong i' takkin' up wi' Mester Anthony—as were *allus* leetgi'en an' mischeevous sin' he were a lad—he's gone, an' thou'rt rid on him. An' it's downright *wicked*,' I'll say, 'for thee to be frettin' thysel' for a man as thou didn't ought to *think* on.' I'll say that straight out," cried Mrs. Tyrer, pausing for breath.

"Ah, do," said Barbara, approvingly.

"I will," pursued Aunt Mary, warming to her subject, "and I'll say"—again assuming a severe air and speaking in a declamatory tone—"I wonder thou doesn't think shame o' sich carryin's on. I'd

ha' thought thou'd ha' had a bit more pride. Coom down an' do thy work,' I'll say. 'Fettle up th' place—let's see thee a bit house-proud again, an' see if that won't fetch all thy maggots out o' thy 'yead.'"

"Eh, an' so 'twould," agreed Barbara. "'Tisn't 'ealthy for a lass same as her to be startin' lazy ways at her time o' life. Her as used to be agate afore aught was stirrin'—why, yo'll never see her so mich as tak' a dish-clout i' her hand now."

"Well, I'll put it to her plain," said Mrs. Tyrer, still lofty and severe. "'What about feyther?' I'll ax her. 'Thou thinks happen as he hasn't got no feelin' because he doesn't barge at thee. But he has, I tell thee—he's thot upset an' miser'ble he scarce knows whether he's on his 'yead or on's 'eels. Thou should tak' thought fur 'im, if thou doesn't for thysel'—thou'lt break's 'eart afore thou's done if thou doesn't tak' heed to thysel' an' mend thy ways.'"

"Ah, tell her thot," said the old woman. "See yo' now, Mistress Tyrer, goo reet upstairs an' tell her—an' we's happen get soom good on her. Go reet up, ma'am. Yo'll find her settin' by th' winder very like."

"Should I raly go up, think yo', Barbara?" enquired Mrs. Tyrer, with a sudden change of tone. "I've never set e'en on her sin' hoo coom back, yo' known. Yo'd happen best call her down—or else nip up to say I'm coomin'."

"Call her down! eh, woman, an' mich good thot ud do. Hoo'd never coom. Hoo wunnot see

nobry. Eh, poor lass!"—with a sudden change of tone—"hoo hasn't the—heart, see yo'. Goo yo' ways up, ma'am, do, an' tak' her a bit easy to start wi'."

Mrs. Tyrer, after hesitating for a moment, went creaking up the narrow stairs. Barbara stood looking after her a little pensively till she heard Ruth's door open; then she turned to Jinny.

"It's to be 'oped as your mother wunnot be too 'ard wi' th' lass," she said. "Hoo's in trouble when all's said an' done."

Jinny laughed. "Eh, Barbara, yo're a caution!" she said. "If my mother does sauce her a bit yo'n nobbut yoursel' to blame. But never fret—my mother never says so mich as hoo says hoo'll say."

With this lucid statement the damsel caught up her hat and approached the door.

"I'll walk a bit o' th' road towards th' lane end an' see what's gotten Uncle Bob," she observed.

"Or Luke," responded Barbara, drily. "Happen Luke 'ud be moore to yo'r mind, Jinny. He's a bit younger if he isn't so mich livelier—an' he's no kin to yo'—eh, yo' could happen mak' shift wi' him to pass th' time."

"No kin!" ejaculated Jinny, turning her head, and reddening slightly, "why, he's mich same as a brother."

"A funny mak' o' brother," commented the old woman. "Ah, put on yo'r fine 'at, do! It's a pity it isn't a cap an' then yo' could set it at him. Hoo's

an impident little snicket," she added to herself, as Jinny made her egress with an indignant bounce, "but I fancy *th' owd lass*, as hoo ca's me, was a match for her for once."

Meanwhile Jinny, curiously enough, did chance to stroll towards the farm-yard, at the farthest end of which she descried Luke's lanky form. He was contemplating a certain interesting old pig with a portly figure and a very retroussé nose. Jinny approached and looked over his shoulder.

"Ah, it's yo', is it? An' wheer han yo' coom from?" he enquired. Then taking the straw he had been chewing out of his mouth he pointed it at the sow. "Hoo's a beauty, isn't hoo!" he remarked.

"I like th' little black Berkshires best," answered Jinny. "We'n got Berkshires up at our place."

"Han yo'?" said Luke. "I don't care for 'em mich mysel'. They dunnot seem to fat same as these do. Eh, this here's a splendid sow. The litters we'n 'ad from her! Yo' wouldn't believe! The money we'n made out of her!"

Jinny glanced from the matron in question to the row of shippons in the rear of the pig-sties, and thence to the well-filled stackyards, the great barn, overflowing with golden store; and a thought which had been simmering in her mind all day found utterance.

"Uncle Bob must be very well off—Ruth 'ill be a rich woman some day."

"Hoo isn't one as 'ill feel the benefit o' it, then,"

retorted Luke, rather contemptuously. "Hoo's uncommon poor-spirited, Ruth is."

Jinny began to retrace her steps, pausing opposite a shed where a couple of little calves were enclosed.

"Suck, suck," she cried, thrusting her stumpy pink fingers through the railings. "These is pretty-shaped fellows. You'll soon be startin' coompany-keepin' with Ruth again, I should think."

"Eh?" queried Luke. "Why, Jinny! Ruth 'ud never think o' gettin' wed again."

"An' why not? Hoo's never bin wed at all—not to say proper wed. If hoo'd a grain o' sense hoo'd mak' haste an' get her a rale 'usband so as folks 'ull give over talkin'. Aye, I'll soon be expectin' to hear yo' shouted."

"Me an' her?" quoth Luke, meditatively. "Well, I dunno. 'T'ud seem queer soom way. I'd keep thinkin' as th' t'other were raly her 'usband. It 'ud allus seem so to me, yo' known."

"Well, it 'ud be very silly o' yo'," retorted Miss Snippet. "Mester Anthony an' her's no more man an' wife nor you an' me's brother an' sister, Luke."

"We're a kind o' brother an' sister, aren't we?" said Luke.

"That's what I said to Barbara just now, but hoo laughed an' said it 'ud be a funny kind. We had different fathers an' mothers, yo' known."

"That's true," replied Aughton, indifferently.

"So we *can't* be any kind o' relations?"

"Nawe," said Luke, "I s'pose not."

"Why, don't you remember?" said Jinny, suddenly very sprightly and ingenuous. "Bob Winstanley an' his wife were just the same as you an' me."

"Well, an' that was a funny thing," remarked the youth. "For 'em to get wed, yo' known. Why, you an' me 'ull be thinkin' o' keepin' coompany next."

Jinny laughed uproariously. "Ah, who knows what chance I might have had if it hadn't ha' been for Ruth."

"Yo're a likelier-lookin' lass nor Ruth when all's said an' done!" observed Luke, appraising her calmly.

"Ah, but look at the fortin' Ruth 'ill have," said Jinny, sidling a little nearer him, nevertheless.

"So she will," agreed Luke, "but yo're the likeliest, Jinny. Yo' are that."

The girl chirrupped to the calves as though she had not heard him, but presently looked round with a titter.

"Folks 'ull say yo're a noddy if yo' coom coortin' me when Ruth's to be 'ad."

"Who says I'm bahn to court yo'?" enquired Luke, with rather disconcerting surprise.

"Nobry said it—yo' said it yo'rsel'," cried Jinny, inconsequently.

"Nawe—nought o' th' soort. I said, yo're a likely lass, an' so yo' are."

Jinny chirrupped to the calves again.

"Not but what," went on Luke, gallantly, "if I was to get agate o' courtin' I wouldn't as soon keep coom-



pany wi' you as wi' another lass, but I'm not thinkin' on't at th' present time. Not at th' present time, yo' see."

"I s'pose yo' think a body 'll be willin' to wait till yo'n made up yo'r mind—but happen yo'll find yo'r too late then."

"I dunnot think nought about it," retorted Luke bluntly. Then, gazing at the girl's flaming cheeks, he sucked his straw a moment or two, and finally laughed to himself. "Dun yo' know what I'm thinkin' on now?"

"Naw, I dunnot—an' I care nought," returned Jinny pettishly.

"I'm thinkin'," went on Luke, smiling still, and keeping his eyes fixed on her face, "yo' known th' apple tree as grows left-'and corner of our orchard, yon?"

Jinny nodded, surprised and interested in spite of herself at this sudden change of subject.

"Well, th' apples on that tree an' yo'r cheeks is just same colour."

"Well, I never!" laughed the girl, recovering her good-humour. Her white teeth flashed as she laughed, and two little dimples suddenly appeared in the cheeks in question.

"Just th' very same!" pursued Luke, delighted at his own brilliancy. "Ha, ha, ha, th' very same!"

"I s'pose if yo' was a bird yo'd like to peck at 'em," said Jinny, who was well versed in the rules of rustic flirtation, and began to think it might be

worth while after all to give Luke a little training therein, unpromising as he had at first appeared. But Luke was an unsatisfactory pupil. He still stared at Jinny, it is true, but he took her remark quite literally.

"Nawe," he said, "I never cared so mich fur apples. Nobbut baked, yo' known—I could fancy 'em then. I'd a dale sooner have a good pear."

"If yo' was a bird, I meant," said Jinny angrily, and then she tapped an unoffending calf on the nose. "Coom, let's goo our ways in. Th' tay 'll be cowd."

"Jinny," said Luke, as he slouched after her, "han yo' got a chap now? Yo' an Joe Gannon's not keepin' coompany no more, are yo'?"

"What's that to yo'?" cried the girl, whisking round.

"Eh, I nobbut axed. Soombry towd me as yo' wasn't. Well, I'll tell yo' summat. 'T wunnot be long afore yo'n gettin' another young mon, Jinny. Nay, it wunnot."

They were walking side by side now, rather close together.

"Eh, Luke!" said Jinny. "What dun yo' say thot fur?"

"It's true," retorted Luke. "Yo'll see."

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### LAST LINKS.

WHEN Mrs. Tyrer entered her niece's room, Ruth was, as Barbara had opined, sitting by the window, looking listlessly out into the little orchard. She had grown thin—very thin—and pale, too, and her eyes looked sunken.

“Eh, my wench!” said Aunt Mary, staring at her hard as she advanced. “I ’ad to coom up an’ see thee, sin’ thou wouldn’t coom down. An’ how art thou, Ruth, love? Nobbut poorly, I doubt.”

Ruth rose and kissed her, and dutifully placed a chair. Mrs. Tyrer sat down, gazing at her with round, melancholy eyes, and breathing hard. Her black silk dress creaked as her portly bosom rose and fell, and the genuine distress in her face intensified as the moments passed.

“Eh, lass, thou’s fell away awful,” she sighed, after a time. “Eh, thou’rt—thou’rt nobbut a shadder It’s enough to break a body’s ’eart to look at thee.”

She sniffed in an ominous manner, and presently drawing from her pocket a handkerchief, redolent of peppermint, wiped her eyes, and sobbed.

“Enough to break a body’s ’eart, it is. See thou, Ruth—it’ll kill thy feyther.”

Ruth’s face changed, and she caught her breath with a little gasp: “Oh, Aunt Mary, how can I help it?”

“An’ that’s true, love—I dunnot raly know how thou con help it,” sobbed Aunt Mary. “Dear heart, I dunnot raly know how thou con.”

Her broad, good-humoured face went into her handkerchief again. Mrs. Tyrer was very like her brother in appearance, and to the full as soft-hearted. The proverb which Barbara had applied to her master would have also held good where his sister was concerned. Mrs. Tyrer’s bark was certainly much more alarming than her bite: at the first sight of her niece’s pale face all desire to deliver the lecture which she had prepared left her. But presently, endeavouring to regain some degree of firmness, she sat upright, mopped her eyes, and rolled her handkerchief into a hard tight ball ready for use if absolutely required, but not sufficiently inviting to encourage further “giving way.”

“See thou, Ruth, when all’s said an’ done, theer’s no use i’ makin’ matters war nor what they are. No use i’ th’ world! Thou’rt frettin’ thysel’ to death, see, fur what cannot be mended now—an’ thou’rt frettin’ feyther so as he con scarce howd up’s ’yead. It ’ull not do thee so mich good t’ ’ave him laid up, thou knows—an’ trewly, he’s bin sadly warsenin’ ever sin’ thou’s comed back.”

"I'm sorry," said Ruth, passing her hand over her brow. "I'm afraid I've been very selfish."

"Nay, my lass, I wouldn't goo fur to say selfish—eh, dear o' me, nawe, not *selfish*. Bless thy 'eart, thou couldn't be selfish if thou tried. But when a body's i' trouble, thou sees, it isn't allus easy to tak' thought fur other folks—an' thou didn't jest chance to notice how feyther's failed this month or two."

"Oh, Aunt Mary, you don't think he's really ill?" cried Ruth, piteously. "What shall I do? How was it I didn't see it?"

"Nay, never tak' on so, love. He'll be reet enough once he thinks thou'rt better—thou'll see. Coom down wi' me to tay, an' talk to him a bit, an' he'll be as fain—my word, he'll scarce howd himsel'. An' if I were thee, Ruth, I'd get to my work again—up an' down the house, thou knows—thou'll be a lot better fur 't, and it 'ull seem a dale more nat'ral to thy feyther. See—it's gettin' time now fur thee to shap' to summat if thou has coom whoam fur good."

"I will," said the girl. "You are right, aunt. I'll set to work—I should have done it before—and I'll come down with you now."

"That's reet," cried Mrs. Tyrer, joyfully, restoring her handkerchief to her pocket as she spoke. "Coom—theer's a good wench—thou'll find thysel' better for 't, see if thou doesn't. Coom, my lass, cheer up! things is never so bad but what they met ha' bin war—an' happen all 'ull turn out better nor thou thinks fur. Eh, I mind when poor Snippet wur

sowd up, I thought there was never sich a misfortunate craitur as mysel' i' th' wide warld—an' not so lung arter he was took an' I was left wi' a rook o' little childer an' nobry to do fur 'em but mysel'. An' thot was a dale war, thou knows—eh, thou may think I made sure then theer was no one wi' sich trouble as me! An' afore th' year were out Tyrer an' me was shouted, an' I've bin as coomfortable ever sin'!—I tell thee, lass, Tyrer's as good a mon as ever a woman need be teed to. So theer, see—never lose 'eart."

She rose now and smoothed down her skirt, her face aglow with honest satisfaction, and led the way downstairs, overjoyed at the successful issue of the interview.

As they entered the living-room, Luke and Jinny, who had been standing by the window, darted suddenly apart, with sundry blushes and giggles.

"Jinny, what hasto agate?" said her mother, looking at her dubiously for a moment, but finally laughing. "Get away wi' thee!—goo an' tell Barbara"—with triumphant enunciation—" 'at Ruth an' me has coomed down fur we're tay. Well, Luke," she added, as the girl disappeared, "thou an' our Jinny's gettin' meeterly thick, it seems."

"Seems so," said Luke, grinning and glancing curiously at Ruth, who smiled at him in return.

"Well, to be sure!" ejaculated Mrs. Tyrer. She was not ill-pleased. Luke was known to be in the receipt of a good wage, and stood, moreover, high in

her brother's favour. Presently Bob Sefton's burly form was seen crossing the yard.

"We's goo an' meet him," said Mrs. Tyrer. And out they went, the old farmer's face, which had been doleful enough when he had first come in sight, brightening as he descried his daughter.

"'Ere's thy Ruth coom to sup tay wi' us," announced Mrs. Tyrer.

"Eh, Ruthie!" said Bob, looking at her incredulously. It was the first time since her return that Ruth had appeared when there was "company."

Meeting her reassuring smile, his doubtful expression changed into rapture; and Ruth felt amply rewarded for the efforts she was making. Many times, during the meal which ensued, the sight of her father's joyful face was a reproach to her for her tardy effort to rouse herself; and she resolved that her personal sorrow should no longer overshadow the lives of those she loved.

Even Luke seemed overflowing with good humour this evening. Ruth was both amused and touched as she noticed his eagerness to supply her wants, and observed the genuine pleasure which overspread his usually stolid countenance when she consented to help herself from one of the various dishes which he perpetually propelled towards her. Poor Luke! he had a good heart after all. Doubtless his own happiness gave him a certain sympathy for her misery. It would be nice if Luke married Jinny. Father would be pleased. So Ruth glanced

kindly at Luke as she accepted the piece of bun loaf which had been for some little time hovering over her plate balanced on the point of a knife; and then she smiled absently on Jinny—and did not notice how Jinny tossed her head.

At last the guests departed; and Farmer Sefton and Ruth saw them off from the gate.

When they were out of sight Bob tilted his hat back on his head and surveyed his daughter with an anxious smile; his face all ready to lengthen itself if Ruth's depression seemed again about to overwhelm her.

"Thou'rt a lot better to-day, my wench, aren't 'ee?" he said, timidly.

"Yes, father. Dear father, you thought you'd lost your lass, didn't you? All this time, I mean. But you haven't, you see. She's come back, and she means to stay now."

"Well, an' that's good news," said Bob, hesitatingly; his face was still puckered up—eyes and mouth round, with a certain remnant of anxiety. "Thou means it, does thou, Ruthie?"

"I do, indeed."

"Coom, then," returned the farmer, "coom, that's better," and he smiled broadly.

"It's a lovely evening," said Ruth, "let us go for a little walk and you shall show me the crops."

"Th' crops! Eh, lass—I think thou *has* bin lost all this time. Why, corn's all cut an' carried—the whole on it is, an' we didn't have no turmits this year—an'



th' arter-grass is stacked yonder at th' Six-Bits, too fur to goo to-neet. Theer's nobbut th' 'taters left."

"Well, let's look at them," said Ruth, passing her arm through his.

"Coom, then, let's look at th' 'taters. My word, an' thou'rt a funny wench. Th' tops is all died down, thou knows; we's be getting 'em up soon. But coom—we's have a look at 'em if that's all."

They strolled through the familiar fields, Ruth conscious of an odd sense of unreality as she noticed the yellow and brown country. It was autumn already; the air was crisp, and the leaves of the berry-laden hedge-rows sere and few. Yonder were stretches of russet stubble where the golden wheat had waved, and this brown expanse striped with lines of withered stalks was the potato-field, green, it seemed, but yesterday. All the homely farm routine had been going on just as usual while she sat apart with folded hands. She had not noticed the various stages; she had asked no questions, though this was the important part of a farmer's year; she had paid no heed to what her father told her—shown, and indeed felt, no interest in his success. Poor father! and he had never said a word, but she would make up for it now; she would atone to him—not by expressing regret or beseeching forgiveness, which would but serve to puzzle and depress him further—but by devoting herself to him heart and soul as in old times. She must try to put it all away from her; all the cruel joy, the bitter sorrow, the love insepar-

able from both, all must be alike wiped out. She must fall into the old familiar ways again, try to feel absorbed in the simple duties which once had been enough to fill her days, live her girl's life once more—Ah, never that! Never a girl again—never more free and young and happy.

“It'll be a heavy crop, this will,” observed Bob. “If we'n any luck we ought to do well with our potatoes this year. They're scarce, thou knows, all round about—it seems a wonderful thing as this here field should ha' 'scaped so well. Well—now thou's seen 'taters, wheer art thou fur next?”

“Let us go round the shippons now; all round—we haven't had a walk for ever so long—you and I.”

“An' that's true”—beaming on her—“neither we have, lass. True enough! But we're havin' a rare one now—we are, fur sure. Same's owd times. Coom an' have a gradely good look at th' new heifer. Hoo's a beauty, hoo is, an' comin' on wonderful sin' I bought her. Eh, hoo'll mak' a splendid cow next year if hoo goes forrard as hoo's shapin'.”

The new heifer was inspected, also the dairy-cows, the pigs, and calves; even the cart-horses, enjoying their Sabbath rest in the field behind the orchard. Poor old Sefton stumped along beside his daughter, pointing out the various points of each cherished animal, his broad, good-tempered face all a-grin, but a slight undercurrent of perplexity mingling with his joy. This was his Ruth sure enough, and she was

walking with him and talking with him just as she always used to. Here was he, showing her everything, and telling her everything, and here was she, listening and laughing—laughing out loud, as she had not laughed for weeks, and looking quite bright, and yet—

“’Tisn’t quite the same as owd times neither,” he thought to himself now and then. “Nay—not the same as owd times. But happen we’s work round i’ th’ end. Time’s a wonderful thing an’ the Lord’s good.”

He cheered up altogether as this two-fold reason for confidence occurred to him, and entered the house in buoyant spirits.

“Why, here’s Luke wi’ a great posy in’s coat. Michaelmas daisies, I b’lieve, an’ thot theer little dahlia as was comin’ out so nice just by the door. What did thou pick it for, an’ it not full blown? Eh, they lads and lasses they never can see a flower growin’ but what they mun goo an’ pluck it.”

“It’s fur Ruth,” said Luke, hauling the posy in question out of his button-hole—a somewhat difficult feat owing to its size, and the stoutness of the string with which he had made it secure.

“Oh, thank you, Luke,” cried the girl, smiling, and fastening the oddly-shaped trophy in her dress. She really was quite touched at the little attention. Luke grinned, and opened his mouth as if he were going to speak, but apparently changing his mind, closed it with a snap, assumed a solemn expression, and stalked into the house.

A few hours later Ruth sat by her window again, looking out into the night, thinking and waiting. At last the absolute stillness of the house betokened that everyone was asleep, and creeping softly downstairs, she opened the back door and went out. The air was sharp, but clear and still, and the moon was shining brightly. Ruth walked briskly along, her way lying through lonely lanes and leading her across bare, bleak fields. No thought of fear occurred to her, though she had seldom been out so late, and the sound of her own footsteps and the rustle of her skirts broke the silence strangely.

At last she reached her destination, the church at Brooklands; and climbing over the locked gate, and crossing the churchyard, made her way to the rear of the little building, and knelt down close to the chancel-wall. She leaned her head against the rough plaster, and remained for a long time motionless, her heart beating loudly; she felt pitifully weak and afraid now. Afraid—not of the loneliness of the spot, but of her own solemn purpose.

She had come here to do a thing which must be done, but which cost her sorely in the doing. She was going to put Anthony out of her life, to sever the last links which connected her with him; and she would do it here, on this sacred spot, within the shadow of the church where she had pledged herself to cleave to him till death. Only here, it seemed to her, was it possible—only like this. The pitiful little ceremonial which she was about to carry out seemed

to make the actual break easier. Youth must always be doing—it is in later life that one learns to suffer with folded hands. Ruth was determined to cast away that which she felt to be a source of temptation, and there seemed to her to be a kind of sacramental virtue in the outward act from which she hoped to gather additional grace and courage for her difficult future. The thought had sustained her during her rapid walk hither; but now that she found herself actually on the spot she felt a sense of sudden desolation, which robbed her of her strength. Presently rousing herself, however, she began to dig with a little trowel with which she had provided herself. She dug deep, and as close to the church wall as she could. A gaping hole lay before her at last—a tiny grave—and drawing a little packet from her bosom she placed it at the bottom. She had already swept down some earth over it, when an uncontrollable impulse seized her, and she hastily snatched it out again, unfolding the wrappings and kissing their contents many times. The moonlight gleamed on them as she held them—her wedding-ring, and the crucifix Anthony had given her. Even that must go—she must keep nothing—nothing that reminded her of him.

As she kissed it she thought of his look on the morning he had pressed it to his lips, of his words—

“It was for your sake—is it not sweet to be loved as I love you? And then, kneeling there, she shook like a reed in a sudden storm of passion.

Was it not sweet? Ah, God, yes—yes, it was sweet.

“Oh, Anthony, you loved me then—you did love me—you loved me then! Oh, Anthony, I told you to go out of my sight. My God, my God, if I could only see him now—as he used to be—just for one— one moment, before I have done with him for ever!”

Again and again she kissed the little cross, rocking to and fro. “For your sake now, Anthony—for yours—because you loved me then.”

She paused, looking fixedly at the little cross clutched tightly in her fingers, and then her grasp relaxed and she lifted it once more to her lips—this time very reverently.

“And now, my Lord and my God, I kiss it for Your sake, because You died for me! Forgive me—and help me to forget him. I pray now to forget him—after this night I will even pray for him no more. I give him up—to You. I place him in Your hands—Oh, my Lord, You died for him, too—You died for him, too—do not forsake him!”

The little packet went once more into its grave, and the earth was pressed down and smoothed above it. Then Ruth rose and stepped back a few paces. Through the stained glass window overhead she caught the glimmer of the sanctuary lamp, beneath which she had so often breathed Anthony’s name. She had been kneeling at the altar rails yonder that first day when he had followed her into the chapel and asked her to pray for him, and from that time she

had never suffered a sun to set without speaking of him to God. And now she had pledged herself to pray for him no more.

She flung out her hands towards the light—

“Let my life be a prayer—since his name must not cross my lips! My whole life—with all that I have to do and to suffer—I offer it for him!”

## CHAPTER XXX.

### HENRY'S "FOLLY."

ONE day, in early February, Ruth went to Little Alford, carrying a store of good things for little sick Lizzie. She had, since that conversation with her aunt which had forced her to return to her former mode of life, devoted herself energetically to her customary duties, and none appeared to her more imperative than this of succouring those in need. Nevertheless, it was always difficult and painful to her to show herself in the village, meeting so many curious eyes, and causing, so she felt, so many gossiping tongues to wag with fresh vigour. To-day, it seemed to her, more heads than ever peered at her through small-paned windows and round half open doors ; and such of her acquaintance as she met face to face, bade her good day with an odd expression in which excitement was mingled with compassion.

Her cousin Jinny Snippet almost ran against her in the street.

"Hello, Ruth!" she exclaimed. "How art thou? Eh, I didn't look to see thee out to-day."



“Why not?” said Ruth, with a sudden tightening of the heart. “Has anything happened?”

Jinny looked astonished and abashed.

“Eh, nought, if thou’s ’yerd nought. Theer’s never mich stirrin’ here, thou knows. I thought happen thou’d ’yerd some news.” Ruth shook her head, and Jinny, after an embarrassed glance up and down the street, remarked that her mother would be waiting for her, and darted off.

Everyone was strange to-day, Ruth thought; even little Lizzie looked up at her from her pillows with loving compassion tinged with wonder; and the mother followed her to the door, staring at her curiously the while.

“Yo’n not ’yerd no news, Ruth, I s’pose? Nawe, theer isn’t mich news t’ear—an’ what theer is is happen none so good. But I wouldn’t tak’ on, Ruth, as how ’tis. What’s ended cannot be mended, as th’ sayin’ goos. Eh, happen’s all’s for the best i’ th’ long run. Well? an’ feyther’s well?—eh, thot’s reet—thot’s reet. An’ yo’re goin’ yo’r ways a-whoam?—Good-day t’ yo’, Ruth, an’ thank yo’—an’ dunnot lose ’eart, love.”

Ruth gazed at her with questioning eyes. What had they all heard? She would not ask. She turned and walked away slowly, because of her trembling knees and the sickeningly rapid beating of her heart.

She had not made many steps, however, before Mary Waring darted out of her doorway and stopped her.

"Eh, Ruth! Can yo' look in a minute? My mother's that set on seein' yo' I cannot keep her quiet. Eh, theer weren't no howdin' 'er when hoo 'yerd as yo' were i' th' village. Step upstairs, will yo', jist for a minute; hoo'll not keep yo' long."

She seized the girl's arm as she spoke, and after hanging back for a moment, Ruth suffered herself to be drawn indoors and up the narrow stairs. She might as well know, after all—she would have to know sooner or later—and Susan would tell her.

Mrs. Waring was indeed sitting up in bed, her face crimson with excitement, her palsied hands extended.

"How are yo', Ruth, how are yo', lass? Sit yo' down. Well, an' what say yo' to this 'ere bit o' news? 'My word,' I says to our Mary, 'Whatever will Ruth say! Eh, what *will* hoo say?' says I."

"I haven't heard the news," said Ruth, falteringly.

"Eh, thou never says! Eh, Mary! Did thou ever 'yeer o' sich a thing! Eh, I'd ha' thought Squire'd ha' tow'd yo' first off. What, dunnot yo' know as yon chap o' yo'rs—Mester Clifton—'as gone an' gotten wed? He raly 'as done th' job this time. It's some mak' o' foreign body as he's takken up wi' yonder—a black woman, some folks say, but I could scarce b'lieve that. But

he's wed, as how 'tis"—raising her cracked voice triumphantly—"Th' news come to th' 'all yesterday, an' Mrs. Simmons—th' 'ousekeeper yon, yo' known—towd me her own sel', an' hoo 'ad it straight fro' Missus Alford's maid. Th' owd lady were that surprised, hoo shrieked out loud when hoo read th' letter. Some o' th' Squire's friends met Mester Anthony an' his new lady somewheers in France, or one o' they places, an' they'd bin married above a bit, they said. Ah, I *was* surprised! An' yo' didn't know, Ruth—eh, I raly thought Squire'd ha' towd yo'—but he's not one as tak's thought mich for nobry, I reckon."

Ruth rose and tried to say good-bye in her ordinary tone, but her form swayed as she stood, and her voice shook.

"Why, yo'r never takin' on about it, are yo'?" cried Susan. "My word, hoo's all of a tremble, Mary! Fetch her a sup of wayter. Eh, Ruth, I'd never gi' 't a thought if I were yo', he's a wastril, yo' known, an' an ill'un at that. *I'd* never fret mysel'. Sit yo' down a bit, an' yo'll be better presently. Eh, theer's a deal o' lasses 'at has war trouble nor yo', I tell yo'! Lasses 'at has no whoam to bide in when they're i' misfortun'. Yigh, an' some on 'em dursen't goo back to feyther and mother, they're that fleyed, yo' known. Eh, I mind a poor lass 'ere i' th' village once, Maggie Lannock her name were, hoo'd been 'ticed away, yo' known—her chap were a married man, too, an' he give her th' bag arter a

while, and went back to 's missus. An' when hoo'd getten whoam her mother shut the door i' her face, an' t' feyther called her ill names, and tow'd her hoo met goo t' th' workhouse. So poor Maggie 'ad to goo theer. But hoo geet ower her trouble arter a while—an' hoo went to sarvice an' geet wed i' th' end to a butcher-lad. So all's well as ends well, yo' see. So dunnot lose 'eart, lass. I could a'most fancy it were poor Maggie's misfortun' ower again when folks get agate o' talkin' about yo'—both o' yo' takkin' up wi' married men, yo' see. Eh, I were tellin' our Mary to-day about Maggie, an' hoo says, 'I shouldn't wonder if Ruth didn't get wed to soombry afore long,' says hoo. 'Hoo'll not be so partic'lar now, and theer's mony a dacent lad as 'ud think none th' war on her for misfortun'.' Why, yo're not off, are yo', Ruth? Eh, what's all yo'r hurry? My word, Mary, hoo's off wi'out so mich as 'good-day' t' yo'."

"Hoo's fair runnin' now," said Mary, peering out of the tiny window. "Eh, mother, I fancy hoo were a bit vexed—hoo's awful proud, yo' known—an' yo' tellin' her hoo'd very like do same as Maggie Lannock! Hoo fancied, happen, as we thought hoo'd wed a butcher-lad—an' noan o' their fambly ever had ought to do wi' tradesfolk—nobbut Mary Tyrer—an' hoo rued it, yo' known."

"Well, hoo met do war nor marry a dacent lad if he were i' trade—'t 'ud be better nor frettin' for gentry-folk as dunnot want hoo. I've no patience wi' sich

nonsense! Not as I howd mich wi' town-folk mysel', thou knows. But Ruth 'ull ha' to give ower bein' so tickle."

Ruth, meanwhile, did not slacken her pace till she found herself outside the village; then she paused trembling and sick with angry misery.

Anthony was married—married to the woman he loved—a torturing pang of jealousy pierced her heart at the thought. He was happy, his wife triumphant, and she, Ruth—what was she? A disgraced woman, a woman who had lost honour, and peace of mind, and her very self-respect. Even the poignant thought of Anthony's marriage did not prevent her feeling the sting of Susan's words. "I could a'most fancy it were Maggie's misfortun' ower again." Yes, she must expect to be looked on by the neighbours as such another outcast as the ignorant, erring heroine of Mrs. Waring's tale. How could she blame them if they did not better discriminate? Did not Anthony's marriage show plainly how little he respected her—how trivial a thing he deemed the wrecking of her life? Her suffering, her degradation were nothing to him—the union into which she had entered so solemnly did not count—it was an episode to be dismissed from his memory, if, indeed, it were not already wholly forgotten. Ah, surely this marriage was all that had been wanting to make her humiliation complete!

Leaning against the wooden paling which bordered

one side of the road, she buried her face in her hands and groaned aloud. How was she to endure it—to live through it?

Presently someone, walking rapidly along the footpath on the opposite side of the way, wheeled round to look at her, paused, and then crossed over.

"Ruth, is it you?"

Ruth looked up and the despair in her face wrung Henry Alford's heart. He gazed at her for a moment without speaking, and presently said, hesitatingly,—

"I was on my way to see you—to tell you—but I see you have heard."

"Yes—I have heard."

There was a silence; Henry's eyes filling, and his voice failing him for pity. How could he but be dumb in presence of such pain?—he scarcely dared look at her—it was as though her bleeding, quivering heart were laid bare. The shame in her face smote him even more than the sorrow. That she should be humbled thus—Ruth, so innocent, so noble—that she should be so terribly punished for a sin that was not her own.

"Oh, Ruth, my poor child!" he faltered at last.

She turned towards him quickly. "Mr. Alford, what are you doing here? You should not be seen with me. I am not fit company for anyone. I am nothing—worse than nothing. Even the village people point at me as if I had been wicked, and they

say—such horrible things. But no wonder—I can't expect anyone to respect me!"

"I respect you, Ruth," said Henry, gently. "I want to help you."

"You are very good," said Ruth, hopelessly, "but no one can help me. Oh, can't you see?—no one can help me but God. Even my poor father—can do nothing."

"But I"—resumed Henry, with the same tremulous gentleness with which he had first begun to speak—"I could perhaps do more for you than your father. Ruth, dear Ruth, do not be startled! My child, if you would give me the right to take care of you I would be so good to you!"

He took her hand timidly, but Ruth withdrew it, and once more turned towards him, her eyes dilated with incredulous wonder.

"If I—would give you the right?" she said, almost in a whisper.

"If you would be my wife," said Henry, firmly. "Then no one could despise you—no one would dare to breathe a word against you. Oh, Ruth, think of it—let me prove to the whole world how much I honour and love you."

Still that same look of shocked surprise as though she could scarcely believe she heard aright.

"You want to *marry* me?—oh, no—you cannot really mean that."

"But I do. See, dear Ruth, I scarcely know how to put it to you—but—he is married, you see he who wronged you, and you, too, are free. If you

would trust me enough to come to me I would try so hard to make you happy—do not be angry! I know you think you can never be happy again—but let me try what I can do. I want," he went on, a certain hesitating tenderness creeping into his voice, "I want you just to give me leave to take care of you and protect you. A marriage with me, you know, would lift you out of all the shame and misery. People would see that *I* reverence you more than any woman in the world."

Ruth, looking away from him, did not see the strong constraint he was putting on himself, in order to lay the case before her dispassionately. She had not observed his increasing pallor, and heard without noticing the tremor in his voice. He continued brokenly after a pause,—

"Would it not—after all—be some comfort to know that there was one person whose only thought was for you? One who would come between you and the hard world—who would—be good to you—and cherish you, Ruth."

She drew a long breath.

"I know you mean to be kind—but you don't know how you hurt me!"

Her face was crimson, and there were tears in her eyes.

"Oh, you do, you do hurt me—you make me feel so bitterly ashamed! Don't think me ungrateful!—I know it is out of the goodness of your heart you are doing this. I know you pity me."

"I do more than pity you," said Henry, "I love



you. Listen to me, Ruth—I have loved you for many years—ever since you came home from school. I tried to conquer myself—yes, I will be quite candid—because I thought a marriage with you would be unsuitable in every way. In age, station, and religion we were so different. I thought it my duty to struggle with my inclinations, and keep away from you as much as I could. Nevertheless, your marriage with Anthony was a terrible blow to me.”

“Stop!” interrupted Ruth, peremptorily, “I don’t want to hear any more.”

“But you must hear me,” cried Henry, vehemently, “I have kept silence all these years—I will speak now. I do love you, Ruth, deeply—as deeply as a man can love. Have a little patience with me and with yourself—think before you refuse me—take time to know me better.”

Ruth suddenly shook off the hand which he had laid upon her arm and burst into tears.

“No, no—never again! How can one love twice in one’s life? Oh, do go away—you make me feel wicked. I can never love anyone but Anthony—God forgive me! only Anthony.”

“What!” exclaimed Henry, “you mean to say you love him still, though you know what he is—though he has treated you—”

“Oh, hush—do not let us speak of him! I have tried to forget him—I have prayed—I have cut myself off from everything that reminded me of him—but I *can’t* put him outside my life. I can’t—I

can't. When you speak to me of love I feel he is there still—there in my heart—do what I will he is there!"

"Then, by Heaven, you shall cast him out!" cried Henry, violently. "This unworthy love shall not come between you and me, Ruth. A man cannot trample on himself for ever. I have feelings too; I have the right to be heard; you shall not silence me with his name. I love you as passionately as he did, and more truly. If his memory is the only barrier between us it shall be overcome. I love you, and I will have you."

The man was shaking in every limb—beside himself with the passion which had at length found an outlet. He came closer to Ruth, and stretched out his arms.

"You shall love me yet!" he cried, hoarsely.

But his ardour had awakened an extraordinary anger in Ruth, a repulsion which was plainly visible in her face.

"Never, never, never! How dare you speak to me so! You insult me!"

Henry fell back, and his arms dropped; the white, shocked misery of his face smiting the girl with sudden compassion.

"I don't mean to be unkind, but you must not say such things. I shall never love anyone again, and it makes me feel—I don't know what I feel—to hear you talk as if I could." She stopped for a moment and went on piteously: "I pray God to forgive me—I did not know how wicked I was—how weak—"

people are right to scorn and despise me ! But I will pray and struggle still—and perhaps God will have pity on me and take all that displeases Him out of my heart.”

“And for me,” said Henry, huskily, “there is no hope ? This is your last word ?”

“It is my last word !” said Ruth, earnestly. “Forgive me—and try to forget me.”

He did not reply, and she walked away slowly, leaving him standing quite motionless, with his head sunk upon his breast.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

EHEU!

MRS. ALFORD, after vainly waiting for her son on the afternoon of his meeting with Ruth, had drunk her two cups of tea, and was meditating punishing him by sending away the things, when he at length appeared.

“How late you are, Henry! Everything is cold, and the tea much too strong to be good for you. Shall I ring for some more?”

“This will do, thanks.”

“Well, you don't deserve to be pampered with fresh tea. My dear Henry, what is the matter? You look as if you had just come back from a funeral—a pauper funeral, the most melancholy thing in the world, as Mr. Pennington says, except playing whist for penny points.”

Henry sipped his tea without replying, and Mrs. Alford, pushing back her chair, contemplated him in some anxiety.

“Anything wrong, my dear boy?”

“Do you know that your dear boy is forty-two? I have been reflecting about my age and many other

serious matters during a long walk, and now if you like I will tell you the result of my meditations."

"If you were a sensible man, they could have only one practical result, Henry. It is high time,"—emphatically—"for you to look out for a wife, my dear."

Henry put down his cup; he did not wince, and Mrs. Alford failed to see, in the half light, how pale he was.

"On the contrary, I have been thinking that, as I am quite determined never to marry, it is my duty to take steps to secure a successor to this property. Wait a minute, mother," as she was about to interrupt, "let me say what I have to say. The news of Anthony's marriage to this foreign woman confirms me in the opinion I had already formed that he is not fit to be master of Alford. She, certainly, would not be a suitable mistress for the old place; I heard about her at Spa last year. I do not choose either that any child of such a marriage, inheriting probably undesirable characteristics from both parents, and brought up heaven knows how, should ultimately reign here. Anthony himself, before his pretended marriage to Ruth, urged me strongly to cut him and his off from the succession. There seems to me to be even more paramount reason now."

"I must say," remarked Mrs. Alford, "though you are my son, you are the most irritating creature on the face of the earth! If ever a man's duty stared him in the face, yours does. Upon my word, I

almost think Anthony with his three wives is better than you, but I don't know which is the most provoking! Here you are, the last scions of an historical family, and one of you won't marry at all, and the other goes and makes two alliances at a time—one more disreputable than the other! What *are* your intentions, may I ask, since this fine old place is apparently going a-begging, and it is evidently your wish to let the race die out?"

Henry paused for a moment to allow his mother to recover herself in some measure after her little outburst, and then said, quietly,—

"Tom Alford Cobham has a lot of boys, hasn't he? I thought of adopting one of them—rather a small one," he added, smiling, "that you and I could manage between us. We could bring him up according to our own notions, you know, and make sure of good principles being instilled into him from the first. We'll make a model Alford of him"—drawing his chair nearer to that of the old lady, and taking her hand. "And you know how often you said it would give you new life to see a child running about the house."

"Yes, but I did not mean anybody's child. I meant your child," sighed Mrs. Alford. Her face was a study. The new idea evidently caught her fancy, but at the same time she could scarcely bring herself to relinquish her long-cherished hopes of a grandchild of her own.

"This wouldn't be anybody's child—it would be Tom Cobham's child."

"Are you really and truly determined to remain a bachelor all your days? Supposing you do adopt a child, and after a year or two come across someone you could take a fancy to, what then?"

"My dear mother, if I were not quite sure of myself I should not, of course, propose such a thing. But I will never marry—I have quite made up my mind."

"Well, then—about Anthony; he is really one of the old stock, you see, and there does not seem to be anything *against* this wife of his, or the Lymingtons would have hinted at it, wouldn't they? After all, it seems a little hard to cut him off, just when he has settled down."

"I mean to do it all the same," said Henry, sternly. "There is no use in arguing that point. Let us discuss my plan. The Cobhams have boys of all ages, I believe?"

"Yes, indeed they have, and fine boys too—straight, well-made, handsome little fellows, with curly fair hair, and blue eyes."

"Blue eyes!" echoed Henry; "I thought they were dark, some of them."

"Oh, no, my dear! How could they be? Tom himself is sandy, you know, and as for Emma, she has hair like lint, and those *china*-blue eyes."

"I should have liked the little chap to have brown eyes," said Henry, half to himself.

"What an extraordinary idea!" exclaimed his mother, sitting upright and staring at him. "You are

certainly very odd, Henry! Will you please tell me why?"

"I don't know," laughing rather dismally, "except that I have sometimes pictured to myself a child trotting about the house or clinging to one's finger, and it always had brown eyes."

"Then, my dear Henry," said Mrs. Alford, conclusively, "depend upon it, if you have fancies like that, you are not meant to be a bachelor. Do, for goodness' sake, go and marry a brown-eyed woman, and give me a brown-eyed grandchild to dandle on my knee—and leave that warren-ful of Alford Cobhams alone!"

"Now, mother, we have discussed my resolution often enough—do not let us waste any more time in argument. Will you write to Emma Cobham tomorrow, and propose my plan to her, and ask if you can go there soon and choose a future Squire of Alford? Mind you pick me out a nice one."

"You talk as if it were a kitten or a puppy—however, I'll do it, and I should think the Cobhams will be out of their wits with joy. They really are dear children, you know, Henry. There was a baby when I was staying there some years ago, a sweet little thing, I remember. I should think it would be about the right age—if it isn't a girl. I must get the old nurseries done up and see about engaging a nurse. Gilly, I am afraid, is too old, but she would be charmed to have a nursling again. You know she has been living all these years in the hopes of your



marrying. I wonder if that child was a boy. It was a dear, with such pretty eyes. I like blue eyes best, myself. I wonder," said Mrs. Alford, dropping her animated tone and gazing with a mystified expression at her son, "I wonder what on earth, Henry, made you think of a child with brown eyes." Henry did not answer, and she continued, after a moment, "Yours are blue, you know—very dark, but still—distinctly blue, and poor dear Lucy had eyes like forget-me-nots."

"People have strange fancies sometimes, you know," said Henry. He got up and sauntered towards the door, pausing as he opened it to remind his mother to be sure to write to Emma to-morrow.

"Yes, unless you change your mind in the night," she returned. As the door closed after him she shook her head.

"He is certainly peculiar—very peculiar, and where he gets it from, I don't know! His dear father was a perfect rock of sense, and no one can say there is anything odd about *me*. . . . So I am never to have a grandchild after all. Well, well, I must write to Emma."

A short time afterwards a sturdy eight-year-old boy was duly installed at the Hall—a vigorous little personality with shoulders that bade fair to rival in time those of any Alford who had ever reigned there, and already a pronounced taste for manly sports and pursuits.

"He will be everything I ought to have been," said

Henry, promising himself a certain melancholy pleasure in educating the boy according to the traditions of his race—traditions which had never been congenial to himself.

Some months after the lad's arrival he took him with him to the Warren Farm, Henry being on foot, and the boy clattering backwards and forwards on his pony.

Ruth was at first a little startled when they appeared, but a glance at his face reassured her.

"This is my boy—my son," he said, "I have taken possession of him as you have perhaps heard, Ruth. His parents have given him up to me."

"He is a bonny little fellow," said Ruth, then, marking how confidently the small sun-burnt hand sought Henry's, she added,—

"He seems very fond of you ; I hope he will be a joy and comfort to you."

"I think he will," he returned gravely. "I hope to be very proud of him by-and-by. Meanwhile, he is making the acquaintance of all my friends. You will let me count you as one of them always, will you not ?"

Ruth looked into his truthful eyes for a moment, and then stretched out her hand.

"Indeed I will, sir."

"And if—at any time I can help you, you know you may depend on me. Good-bye. I am glad to be able to tell you this."

Ruth stood in the doorway watching him as he

assisted the boy to mount again, and Henry looked back at her before he walked away. Her face, though smiling now, bore traces of much sadness, yet its predominant expression was one of peace—that peace which comes of suffering patiently borne, and of self-conquest—“the peace of God which passeth all understanding.”

## CHAPTER XXXII.

### GLIMPSES.

“ My dear Hélène, do you never sit still ? ”

“ Sometimes—when I am talking to an agreeable companion.”

“ I am sure it is bad for you to fidget about the room like that.”

“ Ah, yes—nous sommes aux petits soins, are we not ? Since you are so anxious about me I wonder you left me by myself yesterday.”

“ Surely not even the most devoted husband can be expected to stay indoors all day long ? ”

“ Bah ! as it happened I did not want you—you bored me, and the little Grasi was most entertaining.”

“ He turned up, did he ? ”

“ Yes, almost immediately after you left. He sat here for hours. Dieu ! how comical he is ! I laughed, laughed, laughed ! He told me all about his loves. C'était à se pâmer.”

“ Indeed ? it must have been most interesting.”

“ What a tone you take—I believe you are jealous.” Anthony laughed. “ I think I have told you

several times that I am not likely to commit that folly."

"H'm—h'm—do not be too sure. Grasi is a most fascinating man. You are dining out this evening, are you not?"

"Yes, unless you would like me to remain with you."

"Certainly not, *mon cher*—go by all means. I shall write a line to my little *Vicomte*, and tell him to come and bring his violin. We shall make music—ah, but music! And I will tell him all *my* little *affaires de cœur*—it will be very amusing!"

She danced across the room to the corner where Anthony sat; and, stooping suddenly, thrust forward her face with a grotesque imitation of his rather disdainful smile.

"*Imbécile! je vous déteste!*" she cried, snapping her fingers in his face. The tone and gesture were those of a fish-wife. Anthony drew back his head with an involuntary expression of surprised disgust.

His wife, after a moment's silence, walked over to the table.

"What is this old despatch-box doing here?"

"I have mislaid a paper, and intend to search for it presently."

"Take it away—it spoils my pretty velvet cloth; there, take it, I say."

She flung the box towards him with such a wild aim that Anthony failed to catch it, and it fell heavily on the floor, the lock breaking and the contents being scattered far and wide.

"Ha! now we shall see the secrets," said Mrs. Clifton, pouncing upon as many of the papers as she could seize. "Evil deeds come to light, you see! What have we here?"

"Give me those papers, Hélène," said Anthony, sternly.

"Ah, ah, then you *have* secrets! No, this is a chance for me and I take it."

"Without having any particular secrets, I do not choose you to take possession of my private papers. Give them to me—I desire you."

He rose and approached her with so much determination in voice and manner that a less self-willed woman would have been quelled by it. But he had lost his former power over her, and she laughed in his face.

"You cannot have them unless you take them by force—and even you would hardly dare to struggle with a woman. Voyons, qu'est-ce qu'il y a? Bills—bills—bills—you may have them all if you like"—tossing them towards him—"letters—c'est plus intéressant, ça—we shall read them presently à nous deux—more letters. What is this—a portrait? Ah, ah, Monsieur has no secrets! Who is this woman, then? Stop!"—with a sudden change of tone—"I know, it is the woman who came to you at Spa."

She held the photograph towards him, her hand trembling. It was indeed Ruth's sweet, serene face which looked out at Anthony from the card. How had it come there? He gazed at it as though trans-

fixed, but presently remembered: she had been photographed in Paris a few weeks after their union, and one of the proofs had been mislaid. He had probably taken it up with some loose papers, and slipped it with them into his despatch-box.

His anger suddenly left him, but his deep emotion was not lost upon his wife.

"I give you my word," he said, "I did not know that it was there."

"Menteur!" cried H el ene, violently; and she tore the photograph across and across.

A sort of spasm of anger crossed Anthony's face, succeeded by a profound melancholy. Turning round abruptly, he went over to the window, gazing out into the street below, thronged by the usual gay Parisian crowd, but seeing nothing but Ruth's face.

The woman behind him stormed in vain: he heeded her not until at last he caught the sound of sobs. Then he glanced round quickly; his wife's pretty face looked drawn and ill, and was glazed with tears; her frenzy had exhausted her, but she still raged feebly.

He crossed the room and took her little angry trembling hands.

"My dear child," he said gently, "why are you so unreasonable? You make life very hard for us both."

She jerked her hand away with a harsh laugh.

"Çà! I am unreasonable, am I? What are you, then, that you expect me to take such a discovery

calmly at such a moment? There is not another man in the world, I believe, who would treat his wife as you treat me. And now, too, *now*, when anybody else—”

“Oh Héléne, hush! Have I not tried to be kind to you?”

“Kind—oh, yes—falsely kind, like the traitor that you are! Do you not think I see you have no love for me? You are cold—hard—like a stone to me because your heart is with that other woman. You correspond with her, I suppose—she sends you her portrait—you probably meet frequently—”

She could scarcely articulate in her fury. Anthony looked at her with a kind of amazed repulsion—was this the pretty soulless toy he thought he had married? The thin veneer of refinement was gone—this was a little savage animal—with yet enough of the woman about her to make her impotent passion piteous.

He strove to speak patiently: “Do try and calm yourself—you will really injure yourself. Believe me or not as you choose—I assure you most positively that I am as much surprised as you to find that portrait there. I do not write to that lady, nor she to me. I have never seen her since she came to Spa—we shall probably—” his voice faltered—“never meet again.”

He paused a moment, and then, drawing Héléne down beside him on the sofa, said, almost pleadingly, “It is perhaps natural for you to distrust me—but there is really no need. I may not be a very



admirable husband—but I am at least a faithful one.”

She burst into a shrill, ironical laugh.

“Ah, oui, un modèle. Voilà ce qui est certain.”

“Do my most solemn assurances go for nothing, then?”

“My friend, I prefer to believe my eyes. I know you, you see.”

Anthony rose, the dark colour rushing to his face, and stood looking down at her for a moment or two in silence. She, too, was miserable, poor little unreasonable creature, and she was making herself ill besides.

“Hélène,” he said, hesitatingly. “There is, I suppose, no use in prolonging this discussion, but it seems to me such a pity to make life more unendurable than it need be. Perhaps our marriage was a mistake—but it cannot be undone. Can we not—for the sake of the little one who is coming—try to bear with each other a little?”

“Non,” she returned abruptly, and raising her hands she pushed him away from her, “non—je ne vous souffre pas. I hate, hate, hate you! There! Go away. Vous m’ennuyez.”

“Monsieur can go in to Madame now, if he is careful not to excite her. The little one?—oh, the little one is well, Monsieur. Jolie comme un cœur. Go in then, Monsieur. Madame will be enchantée to see you.”

Thus the *garde*—black-eyed, smiling, and im-

portant. She raised the heavy *portière*, and Anthony approached his wife's bedside a little timidly.

There lay Hélène, looking very pretty in her soft cambrics and laces. On the rose-coloured satin counterpane were piled a variety of dressmaker's patterns, and she was giving directions in an animated voice to her maid, who was standing on the other side of the bed.

"The lace en cascade, you will tell her, Berthe, and the ribbon in big knots. Then for the other—well, what is the matter?"

"It is Monsieur who is coming in to see Madame."

"Oh, wait there a minute, then"—with an impatient twist of the shoulder.

"They would not let me come yesterday," said Anthony, stooping to kiss her brow.

She did not reply: one little hand was busy with the shreds of silk and velvet.

"Where is—," said Anthony, looking round, after an embarrassed pause—"where is the child?"

"Mon Dieu, where is it, Berthe?"

"The nurse has taken it away, Madame, into her room."

"If I had known," observed the new-made father a little reproachfully, "I should have gone to see it before; but I thought it was with you, and I feared to disturb you."

"It was not likely I should keep the little crying thing here—it makes a noise like a cat."

"But it is strong and healthy, is it not?"

"Oh, yes, I believe so. Ask the *garde*. She knows."

"And you, Hélène, how do you feel?"

"Ennuyée!" cried Madame, with a grimace; "bored so that I could cry! Dieu, que c'est assommant de mettre un enfante au monde! On n'en finit pas. Br-r-r-r!—how I hate it all! I am sick of their broths and gruels—I am tired to death of lying here already, and they tell me I must not think of getting up for days and days! I have nothing to amuse me; I can see no one. Ah, que diable suis-je allée faire dans cette galère?"

"Poor little Hélène!" said Anthony, laughing ruefully, though he felt secretly sore at heart. "Come, let us send for the baby and see if it will not console you. They tell me it is a pretty little thing, and you know you wished for a girl."

"It isn't pretty," returned Madame, fretfully; "it is frightful—at least, I thought so when I saw it yesterday. De grâce, do not bring it in here—it cries all the time and makes my head ache. Now, Berthe, shall we have the cream-colour or the pink for the dressing-gown?"

Anthony, considering himself dismissed, made his way out again and knocked at the door of the room where he was told the nurse was installed. A white-capped peasant woman opened it, inviting him in with many smiling gesticulations, and showing him the infant asleep in its cradle.

Likenesses are sometimes curiously noticeable in new-born babes, and Anthony recognized with an

odd mixture of feelings that the little placid face before him was startlingly like the Alford's. It was the image of his own, in fact—even he could see that—and the thought flashed across him suddenly, "If it had been Ruth's child, how proud she would have been!"

"La belle petite!" cried the nurse. "Does Monsieur observe the little dimpled hand? And see then the hair—curly already, and so thick. It is dark, yes, but it will be lighter by-and-by—chestnut, like the hair of Monsieur. She resembles her papa, the dear little one!"

Anthony threw up his hands in involuntary protest. Heaven forbid that the poor child should resemble him too closely. If she had inherited his temperament as well as his face, what would become of her? What would become of her in any case? He himself was scarcely fit to guide and instruct her; and as for her mother—here Anthony was conscious of a sudden rush of indignation—what was to be expected from a heartless coquette who would hardly take the trouble to look upon the face of her first-born? Hapless little babe, it would have been better for it never to have come into the world; it would be better now, perhaps—but the tiny fingers closed round his long brown one tentatively outstretched, and his whole face changed—oh, no, not better for it to die; it must not die. It was his child after all—something of his own, something to love—and he was very lonely.

"You will take care of it, nurse, will you not?"

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### GAFFER "GOES FERRARD."

"DUN yo' 'year bell tollin'?" said Barbara. "Sh, sh, sh! . . . Sixty-five, sixty-six, sixty-seven, sixty-eight. It will be Mester Wharton for sure—seventy-one—ah, I thought it were him. It's stopped, yo' see. He's bin failin' ever sin' Michaelmas. Eh, well, he were one o' th' better mak'—an' he's gone to a better place. Mrs. Wharton 'ill be awful takken to, poor soul—hoo will, I doubt, fur all hoo's well left."

"Seventy-one," meditated Bob; "eh, I'd scarce ha' thought he were that mich. He were allus sich an 'earty owd lad. Seventy-one—two year owder nor me. Eh, I reckon I'm th' owdest farmer on Alford propetty now."

"Oh, no, father!" cried Ruth eagerly. "You're not old at all. Sixty-nine is nothing."

"'Ark at th' lass!" chuckled the Gaffer. "Hoo wants to mak' out as her feyther's quite a frisky yoong chap! Eh, Ruthie, sixty-nine's pretty well on, thou knows."

"I'm sure Tommy Lupton is years older than you, and so is Martin Ford."

"Ah, they are, lass, both on 'em, but they aren't farmers, thou sees. Gradely farmers never lives to ony long age—never—it's a cur'ous thing. Owd Doctor Bart used allus say 't were th' heytin' an' drinkin.' 'Yo' farmers,' he'd say, 'is allus agate at yo'r beef an' bacon—an' when yo're not heytin' yo're drinkin',' says he. Ho! ho! He were happen reet. Then, thou sees, farmers has a dale o' standin' about—an' sittin' i' traps an' thot—an' they're mostly 'eavy men an' cotches cowl easy. That's wheer it is, see thou. It's the 'titus as gener'lly carries us off at th' last—it'll be th' titus as 'ill finish me, I reckon. Nay—us farmers doesn't live so very long, none of us. . . . An' now poor owd Jack Wharton's gone. It'll happen be my turn next."

"Very like it will," said Luke cheerfully. "Very like."

"How can you say such foolish things?" cried Ruth impatiently, but casting at the same time an anxious glance at her father. "Really, Luke, if I could not find something more pleasant to say I shouldn't talk at all."

"Well, nobry can say as our Luke's a great talker," observed the farmer impartially. "Nay, he's not one as lets his tongue wag so very mich. But he's smartened up wonderful, ha'n't he, Barbara? He's a regular dandy is Luke. I can smell the yure-oil off him from 'ere."

Luke passed his hand gently over his reeking locks, and smiled with a satisfied air.

"I fancy Luke's agate o' courtin'," went on Bob, winking with both eyes together at the womankind. "How's Jinny, I wonder? Jinny's gotten 'er a new 'at. Hoo's very near as fine as our Luke."

Barbara set her arms akimbo and contemplated the rustic gallant with an inscrutable expression.

"Jinny, indeed!" quoth she.

Luke rose and stood grinning before Ruth.

"Coom outside for a bit," he said, jerking his head towards the door.

"No, thank you, I am going to stay with my father."

"Then I'll goo my ways to Tyrers' an' fetch Jinny fur a walk," said Luke, without the least change of expression.

"Ah, do," cried Gaffer. "Hoo'll be happen expectin' thee," winking again. "My lass 'ere's fur bidin' wi' feyther. Well, an' hoo shall bide wi' feyther if hoo's a mind. Wheer's the paper, Barbara? Sit thee down; Ruth's bahn to read us th' news."

Ruth unfolded the paper and read out a selection of its contents to the old folks; listening vaguely to their comments, and responding rather at random, for her mind had been much disturbed by her father's casual reference to himself as one who had not, in all probability, very long to live. Her eyes strayed constantly towards him; it struck her that there were many more creases and wrinkles in his ruddy good-humoured face than when she had

returned from her ill-fated expedition to Spa, more than a year ago now, and his hair and whiskers were whiter. His limbs, though as massive as ever, were perhaps less muscular, and his broad shoulders stooped a little. How was it she had not hitherto realized that her father was ageing fast, and that according to the order of nature she could only hope to keep him a few years longer? A few years at best, and he was all she had! How should she live without him?

That night when all the household slumbered, Ruth crept down to the farmer's room, and gazed at him as he slept, with the solicitude of a mother over her babe. Certainly Gaffer's face looked comfortably red as it snuggled into the pillow, and his snores were loud enough! Ruth stole back to bed somewhat comforted.

Her anxiety, however, once roused could not again be allayed. She now endeavoured to deter her father from going out in the wet, was alarmed when he returned home late, terrified at the smallest symptom of cold. But Bob was, it must be owned, hard to manage. He had not indeed the smallest objection to being smothered in wraps and comforters, and had, moreover, a theory of his own that an occasional glass of whisky and water to warm the "in'ards," and the constant smoking of a certain stumpy black pipe, were the best preventatives of cold in the world. But as for staying indoors, even in a blizzard, or changing wet boots, or walking



about instead of standing at draughty corners, he scouted all such suggestions with scorn. The lass 'ud mak' him thot nesh if he were to give in to hoo, he complained to Barbara, as he'd welly be ashamed to look the neighbours i' th' face.

He got over the winter so well, however, that Ruth began to think her fears groundless; but when March came, and with it a spell of terribly hard weather, Gaffer caught a severe cold, and presently it became evident that his presentiment was about to be realized, and that "th' 'titus" would indeed finish him off.

From the very first he had no hope of his own recovery, though when his daughter assured him that the doctor did not think unfavourably of his case he did not contradict her.

"He thinks you are a little better to-day," she would say wistfully, for now that her forebodings were actually justified she strove to disbelieve in them.

"Aye, lass," Gaffer would answer, eyeing her hard.

"He says," pursued Ruth, "that you have such a good constitution, you know."

"Ah," said Bob, "I have that," but he was evidently unconvinced.

One day he suddenly called over Barbara,—  
"Theer's one thing as is troublin' me, owd lass. I dunnot like to ax our Ruth—poor lass, hoo connot thooal th' notion o' my goin'—but it bothers me, I tell thee. Wheer mun I be buried, thinks thou?"

Grave's full up—eh, I've mony a time rued lettin' our Mary bury her childer theer. Th' last little lad is reet at top, they say. Theer'd never be room for me; I'm sich a terrible size—eh," said Gaffer, with a certain pride, "I doubt my coffin 'ill be about the biggest ever made in Alford village!"

"I reckon it will," said Barbara, with an appreciative glance, followed by a sniff.

"Well," went on her master after an interval of coughing. "What mun I do, thinks thou?"

"Why," said Barbara, "yo' mun jist buy yo'rsel' a new un. Yo'r rich enough. Buy a nice bit o' ground as 'ull do for yo'rsel' an' y'or Ruth when her time cooms."

"Eh, Barbara, whatever art thou thinking on? Our Ruth 'ull not be buried wi' me? Her'll goo yonder wi' our missus at Brooklands. Th' priest 'ull ha' th' berrin' o' Ruth. That's what's botherin' me, I tell thee. I wouldn't grudge the new grave if th' lass 'ud ha' th' benefit on't, but hoo wunnot."

"Well then, connot yo' ax Mr. Pennington if he'd be willin' to bury yo' at Brooklands. Happen the priest 'ud ha' no objection on account o' yo'r missus bein' theer. An' theer's plenty o' room fur yo' an' Ruth too."

"Nay, nay, Barbara," wheezed Gaffer, "'Twouldn't seem nat'ral, lass. Nawe, I mun be buried i' th' owd churchyard yonder, where I've stood every Sunday ever sin' I were a lad, waitin' for bell to stop ringin' an' watchin' th' folks goin' in. Eh, I reckon I'll want

to get up an' jine'em when I 'year 'em tramplin' past!" He paused to cough again, gazing at the old woman the while with a puzzled expression.

"Whatever mun I do, eh? I keep moiderin' about it, lyin' 'ere. It seems sich waste, thou knows, fur me to go an' buy a new grave when theer's nobbut mysel' to put in't."

"I tell yo' what yo' should do, Gaffer," cried Barbara, struck with a bright thought. "Missus Tyrer an' yo' should jine, yo' known, an' buy a grave between yo'. 'Tis but reet when all's said an' done. Hoo's putten her childer i' yo'r family grave—hoo should be at some o' th' expense o' th' new one. An' hoo'll be wantin' one for hersel', yo' known, an' all they childer. Tyrers' is full. If hoo was to lose another o' yon rook o' little lads an' lasses, hoo'd ha' nowheres to bury it. 'T'ud coom a dale chepper to her to goo 'alves wi' yo', nor to get a new 'un for hersel'."

"Eh, Barbara, well said, owd lady!" exclaimed Gaffer, his face clearing. "Thou'rt a wonderful owd lass—I've allus said thee wert. Eh, I'd never ha' thought o' thot! Th' very thing!—th' next time our Mary cooms I'll ax her. Eh, I'm fain thou's thought on it. I'm a deal easier i' my mind now."

Gaffer, indeed, set about his "deein'" in the most untroubled fashion with which ever a man undertook that rather important piece of business. It was certainly an affair which he would personally have preferred to postpone for some years longer, but since

that was not to be, he faced the inevitable with his usual straightforward simplicity. The thought of the next world did not alarm him in the least; though that he pondered about it was evident from the frequent surmises concerning it to which he gave utterance.

"Dost thou think, Ruthie, as we's ha' to weer wings up yonder?" he asked one day.

"Oh, no, dear father!" answered Ruth, smiling, in spite of her heavy heart, at the anxiety in his face.

"I allus thought we 'ad to 'ave 'em," he returned feebly. "Eh, but I'm glad, lass—wings wouldn't coom nat'ral to me."

He dozed for a little, but waking after a time, said, suddenly: "Thou met read me a bit, my wench; th' Bible's yonder o' th' cupboard. Read about when th' Lord was out walkin' o' th' Sabbath, an' the disciples geet agate o' pullin' th' ears o' corn, an' th' preachin' folk sauced 'em for't. Eh, I'm rale fond o' that chapter."

Ruth found the place, and read; her father chuckling to himself when she paused.

"Weren't thot an answer, lass? 'Which man shall there be among yo' as shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on th' Sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it and lift it out?'—'How mich is a mon better than a sheep?' says He. Ho! ho! I reckon they couldn't say mich to thot! Eh, Ruth, I could fancy as th' Lord were one as a body like mysel' could soon mak' free wi'. He mun ha' knowed farmer

folk meeterly well. Read me about th' seed now. Eh, that's wonderful clever! How the thorns choked it, thou knows—jist same as they would—an' th' sun brunt it up o' th' rock, an' theer was a gradely crop o' th' good ground."

Ruth read again, falteringly, for her tears fell upon the page, but Gaffer listened, smiling.

"It's wonderful nat'ral," he said, "wonderful! An' yon bit wheer He says, 'When it is evening,' says He, 'ye say it will be fair weather, for the sky is red. And in the morning, it will be foul weather to-day, for the sky is red, and lowering.' Jest th' same as we say here—th' very same! Eh, He mun ha' took wonderful notice! He knowed country folk an' country ways. I connot feel," said Bob, faintly, for he was growing tired—"I connot no-ways feel as if He were a stranger."

Ruth leaned her brow against his pillow, scarcely able to conceal her grief. Dear old simple father! She was losing him! His child-like soul would need no passport "yonder"; he would soon be at Home; it was she who must remain a stranger and a pilgrim in a lonely land.

Gaffer shifted his head a little so that he could catch a glimpse of her averted face; his own was overshadowed for a moment and it seemed as though he would speak. But he sighed instead, and closed his eyes, presently falling into a doze. That the thought of his child's forlorn estate was frequently present to him was betrayed by many wistful glances

and feeble caresses ; but he never spoke of it, and as the end drew near his serenity increased.

He had been wandering a little during the day, calling for his "missus," whistling to an imaginary dog, clacking his tongue, and addressing encouraging admonitions to a certain nag, "Boxer," buried years before. When evening came, however, he grew more silent, and lay quite still gazing before him, but without seeing those gathered round his bed. Ruth knelt beside him, holding his hand in hers ; while Mrs. Tyrer and Barbara, leaning, each the picture of woe, over the end of his bed, occasionally exchanged tearful whispers, as to the progress of his "deen'."

"He's goin' off comfortable," the one would sob, while the other, wiping her eyes, would opine that it wouldn't be so long now.

Presently Gaffer gave a little sigh, and made an effort to speak. All bent towards him, holding their breath.

"Coom," said Gaffer, "let's be . . . goin' farrard."

His fingers closed round Ruth's and then relaxed their clasp ; he had gone forward—into eternity.

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

"SIGH NO MORE, LADIES."

THE Warren Farm without Gaffer Bob! Is it possible to describe the desolation of the place? As for Ruth, who shall say what her father's loss was to her? When she came back after the funeral to the empty house, and saw his chair standing against the wall, she, who had shed no tears since he left her, cried and groaned aloud.

"Oh, father, father! Why couldn't I go with you—why couldn't you take me?"

"Don't thee fret, Ruth," said Barbara, gruffly. "Thou's bin a good wench to him, an' thot ought to be coomfort to thee! 'Tisn't as if thou'd ever bin a trouble to him same as other folks."

"Ah, but I was a grief to him, too," sobbed Ruth.

"Nay, thou weren't," cried the old woman stoutly. "Theer's others"—with a sniff—"as crossed him war nor thee, an' they rue it, I tell thee."

Her wrinkled face was contorted with the effort to keep back the tears, and her eyes were crimson with those she had already shed; after this last rather

mysterious statement she heaved a deep sigh, and backed slowly towards the door.

"I'm bahn to tak' off my blacks," she said. "Ruth, if I were thee, I'd do th' same. It 'ull mess thy crape war nor a month's weer cowerin' o' th' floor that gate."

Ruth scarcely heard her. She was crouching beside her father's chair with her head upon the cushioned seat.

Barbara went slowly upstairs: her heavy footfall as she moved about in the room above, the only sound to be heard in the silent house; presently she came down again and went out into the yard. Maggie and the men would be coming in presently. Mrs. Tyrer had, at Ruth's request, entertained the mourners at her house, and the girl herself had chosen to return home immediately after the ceremony, accompanied, somewhat to her surprise, by Barbara.

"I'm sure you would rather go to Brooklands," she had said, knowing that the old woman's principles must naturally urge her to be present at the melancholy festivity.

"Nawe," Barbara had replied, "I'll coom my ways wi' thee. Thou'rt all 'at's left now—I'll see to thee."

Hearing approaching footsteps by-and-bye, Ruth thought Luke and the servants were returning, and rose quickly, hastening to the door that she might make her escape upstairs before they entered. But



it was Barbara whom she met in the passage. Barbara, sobbing under her breath, and proceeding towards the stairs with a curious crab-like motion, carrying something under her apron.

She started as she caught sight of Ruth, shuffled a little away from her, and then suddenly changing her mind, drew aside her apron and exposed to Ruth's view—a man's battered hat.

"It's th' Gaffer's," said Barbara, with the tears rolling down her cheeks. "It's yon 'at as he set sich store by—an' I went an' bruk it—I did. Eh, however 'ad I th' 'cart? How could I ha' crossed him—the best master ever a body 'ad! It were me as smashed it. Eh, lass, I tell thee it cuts me. I made an end on't an' he were terrible takken to—an' now he'll never weer no 'ats again."

"Don't cry so, Barbara, you didn't mean it."

"I did, Ruth, I raly did. Thou'd never think I wur thot wicked, but I 'ad sich pride in me I couldn't thooal to see him weer it, an' I set it on a cheer an' sot me down on't. Eh, I mun fret, lass, I cannot give ower. Thou con think thysel' lucky, for thou never were bad to thy feyther same as me. Eh, Gaffer, I rue it now! Eh, Gaffer, Gaffer, if yo' could coom back yo' might weer owt yo' fancied—I'd never cross ye."

She went upstairs, inarticulately moaning and lamenting, and locked up the precious relic among the treasures in her cupboard.

Farmer Sefton's will was the cause of quite a stir

of respectful excitement in the neighbourhood. Everyone felt that poor Bob had acted very handsomely in proving himself to be a man of so much substance. Barbara's legacy alone was held to be "a nice little fortun'." Luke, though he seemed neither surprised nor elated, was undeniably "well left"; while as for Ruth, what between the farm and "th' brass i' th' bank," she was considered to be mistress of untold wealth.

Luke came to her a few days after the reading of the will.

"Mun I keep on here same as usual?"

"I hope you will, Luke. You know all about the place and will help me to manage it."

"I'd sooner manage it altogether," said Luke, stolidly.

Ruth looked up with a little weary gesture.

"Do what you like for the present. I have not been able to look into things yet. By-and-bye we can talk over our arrangements."

Luke shuffled with his feet, and observed presently—

"Jinny Snippet says it ought to be th' one way or th' t'other."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, thot's what hoo says," repeated Luke, nodding. "'One thing or t'other,' says hoo."

"Do you mean she thinks you should either manage the place entirely or not at all?"

"Ah," said Luke, rubbing his chin and staring very hard at Ruth. "Summat o' th' kind."

"I really can't say yet," she replied, looking rather puzzled. "I have not had time to think; but I am sure my father would not like me to give up the control of everything. I will think over it and let you know at the end of the week what I consider best."

"Very well," agreed Mr. Aughton; then he smiled broadly. "I'll tell Jinny hoo mun wait—that's all. Wenches is all fur havin' everythin' settled straight off; but hoo mun ha' patience."

"Really, I think, considering everything, she might be content to wait a few days," returned Ruth, with a little natural irritation. Jinny was presumably in a hurry to arrange financial matters previous to her wedding; but nevertheless she might surely have some consideration for her cousin in her bereavement.

"I'll tell her," said Luke, slouching out of the room.

One morning, a day or two later, he suddenly astonished Ruth by producing from the depth of his pocket a small packet, which proved to contain a little needle-case of red leather. The price ticket, marked in plain—very plain figures, was attached to it, and though Luke presently removed this by the simple expedient of rubbing it with the corner of his handkerchief, previously moistened in his mouth, it had previously been made evident to all present that the article in question had cost one shilling and sevenpence-halfpenny.

Luke pushed it across the table to Ruth.

"What dun yo' think o' that?"

"It's very pretty. Is it for Jinny?"

"Nawe—it's fur yo'. Yo'r feyther tow'd me onest as I'd never give yo' nought. Well—now I've gi'en yo' that. He, he, isn't it pretty—an' useful too? Theer now."

He rose, leered all round the table, and went out, closing the door after him. In an instant, however, he thrust his head in again.

"Dunnot tell Jinny!" he cried.

"Yon lad is noan coortin' Jinny Snippet," observed Barbara, pushing back her chair noisily. "He's arter soombry else—an' thou knows who, Ruth."

Ruth looked annoyed and perturbed; something in Luke's demeanour, besides his unusual generosity, seemed to endorse the old woman's words. She resolved to delay her explanation no later than the morrow; it would not be her fault if Luke did not thoroughly understand his position.

After breakfast, therefore, on the following day, she summoned him to the parlour, and informed him somewhat peremptorily that while she was most anxious to retain his services at the farm, and has all confidence in his wisdom and discretion, she did not intend his authority to be supreme, and wished him to consult her as to every important undertaking.

"I want you, in fact," she added, "to be a kind of bailiff or overseer, carrying on the work

here in the old way. Of course you will now have many more responsibilities, and I will make it worth your while."

Luke shook his head.

"It 'ull not do," he said. "Nawe, it wunnot."

"Do not be foolish—why should it not do? You understand the work and will be earning good wages."

"I've no mind to be yo'r mon," said Luke. He paused and cleared his throat—"If I'm to bide, I'll be mester 'ere."

Ruth looked at him without speaking, her colour rising ominously.

"See here, Ruth," he went on, calmly. "Yo' connot work this here farm wi'out me. I know it, an' I con keep it gooin' same 's yo'r feyther, but I'll no bide wi'out yo' marry me. I'll tell yo' thot—I wunnot."

"Then you must go," said Ruth, curtly.

"Nay, now, tak' time, tak' time—dunnot be i' sich a hurry—yo'll happen rue it at arter. See yo', Ruth, if I wur to live 'ere wi'out bein' wed to yo' folks 'ud get agate o' talkin'—they would fur sure, an' thot's none so pleasant fur an 'ard-wortchin' chap same 's me. I'm willin' to wed yo' an' I'm not one to go castin' up bygones to yo'! Nawe—I'd just as soon ha' yo' as another lass."

"Luke, if you don't want me to tell you to go out of the house this very morning and never come back, you'll be silent. Never speak to me like that

again. Do you hear? Never another word on the subject."

Her cheeks were crimson, her eyes glowing with anger. Luke gaped at her and scratched his head.

"Look here, Ruth," he observed at last, his exasperation finding vent in a kind of roar, "dom me, if I can tell what yo're drivin' at! Is it aye or nay, tell me? Now mind what yo're doin'—I tell yo' plain, I wunnot gi' yo' another chance."

"It's no!" said Ruth, and in spite of her vexation her face dimpled with smiles.

"Then Jinny 'll do," cried Luke, ramming his hat on his head. "Never say I didn't ax yo', Ruth. Well, all's well as ends well—we's try Jinny."

## CHAPTER XXXV.

**" MINE EAR IS FULL OF THE MURMUR OF ROCKING  
CRADLES."**

LUKE'S defection was perhaps the best thing that could have happened to Ruth, though, for the sake of old associations and out of regard for what she knew her father had wished, she would have been glad if he had continued to work the farm for her. But even if he himself had been willing to accept a subordinate position on the place where he had hoped to be master, Jinny's pride would have forbidden it.

"Me an' Luke's goin' to 'ave a farm o' we're own," she remarked, with a high and mighty air when the subject was broached. "Our folks are goin' security for th' rent, an' he's enough money o' his own to stock it—we need be behowden to nobry."

"Stuck-up little bowd-faced huzzy!" commented Barbara. "If it hadn't ha' been for our Gaffer yon chap o' hers 'ud scarce ha' brass enough to buy himsel' a pair o' breeches. *Hoo* needn't be so proud as thot comes to, wi' a feyther as were sowd

up, an' an 'usband as is no better nor a charity lad !"

Ruth's new responsibilities were, however, invaluable in forcing her to rouse herself even in the midst of her first heaviness of grief. Poor old Bob Sefton would not have rested in his grave if the Warren Farm had been mismanaged, and his daughter was obliged to be astir early and late in order to assure herself that everything was done in the manner he would have wished.

"It is because he would have liked it that I work so hard," she said once to the old priest at Brooklands; "and, of course, in any case it is my duty, but I often wonder what is the use of it all. What is the good of being prosperous when one is all alone?"

"Do your duty, my dear," was her friend's response; "do your duty. God will show you the good of it in His own time."

Things did, indeed, seem to prosper more than ever at the Warren Farm since Ruth had assumed the management. She was naturally practical and energetic, with a good head for business; and, besides being accustomed to hear every detail of farm life discussed by her father, had always taken an active part therein. The work was thoroughly congenial to her, moreover, and as the time passed she began to take a certain pleasure in the sight of her teeming acres and her sleek cattle, and to find savour once again in the familiar routine. Her



nature was too broad and strong, her mind too wholesome and well regulated, to be dominated by perpetual sadness; but at times her loneliness oppressed her painfully, and in spite of all efforts to be cheerful, life seemed very blank. Then she would try to find comfort in comforting others; people for miles around called for "Ruth o' th' Warren" in times of trouble. Her purse was deep, it is true, and her hand open; and in certain cases these facts alone would have ensured her a welcome, but she was nevertheless beloved chiefly for herself, for her ready sympathy, her patience, her tender tolerance. Her own sorrows seemed to give her a special power over those in affliction, and many a poor mourner welcomed her kind, grave face as though it were the face of an angel of light. Sometimes, too, she heard pitiful tales of sin and misery, and her helpful tact became the means of saving a hapless transgressor from despair.

So the time passed, slowly indeed, but not altogether unhappily. The grass had been green on Gaffer's grave for more than a year, when one day Ruth received a letter from a poor girl whom she had once befriended. A foolish, pretty, vain lassie who had strayed into evil ways even in her happy home, and had of late been entirely lost sight of. She wrote from a London hospital: "I am dying," she said, "the doctors say I can't last many days. Oh! Ruth, do come and see me. I'm frightened. I have been so bad. Do come and comfort me as you

did before. Oh ! why didn't I keep my promise then ? I'd be ashamed to see father and mother now, but I'd just love to see you.”

Ruth went at once and was in time to do much for the poor little rustic sinner, who had been punished so bitterly for her folly. The girl died clinging to her hand and trying to repeat the prayers she said. Ruth cut off a lock of her fair hair for the mother—who was to be told nothing of her child save that she was dead—then she turned and went away, her face very sad and solemn. Such a death was terrible—but God was very merciful ; Rose had not looked so frightened at the last.

She took the night train northwards, not wishing to remain in London, and got into an empty first-class carriage, permitting herself this unwonted extravagance, as she was travelling alone. It was a cold night, and she was very tired. Rolling herself up in a shawl, she prepared to go to sleep. Just as the train was about to start somebody got in ; there was a great deal of shuffling about and arranging of bags and wraps. Ruth in her corner did not feel sufficient curiosity to raise her shawl in order to look out at the new-comer.

Someone was talking volubly through the window ; then the train started with a jerk and the person sat down beside her. There was a sudden drowsy cry, and Ruth, partially raising herself, turned round a little way, and saw that her travelling-companion was a foreign-looking woman with a white

cap, who carried what seemed to be a large bundle of wraps, from which proceeded, however, certain inarticulate remonstrances, while the chubby hand of a small child energetically beat the air.

“Dors, Bébé, dors,” said the woman, “Don, don, don, don.” She rocked her nursling up and down, crooning meanwhile a monotonous ditty, which had evidently the desired effect; the little husky voice was silenced, and presently Ruth too fell asleep, so soundly that she did not feel the jerk and jar of the train stopping at one of the principal stations, and even the clapping of doors and shouting of porters failed to rouse her. But presently she was roused, and that very effectively, by the sound of a voice at the carriage window. It spoke in French, and in low tones, but Ruth was awake at the very first word.

“Is she comfortable, nurse?”

“Monsieur can see for himself: she sleeps like an angel.”

“You are sure she is not cold, can you not wrap her up more closely?”

An arm was stretched through the carriage window, almost touching Ruth as she crouched in her corner. She pulled her shawl a little more over her face, holding her breath; then the arm was withdrawn—but the hand rested still on the ledge of the window. She could see it from between the folds of her disguise. Anthony's hand! The hand which had so often caressed her!

“I hope she will not be the worse for this journey. It is a little dangerous for so young a child to be travelling at night, I fear.”

How many times she had heard that voice in her dreams, lowered to the same gentle and tender key—and it had seemed to her that this tenderness was for her, and in her dream she had palpitated with joy! But she was not dreaming now—never before had she so thoroughly realized how completely she had passed out of his life. These other ties which he had formed, how close they were! how blessed! There was the child—his child, Anthony’s child—and not hers!

She could fancy his face—so near her here; she knew the expression indicated by that tone—the eyes soft, the lips smiling—that *better* look which in former days had so often raised her hopes. If she were to lift her shawl ever so little, she would see it—and she might never have the chance again. But could she trust herself—dared she?

“Take your seats, please.”

“Au revoir, Monsieur! Do not be anxious. The little one is quite warm and well.”

He was gone—thank Heaven! It was better so! The train was now once more in motion. It would not stop again until Ruth’s destination was reached, and then she would get out quickly, and fly before he again came near.

She kept her face covered still, though she was almost suffocating—she must regain her self-control

before she came out of ambush. As she leaned back quivering in her corner, thoughts came crowding upon her, emotions that she had hoped to have crushed for ever, passionate anguish. Oh, Heaven, how she used to dream of holding a babe in her arms—Anthony's child! She had thought with young, shy tenderness, and delight, of the little soft limbs, the clinging hands, the tiny face, which would perhaps belong to her some day, and fill up the measure of her bewildering happiness. And of how, as it grew older, it would draw the father's heart closer and closer to her, the mother, and through her to God! And now, with her heart burning within her, Ruth told herself that if things had been as she had fancied of old—if she were indeed Anthony's wife, and that child hers, her dream might have come true! How he loved it! Oh, why had she seen it?—why had she been allowed to see it? If it had been hers, how dear it would have been to her? Could that other woman love it as much?—Why was it not with her—in the same carriage—if the father was so full of solicitude for it, why were they not all together? Probably Anthony's wife wanted him all to herself—the companionship even of the nurse would be irksome to her.

Hark! a little sleepy murmur, a laugh—a whispered remonstrance from the woman, and then a babble of baby talk in broken French. Little voice! how sweet it was! Now, what was this? tugs at Ruth's shawl, fumbling of sturdy little fingers—then the

folds were drawn aside, and a small face peered into hers.

"Ma-dame!" cried the child. Ruth sat up, and looked unwillingly, shrinkingly at the upturned face. It had lost its first startling likeness to its father—but the eyes were his. Ruth stretched out her arms, her momentary repulsion gone; she took the child on her knee, and kissed it; the round cheek, the brown curls, the chubby hands.

"Madame loves children?"

"Yes."

"One must say that this one is an angel. Always laughing, always good-tempered, and so clever! Madame should hear her already say her prayers, and not yet two years old."

Ruth bowed her head over the child's crisp curls. "Thank God for that," she breathed to herself. Her prayer was perhaps to be heard after all—the wife would teach the child—and the child the father! "Thank God!" she said—with a dagger-pang at her heart.

The little one jumped and crowed on her knee, examining with busy fingers her hair, her hat, the brooch at her throat, its little round mouth open, its eyes dilated with eagerness.

"Fi donc, Bébé!" cried the nurse, with pretended anger. "It is bad, what you are doing there! You will tire Madame."

"Oh, no, she does not tire me," said Ruth. "Let her stay with me for a little. Your arms must be stiff with holding her so long."

"Madame is very good. It is true my arms are a little cramped, but that is no reason why Madame should be fatigued—still as she is so good—"

Ruth scarcely heard her; her eyes were fixed on the baby face. What long lashes, longer than Anthony's; what a beautiful little mouth and chin—that little cleft chin was his in miniature—and then the exquisite beauties which belonged to childhood alone; the soft curves of cheek and neck, the dimples—the little creased wrist, the tiny pink fingers—how the mother must love them all and rejoice in them!

"Oh, God!" she cried in her heart, "is this woman so good? You have given her everything!"

During the remainder of the journey she kept the child on her knee, but when they slackened speed on nearing their destination the nurse was astonished at the eagerness with which she restored her charge to her. Indeed, she had collected her belongings and left the carriage almost before the train stopped.

Quick as she was, however, Anthony, as he came up, caught a glimpse of the tall figure before it disappeared in the crowd, and stood looking after her, breathlessly.

"The beautiful lady," observed the nurse, following the direction of his eyes. "She was in this compartment, Monsieur, and has been so amiable! She took care of Bébé for a long time, with a kindness!—Ah! Monsieur should have seen how she caressed the dear little one."

"She was—here?"

“But yes, Monsieur. Doubtless Monsieur did not observe her, for she was enveloped in her shawl, asleep. But she woke up soon after Monsieur left us that time, and took our Bébé on her knee. One must believe she loves children. If Monsieur had seen her with ours! How she kissed Bébé at parting!”

Anthony took the child from her arms; he too kissed it with a sudden fierce eagerness, and then, restoring it to her, turned abruptly away.



## CHAPTER XXXVI.

### SURSUM CORDA.

ALL the following day Ruth remained out of doors ; the atmosphere of the house seemed to stifle her. She followed her men afield, watching them as they "got" the potatoes with an intensity of interest which surprised them.

"I could welly fancy hoo was countin' 'em," observed one fellow grumblingly to his neighbour.

Up and down the ranks she walked, questioning occasionally, urging on loiterers, reprimanding idlers.

"Give me that fork," she said sternly to a gawky lad, who stood by in sulky astonishment as she wielded his implement with feverish energy. "This is the way to dig up potatoes."

The labourers looked round ; some of them laughing, some indignant.

"Eh, missus ! an' how lung 'ud a body keep thot up, thinken yo'?" growled one. "Yo'd have us sweatin' afore we'd scarce begun."

"They wenches," commented an old white-haired man, "they cannot do onything by hawves—it mun be all or nought wi' 'em. They'll either wortch a mon

to death or else they'll be for coddlin' an' marrin' him. Last week our missus, yon, sent Joe Birch a-whoam o' count o' th' rheumatiz' an' paid him full wage, too, hoo did. 'T'ud ha' done him good to ha' wortched a bit—I've th' sciatic' often mysel' an' never say nought about it—but thot's where it is. Women 'ull never see reason."

Meanwhile, Ruth plied her fork with rapid, vigorous movements, finding in the physical labour a temporary relief to her restlessness ; but she was obliged perforce to desist soon, and returned the tool to its owner with a flush and a smile.

"Now, Billy, put a little more energy into it."

Billy clutched his fork and fell to, looking up presently with a beaded forehead, to be commended for his valour. But the mistress had already withdrawn, and stood apart with eyes looking vaguely into space.

"Hoo doesn't tak' no notice," he observed in some indignation to his neighbour. "Hoo comes and sauces—an' then hoo walks off. I'm noan bahn to kill mysel' fur her."

"Nay, nay, dunnot do thot, lad," chuckled the other. "Eh, we couldn't spare a chap o' thy mak'—thou'd be terrible missed. Why, I reckon when thou'rt put to 't thou can do very near as mich wark in fower days as any other mon 'ud do in one. Theer be a dale of brukken-'earted folks at *thy* berrin', Billy."

Billy jocularly endeavoured to rap the wag over the head with the handle of his fork, and got tripped

up for his pains. But the sound of the scuffle and the roar of laughter which it provoked did not seem to reach Ruth's ears, though after a time she looked round hastily as though suddenly aroused, and walking over to the long ridge of heaped-up potatoes, which already stretched for many yards across the field, employed herself in picking up and replacing those which had rolled away.

Dusk came all too soon; the chill sweet October evening closing in suddenly. Wreaths of mist shrouded the bare meadow lands, and clung about the distant shadowy woods.

The men tramped homewards, talking to each other in the curt, perfunctory manner peculiar to north-country folk, but Ruth still lingered in the bleak brown field. To-night it was hard to go in—the house would be so quiet, so lonely. Every one of her labourers had more of a home to return to than she. A wife and bairns—father and mother. But no one was waiting to welcome her except Barbara. Poor old Barbara! She would scold her and pet her and wait on her, it was true; and they would have their meal together and finish the house-work—and then Barbara would go to bed, and Ruth would be left to her thoughts—those terrible thoughts which she had been holding at bay all day—they would have to be reckoned with at last and overcome. The struggle would be hard—and her heart failed her. But she must not be a coward—the lonely night would overtake her there in the field

as easily as in her quiet room. Besides, Barbara would be anxious. She began to walk homewards swiftly, as though to outpace her own fears.

The autumn land in the twilight looked vast and shadowy and unreal ; her own dark figure, pressing onwards, the only thing that seemed alive. There was a twitter and a flutter occasionally when the dim form of a tree broke the long irregular outline of the hedge, the sound of her steps disturbing a colony of sleepy feathered things ; and a rustle and crackle as her skirts brushed the curling leaves on the hedge, or her feet, treading on those already fallen, stirred up faint odours of decay to mingle with the other sweet indistinguishable scents of the October evening.

There, at last, loomed the roof of the farm, solitary and dark. But what was this ? A light twinkling through the almost leafless trees of the orchard. It looked as though it came from the window of the parlour, and yet that could not surely be. Barbara and she never sat there now.

As she drew nearer, however, she saw that the room was indeed illumined, and with the flickering glow of firelight. She paused, and then dashing across the long wet grass, and putting impatiently aside the dewy branches which would have barred her passage, she approached the window and looked in. Her heart beat to suffocation. She knew whom she would find there.

Yes, he was sitting on the couch, full in the

ruddy glow, his head a little bent, his hands loosely clasped together, waiting for her, as he had waited so often of old. And beside him, with chubby limbs outstretched, and curly hair gleaming in the dancing light, was the sleeping form of his child.

After one long steady look Ruth noiselessly withdrew, and went round the house to the door. Barbara came hurrying forth to meet her.

"My lamb, he's theer!" she said, in an agitated whisper. "Mester Anthony's theer—an' he's brought—a little 'un! I don't know what to mak' on it, but he wouldn't be gainsaid. I doubt thou'll be angered—but he wouldn't 'earken to nought as I tow'd him. He said they'd bide till thou coom—so I've made them up a bit o' fire, fur th' room were perishin' cowl, an' th' child were fair wearied out."

Ruth put Barbara silently on one side.

"Love, dunn't goo in if it 'urts thee," whispered the old woman, awed by her manner. "See, I'll nip in an' tell him thou connot."

"No," said Ruth, "do not go in—I will see them."

She entered the house with a firm step. The light from Barbara's lamp fell upon her face as she passed, showing it pale and calm; no trace of the passionate agitation of a little while ago remained—the very intensity of her emotion gave her strength and dignity.

She went into the parlour, closing the door after her, and advancing slowly.

Anthony rose, and awaited her approach.

"Ruth," he said, in a low voice, "this is my child. I have come to ask you if you will take her."

Ruth gazed at him: the suddenness and strangeness of the petition overwhelmed her, and she could not find words in which to reply.

"No other woman in the world would grant such a request—no other man would have the effrontery to make it. But *I* dare make it—to you. You will not refuse?"

"I will not refuse," said Ruth, her voice sounding muffled in her own ears. "But I do not understand. How can I take this child from her mother?"

"The mother is dead," said Anthony. "She died some months ago—suddenly."

There was a pause, and then Ruth sat down—indeed, she could scarcely stand, and signed to Anthony to do the same—the thought flashing simultaneously through the minds of both; thus, on this sofa, did they sit that Sunday morning when Anthony first asked leave to woo her. But now—the child lay between them.

"Ruth," he began, and then with a sudden break in his voice; "Ah, Ruth, Ruth—that we should sit here side by side again! No, no"—with a quick desperate effort at self-control—"I have not come for this—I will not offend you. I have come only for the child's sake. She has no one but me—and you know—I am not fit for such a charge. I had intended to let her share my wandering life—I am

sailing to-morrow for America—I love the little thing, and I could not make up my mind to leave her among strangers! but yesterday, when the nurse told me that you had held her in your arms”—he paused a moment, but continued quietly—“the thought came to me that if I appealed to you—if I asked you to take this child in her innocence, you would not deny me.”

She sat silent and motionless; the fire had sunk low and he could not see her face.

“In this room,” he said, “I asked you years ago to take me and save me. In that—as I now own—I wronged you—past forgiveness. I ask you now to take my child. Take her, Ruth—make her good, teach her your religion—make her like yourself. Bring her up—as if she were a daughter of your own. I dare to ask it because you are—yourself.”

There was a pause broken only by the little one's deep breathing. Anthony pressed his hands tightly together, and went on, striving to speak in tranquil, measured tones,—

“I resign all right over her—I abandon her entirely to you. I am going far away, and will not return for many, many years—if at all. It is better so—the less she knows of her father the better. . . Will you accept the trust, Ruth?”

“I will,” she said, and stooping, gathered up the little one in her arms, so gently that she did not wake, but with a little sleepy contented sigh nestled close.

Anthony looked away quickly—he could not bear the sight. After a moment he rose.

“I am going now. There is no more to be said—yes, one thing I have not told you, and it will please you. The child is already a Catholic—I always wanted her to be brought up in your Faith. Her nurse has begun to teach her some of the prayers I think you used to say. She was baptized after her mother’s death. I have called her”—dropping his voice—“by your name.”

“Oh, Anthony!” cried Ruth. Was that joy, or pain, or reproach in her voice?

“You may as well know it,” he went on, speaking hurriedly and vehemently. “My wife and I were not happy, Ruth. I was to blame, for I married her without love. I could not love her—I have never loved any woman but you.”

He turned towards her now, the passion in him leaping suddenly forth; the frail barrier of his self-restraint crumbling before it like straw before a flame.

“I will say it—you must hear it,” he cried incoherently. “I must tell you—in spite of all. I misused you, I betrayed you, I insulted you, but never, Ruth, never, even when I was most brutal to you, have I ceased to love you. It has been my torture and my punishment. If suffering could have atoned, I should have atoned—but my sin can never be blotted out—never—never! No, do not be afraid—I will trouble you no more—Good-bye!”



He bent over the child for a moment and then straightened himself with a groan,—

“Oh, if I could live my life again!”

“Anthony,” said Ruth, trembling, “wait! Where are you going?”

“How do I know?” he answered, with an unsteady, miserable laugh. “Anywhere!—into the outer darkness!”

“No, no, you shall not leave me so. I have the right to be heard. Anthony, you say your sin can never be blotted out. Oh, you are wrong!” bending earnestly forward, and laying her hand upon his sleeve—“Can you not believe it when I tell you? God will forgive you—as I forgive you.”

“Where is God?” cried Anthony, hoarsely, and she saw his form falter and sway. “Where is *your* God? Ruth, Ruth, let me go! When I see you with my child—it unmans me. If I, too, could learn—from your lips—but it is too late!”

“It is not too late,” said Ruth. “It is never too late. Oh, Anthony, how often I have prayed for this hour! Love, stay with me—I will teach you!”

And, stretching out her arm with exquisite, indescribable tenderness, she drew him down, down until his wet cheek touched hers.

THE END.







