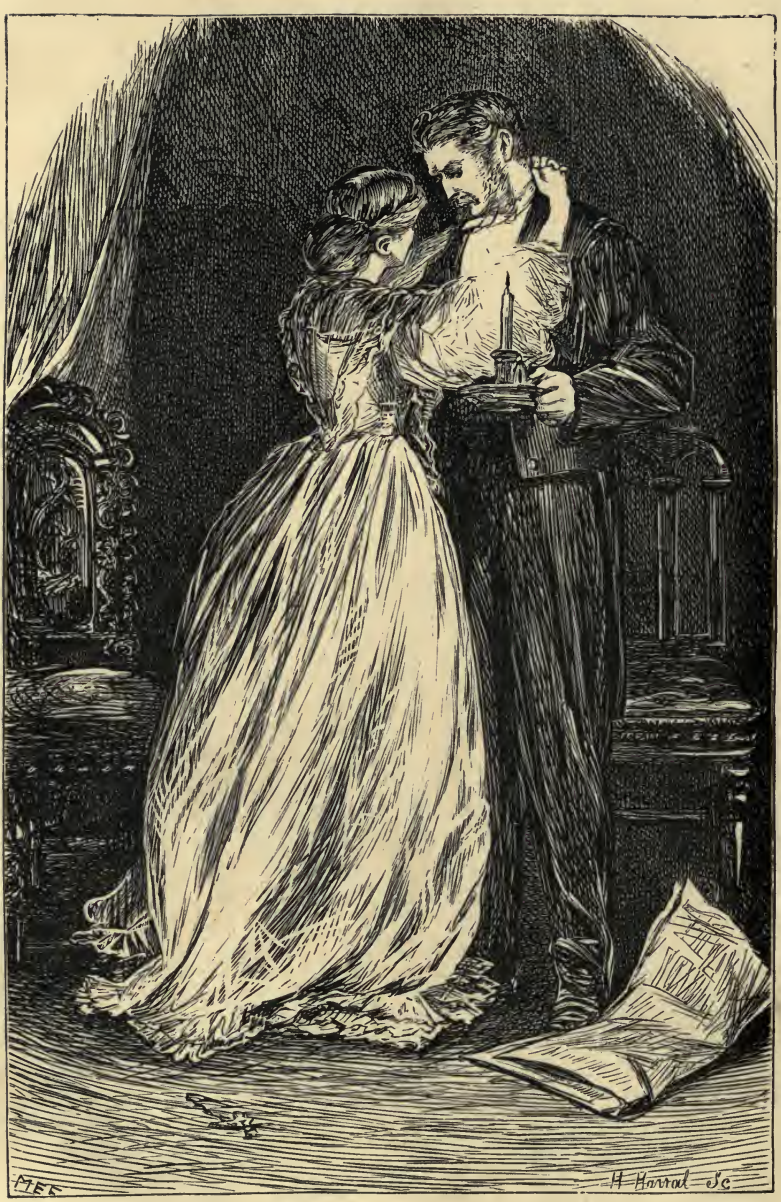

Husband and Wife.

THE

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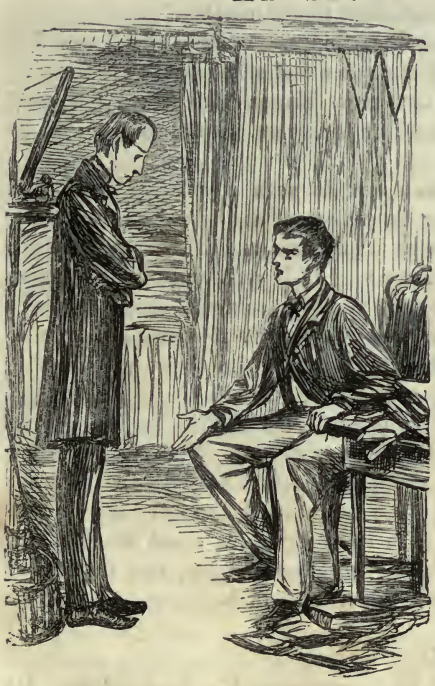
The Claverings.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Mr. Saul's Abode.



WHEN Harry Clavering left London he was not well, though he did not care to tell himself that he was ill. But he had been so harassed by his position, was so ashamed of himself, and as yet so unable to see any escape from his misery, that he was sore with fatigue and almost worn out with trouble. On his arrival at the parsonage, his mother at once asked him if he was ill, and received his petulant denial with an ill-satisfied countenance. That there was something wrong between him and Florence she suspected, but at the present moment she was not disposed to inquire into that matter. Harry's love-affairs had for her a great interest, but Fanny's love-affairs at the present moment were paramount in her bosom. Fanny, indeed, had become very troublesome since Mr. Saul's visit to her father. On the evening of her conversation with her mother, and on the following

morning, Fanny had carried herself with bravery, and Mrs. Clavering had been disposed to think that her daughter's heart was not wounded deeply. She had admitted the impossibility of her marriage with Mr. Saul, and had never insisted on the strength of her attachment. But no sooner was she told that Mr. Saul had been banished from the house, than she took upon herself to mope in the most love-lorn fashion, and behaved herself as though she were the victim of an all-absorbing passion. Between her and her father no word on the subject had been spoken, and even to her mother she was silent, respectful, and subdued, as it becomes daughters to be who are hardly used when they are in love. Now, Mrs. Clavering felt that in this her daughter was not treating her well.

"But you don't mean to say that she cares for him?" Harry said to his mother, when they were alone on the evening of his arrival.

"Yes, she cares for him, certainly. As far as I can tell, she cares for him very much."

"It is the oddest thing I ever knew in my life. I should have said he was the last man in the world for success of that kind."

"One never can tell, Harry. You see he is a very good young man."

"But girls don't fall in love with men because they're good, mother."

"I hope they do,—for that and other things together."

"But he has got none of the other things. What a pity it was that he was let to stay here after he first made a fool of himself."

"It's too late to think of that now, Harry. Of course she can't marry him. They would have nothing to live on. I should say that he has no prospect of a living."

"I can't conceive how a man can do such a wicked thing," said Harry, moralizing, and forgetting for a moment his own sins. "Coming into a house like this, and in such a position, and then undermining a girl's affections, when he must know that it is quite out of the question that he should marry her! I call it downright wicked. It is treachery of the worst sort, and coming from a clergyman is of course the more to be condemned. I shan't be slow to tell him my mind."

"You will gain nothing by quarrelling with him."

"But how can I help it, if I am to see him at all?"

"I mean that I would not be rough with him. The great thing is to make him feel that he should go away as soon as possible, and renounce all idea of seeing Fanny again. You see, your father will have no conversation with him at all, and it is so disagreeable about the services. They'll have to meet in the vestry-room on Sunday, and they won't speak. Will not that be terrible? Anything will be better than that he should remain here."

"And what will my father do for a curate?"

"He can't do anything till he knows when Mr. Saul will go. He talks of taking all the services himself."

"He couldn't do it, mother. He must not think of it. However, I'll see Saul the first thing to-morrow."

The next day was Tuesday, and Harry proposed to leave the rectory at ten o'clock for Mr. Saul's lodgings. Before he did so, he had a few words with his father, who professed even deeper animosity against Mr. Saul than his son. "After that," he said, "I'll believe that a girl may fall in love with any man! People say all manner of things about the folly of girls; but nothing but this,—nothing short of this,—would have convinced me that it was possible that Fanny should have been such a fool. An ape of a fellow,—not made like a man,—with a thin hatchet face, and unwholesome stubbly chin. Good heavens!"

"He has talked her into it."

"But he is such an ass. As far as I know him, he can't say Bo! to a goose."

"There I think you are perhaps wrong."

"Upon my word, I've never been able to get a word from him except about the parish. He is the most uncompanionable fellow. There's Edward Fielding is as active a clergyman as Saul; but Edward Fielding has something to say for himself."

"Saul is a cleverer man than Edward is; but his cleverness is of a different sort."

"It is of a sort that is very invisible to me. But what does all that matter? He hasn't got a shilling. When I was a curate, we didn't think of doing such things as that." Mr. Clavering had only been a curate for twelve months, and during that time had become engaged to his present wife with the consent of every one concerned. "But clergymen were gentlemen then. I don't know what the Church will come to; I don't indeed."

After this Harry went away upon his mission. What a farce it was that he should be engaged to make straight the affairs of other people, when his own affairs were so very crooked! As he walked up to the old farmhouse in which Mr. Saul was living, he thought of this, and acknowledged to himself that he could hardly make himself in earnest about his sister's affairs, because of his own troubles. He tried to fill himself with a proper feeling of dignified wrath and high paternal indignation against the poor curate; but under it all, and at the back of it all, and in front of it all, there was ever present to him his own position. Did he wish to escape from Lady Ongar; and if so, how was he to do it? And if he did not escape from Lady Ongar, how was he ever to hold up his head again?

He had sent a note to Mr. Saul on the previous evening giving notice of his intended visit, and had received an answer, in which the curate had promised that he would be at home. He had never before been in Mr. Saul's room, and as he entered it, felt more strongly than ever how incongruous was the idea of Mr. Saul as a suitor to his sister. The Claverings had always had things comfortable around them. They were a people who had ever lived on Brussels carpets, and had seated themselves in capacious chairs. Ormolu, damask hangings, and Sévres china were

not familiar to them; but they had never lacked anything that is needed for the comfort of the first-class clerical world. Mr. Saul in his abode boasted but few comforts. He inhabited a big bed-room, in which there was a vast fireplace, and a very small grate,—the grate being very much more modern than the fireplace. There was a small rag of a carpet near the hearth, and on this stood a large deal table,—a table made of unalloyed deal, without any mendacious paint, putting forward a pretence in the direction of mahogany. One wooden Windsor arm-chair—very comfortable in its way—was appropriated to the use of Mr. Saul himself, and two other small wooden chairs flanked the other side of the fireplace. In one distant corner stood Mr. Saul's small bed, and in another distant corner stood his small dressing-table. Against the wall stood a rickety deal press in which he kept his clothes. Other furniture there was none. One of the large windows facing towards the farmyard had been permanently closed, and in the wide embrasure was placed a portion of Mr. Saul's library,—books which he had brought with him from college; and on the ground under this closed window were arranged the others, making a long row, which stretched from the bed to the dressing-table, very pervious, I fear, to the attacks of mice. The big table near the fireplace was covered with books and papers,—and, alas, with dust; for he had fallen into that terrible habit which prevails among bachelors, of allowing his work to remain ever open, never finished, always confused,—with papers above books, and books above papers,—looking as though no useful product could ever be made to come forth from such chaotic elements. But there Mr. Saul composed his sermons, and studied his Bible, and followed up, no doubt, some special darling pursuit which his ambition dictated. But there he did not eat his meals; that had been made impossible by the pile of papers and dust; and his chop, therefore, or his broiled rasher, or bit of pig's fry was deposited for him on the little dressing-table, and there consumed.

Such was the solitary apartment of the gentleman who now aspired to the hand of Miss Clavering; and for this accommodation, including attendance, he paid the reasonable sum of 10*l.* per annum. He then had 60*l.* left, with which to feed himself, clothe himself like a gentleman,—a duty somewhat neglected,—and perform his charities!

Harry Clavering, as he looked around him, felt almost ashamed of his sister. The walls were whitewashed, and stained in many places; and the floor in the middle of the room seemed to be very rotten. What young man who has himself dwelt ever in comfort would like such a house for his sister? Mr. Saul, however, came forward with no marks of visible shame on his face, and greeted his visitor frankly with an open hand. "You came down from London yesterday, I suppose?" said Mr. Saul.

"Just so," said Harry.

"Take a seat;" and Mr. Saul suggested the arm-chair, but Harry contented himself with one of the others. "I hope Mrs. Clavering is well?" "Quite well," said Harry, cheerfully. "And your father,—and

sister?" "Quite well, thank you," said Harry, very stiffly. "I would have come down to you at the rectory," said Mr. Saul, "instead of bringing you up here; only, as you have heard, no doubt, I and your father have unfortunately had a difference." This Mr. Saul said without any apparent effort, and then left Harry to commence the further conversation.

"Of course, you know what I'm come here about?" said Harry.

"Not exactly; at any rate not so clearly but what I would wish you to tell me."

"You have gone to my father as a suitor for my sister's hand."

"Yes, I have."

"Now you must know that that is altogether impossible,—a thing not to be even talked of."

"So your father says. I need not tell you that I was very sorry to hear him speak in that way."

"But, my dear fellow, you can't really be in earnest? You can't suppose it possible that he would allow such an engagement?"

"As to the latter question, I have no answer to give; but I certainly was,—and certainly am in earnest."

"Then I must say that I think you have a very erroneous idea of what the conduct of a gentleman should be."

"Stop a moment, Clavering," said Mr. Saul, rising, and standing with his back to the big fireplace. "Don't allow yourself to say in a hurry words which you will afterwards regret. I do not think you can have intended to come here and tell me that I am not a gentleman."

"I don't want to have an argument with you; but you must give it up; that's all."

"Give what up? If you mean give up your sister, I certainly shall never do that. She may give me up, and if you have anything to say on that head, you had better say it to her."

"What right can you have,—without a shilling in the world——?"

"I should have no right to marry her in such a condition,—with your father's consent or without it. It is a thing which I have never proposed to myself for a moment,—or to her."

"And what have you proposed to yourself?"

Mr. Saul paused a moment before he spoke, looking down at the dusty heap upon his table, as though hoping that inspiration might come to him from them. "I will tell you what I have proposed," said he at last, "as nearly as I can put it into words. I propose to myself to have the image in my heart of one human being whom I can love above all the world beside; I propose to hope that I, as others, may some day marry, and that she whom I so love may become my wife; I propose to bear with such courage as I can much certain delay, and probable absolute failure in all this; and I propose also to expect,—no, hardly to expect,—that that which I will do for her, she will do for me. Now you know all my mind, and you may be sure of this, that I will instigate your sister to no disobedience."

"Of course she will not see you again."

"I shall think that hard after what has passed between us; but I certainly shall not endeavour to see her clandestinely."

"And under these circumstances, Mr. Saul, of course you must leave us."

"So your father says."

"But leave us at once, I mean. It cannot be comfortable that you and my father should go on in the parish together in this way."

"What does your father mean by 'at once?'"

"The sooner the better; say in two months' time at furthest."

"Very well. I will go in two months' time. I have no other home to go to, and no other means of livelihood; but as your father wishes it, I will go at the end of two months. As I comply with this, I hope my request to see your sister once before I go will not be refused."

"It could do no good, Mr. Saul."

"To me it would do great good,—and, as I think, no harm to her."

"My father, I am sure, will not allow it. Indeed, why should he? Nor, as I understand, would my sister wish it."

"Has she said so?"

"Not to me; but she has acknowledged that any idea of a marriage between herself and you is quite impossible, and after that I'm sure she'll have too much sense to wish for an interview. If there is anything further that I can do for you, I shall be most happy." Mr. Saul did not see that Harry Clavering could do anything for him, and then Harry took his leave. The rector, when he heard of the arrangement, expressed himself as in some sort satisfied. One month would have been better than two, but then it could hardly be expected that Mr. Saul could take himself away instantly, without looking for a hole in which to lay his head. "Of course it is understood that he is not to see her?" the rector said. In answer to this, Harry explained what had taken place, expressing his opinion that Mr. Saul would, at any rate, keep his word. "Interview, indeed!" said the rector. "It is the man's audacity that most astonishes me. It passes me to think how such a fellow can dare to propose such a thing. What is it that he expects as the end of it?" Then Harry endeavoured to repeat what Mr. Saul had said as to his own expectations, but he was quite aware that he failed to make his father understand those expectations as he had understood them when the words came from Mr. Saul's own mouth. Harry Clavering had acknowledged to himself that it was impossible not to respect the poor curate.

To Mrs. Clavering, of course, fell the task of explaining to Fanny what had been done, and what was going to be done. "He is to go away, my dear, at the end of two months."

"Very well, mamma."

"And, of course, you and he are not to meet before that."

"Of course not, if you and papa say so."

"I have told your papa that it will only be necessary to tell you this,

and that then you can go to your school just as usual, if you please. Neither papa nor I would doubt your word for a moment."

"But what can I do if he comes to me?" asked Fanny, almost whimpering.

"He has said that he will not, and we do not doubt his word either."

"That I am sure you need not. Whatever anybody may say, Mr. Saul is as much a gentleman as though he had the best living in the diocese. No one ever knew him break his word,—not a hair's breadth,—or do—anything else—that he ought—not to do." And Fanny, as she pronounced this rather strong eulogium, began to sob. Mrs. Clavering felt that Fanny was headstrong, and almost ill-natured, in speaking in this tone of her lover, after the manner in which she had been treated; but there could be no use in discussing Mr. Saul's virtues, and therefore she let the matter drop. "If you will take my advice," she said, "you will go about your occupations just as usual. You'll soon recover your spirits in that way."

"I don't want to recover my spirits," said Fanny; "but if you wish it I'll go on with the schools."

It was quite manifest now that Fanny intended to play the rôle of a broken-hearted young lady, and to regard the absent Mr. Saul with passionate devotion. That this should be so Mrs. Clavering felt to be the more cruel, because no such tendencies had been shown before the paternal sentence against Mr. Saul had been passed. Fanny in telling her own tale had begun by declaring that any such an engagement was an impossibility. She had not asked permission to have Mr. Saul for a lover. She had given no hint that she even hoped for such permission. But now when that was done which she herself had almost dictated, she took upon herself to live as though she were ill-used as badly as a heroine in a castle among the Apennines! And in this way she would really become deeply in love with Mr. Saul;—thinking of all which Mrs. Clavering almost regretted that the edict of banishment had gone forth. It would, perhaps, have been better to have left Mr. Saul to go about the parish, and to have laughed Fanny out of her fancy. But it was too late now for that, and Mrs. Clavering said nothing further on the subject to any one.

On the day following his visit to the farm house, Harry Clavering was unwell,—too unwell to go back to London; and on the next day he was ill in bed. Then it was that he got his mother to write to Mrs. Burton;—and then also he told his mother a part of his troubles. When the letter was written he was very anxious to see it, and was desirous that it should be specially worded, and so written as to make Mrs. Burton certain that he was in truth too ill to come to London, though not ill enough to create alarm. "Why not simply let me say that you are kept here for a day or two?" asked Mrs. Clavering.

"Because I promised that I would be in Onslow Terrace to-morrow, and she must not think that I would stay away if I could avoid it."

Then Mrs. Clavering closed the letter and directed it. When she

had done that, and put on it the postage-stamp, she asked in a voice that was intended to be indifferent whether Florence was in London; and, hearing that she was so, expressed her surprise that the letter should not be written to Florence.

"My engagement was with Mrs. Burton," said Harry.

"I hope there is nothing wrong between you and Florence?" said his mother. To this question, Harry made no immediate answer, and Mrs. Clavering was afraid to press it. But after a while he recurred to the subject himself. "Mother," he said, "things are wrong between Florence and me."

"Oh, Harry;—what has she done?"

"It is rather what have I done? As for her, she has simply trusted herself to a man who has been false to her."

"Dear Harry, do not say that. What is it that you mean? It is not true about Lady Ongar?"

"Then you have heard, mother. Of course I do not know what you have heard, but it can hardly be worse than the truth. But you must not blame her. Whatever fault there may be, is all mine." Then he told her much of what had occurred in Bolton Street. We may suppose that he said nothing of that mad caress,—nothing, perhaps, of the final promise which he made to Julia as he last passed out of her presence; but he did give her to understand that he had in some way returned to his old passion for the woman whom he had first loved.

I should describe Mrs. Clavering in language too highly eulogistic were I to lead the reader to believe that she was altogether averse to such advantages as would accrue to her son from a marriage so brilliant as that which he might now make with the grandly dowered widow of the late earl. Mrs. Clavering by no means despised worldly goods; and she had, moreover, an idea that her highly gifted son was better adapted to the spending than to the making of money. It had come to be believed at the rectory that though Harry had worked very hard at college,—as is the case with many highly born young gentlemen,—and though, he would, undoubtedly, continue to work hard if he were thrown among congenial occupations,—such as politics and the like,—nevertheless, he would never excel greatly in any drudgery that would be necessary for the making of money. There had been something to be proud of in this, but there had, of course, been more to regret. But now if Harry were to marry Lady Ongar, all trouble on that score would be over. But poor Florence! When Mrs. Clavering allowed herself to think of the matter she knew that Florence's claims should be held as paramount. And when she thought further and thought seriously, she knew also that Harry's honour and Harry's happiness demanded that he should be true to the girl to whom his hand had been promised. And, then, was not Lady Ongar's name tainted? It might be that she had suffered cruel ill-usage in this. It might be that no such taint had been deserved. Mrs. Clavering could plead the injured woman's cause when speaking of it without any close

reference to her own belongings; but it would have been very grievous to her, even had there been no Florence Burton in the case, that her son should make his fortune by marrying a woman as to whose character the world was in doubt.

She came to him late in the evening when his sister and father had just left him, and sitting with her hand upon his, spoke one word, which perhaps had more weight with Harry than any word that had yet been spoken. "Have you slept, dear?" she said.

"A little before my father came in."

"My darling," she said,—"you will be true to Florence; will you not?" Then there was a pause. "My own Harry, tell me that you will be true where your truth is due."

"I will, mother," he said.

"My own boy; my darling boy; my own true gentleman!" Harry felt that he did not deserve the praise; but praise undeserved, though it may be satire in disguise, is often very useful.

CHAPTER XXXV.

Parting.

On the next day Harry was not better, but the doctor still said that there was no cause for alarm. He was suffering from a low fever, and his sister had better be kept out of his room. He would not sleep, and was restless, and it might be some time before he could return to London.

Early in the day the rector came into his son's bedroom, and told him and his mother, who was there, the news which he had just heard from the great house. "Hugh has come home," he said, "and is going out yachting for the rest of the summer. They are going to Norway in Jack Stuart's yacht. Archie is going with them." Now Archie was known to be a great man in a yacht, cognizant of ropes, well up in booms and spars, very intimate with bolts, and one to whose hands a tiller came as naturally as did the saddle of a steeple-chase horse to the legs of his friend Doodles. "They are going to fish," said the rector.

But Jack Stuart's yacht is only a river-boat,—or just big enough for Cowes harbour, but nothing more," said Harry, roused in his bed to some excitement by the news.

"I know nothing about Jack Stuart or his boat either," said the rector; "but that's what they told me. He's down here, at any rate, for I saw the servant that came with him."

"What a shame it is," said Mrs. Clavering,—"a scandalous shame."

"You mean his going away?" said the rector.

"Of course I do;—his leaving her here by herself, all alone. He can have no heart;—after losing her child and suffering as she has done. It makes me ashamed of my own name."

"You can't alter him, my dear. He has his good qualities and his bad,—and the bad ones are by far the more conspicuous."

"I don't know any good qualities he has."

"He does not get into debt. He will not destroy the property. He will leave the family after him as well off as it was before him,—and though he is a hard man, he does nothing actively cruel. Think of Lord Ongar, and then you'll remember that there are worse men than Hugh. Not that I like him. I am never comfortable for a moment in his presence. I always feel that he wants to quarrel with me, and that I almost want to quarrel with him."

"I detest him," said Harry, from beneath the bedclothes.

"You won't be troubled with him any more this summer, for he means to be off in less than a week."

"And what is she to do?" asked Mrs. Clavering.

"Live here as she has done ever since Julia married. I don't see that it will make much difference to her. He's never with her when he's in England, and I should think she must be more comfortable without him than with him."

"It's a great catch for Archie," said Harry.

"Archie Clavering is a fool," said Mrs. Clavering.

"They say he understands a yacht," said the rector, who then left the room.

The rector's news was all true. Sir Hugh Clavering had come down to the Park, and had announced his intention of going to Norway in Jack Stuart's yacht. Archie also had been invited to join the party. Sir Hugh intended to leave the Thames in about a week, and had not thought it necessary to give his wife any intimation of the fact, till he told her himself of his intention. He took, I think, a delight in being thus over-harsh in his harshness to her. He proved to himself thus not only that he was master, but that he would be master without any let or drawback, without compunctions, and even without excuses for his ill-conduct. There should be no plea put in by him in his absences, that he had only gone to catch a few fish, when his intentions had been other than piscatorial. He intended to do as he liked now and always,—and he intended that his wife should know that such was his intention. She was now childless, and therefore he had no other terms to keep with her than those which appertained to her necessities for bed and board. There was the house, and she might live in it; and there were the butchers and the bakers, and other tradesmen to supply her wants. Nay; —there were the old carriage and the old horses at her disposal, if they could be of any service to her. Such were Sir Hugh Clavering's ideas as to the bonds inflicted upon him by his marriage vows.

"I'm going to Norway next week." It was thus Sir Hugh communicated his intention to his wife within five minutes of their first greeting.

"To Norway, Hugh?"

"Yes;—why not to Norway? I and one or two others have got

some fishing there. Archie is going too. It will keep him from spending his money;—or rather from spending money which isn't his."

"And for how long will you be gone?"

It was part of Sir Hugh Clavering's theory as to these matters that there should be no lying in the conduct of them. He would not condescend to screen any part of his doings by a falsehood;—so he answered this question with exact truth.

"I don't suppose we shall be back before October."

"Not before October?"

"No. We are talking of putting in on the coast of Normandy somewhere; and probably may run down to Brittany. I shall be back, at any rate, for the hunting. As for the partridges, the game has gone so much to the devil here, that they are not worth coming for."

"You'll be away four months!"

"I suppose I shall if I don't come back till October." Then he left her, calculating that she would have considered the matter before he returned, and have decided that no good could come to her from complaint. She knew his purpose now, and would no doubt reconcile herself to it quickly;—perhaps with a few tears, which would not hurt him if he did not see them.

But this blow was almost more than Lady Clavering could bear,—was more than she could bear in silence. Why she should have grudged her husband his trip abroad, seeing that his presence in England could hardly have been a solace to her, it is hard to understand. Had he remained in England, he would rarely have been at Clavering Park; and when he was at the Park he would rarely have given her the benefit of his society. When they were together he was usually scolding her, or else sitting in gloomy silence, as though that phase of his life was almost insupportable to him. He was so unusually disagreeable in his intercourse with her, that his absence, one would think, must be preferable to his presence. But women can bear anything better than desertion. Cruelty is bad, but neglect is worse than cruelty, and desertion worse even than neglect. To be treated as though she were not in existence, or as though her existence were a nuisance simply to be endured, and, as far as possible, to be forgotten, was more than even Lady Clavering could bear without complaint. When her husband left her, she sat meditating how she might turn against her oppressor. She was a woman not apt for fighting,—unlike her sister, who knew well how to use the cudgels in her own behalf; she was timid, not gifted with a full flow of words, prone to sink and become dependent; but she,—even she,—with all these deficiencies,—felt that she must make some stand against the outrage to which she was now to be subjected.

"Hugh," she said, when next she saw him, "you can't really mean that you are going to leave me from this time till the winter?"

"I said nothing about the winter."

"Well,—till October?"

"I said that I was going, and I usually mean what I say."

"I cannot believe it, Hugh; I cannot bring myself to think that you will be so cruel."

"Look here, Hermy, if you take to calling names I won't stand it."

"And I won't stand it, either. What am I to do? Am I to be here in this dreadful barrack of a house all alone? How would you like it? Would you bear it for one month, let alone four or five? I won't remain here; I tell you that fairly."

"Where do you want to go?"

"I don't want to go anywhere, but I'll go away somewhere and die; —I will indeed. I'll destroy myself, or something."

"Psha!"

"Yes; of course it's a joke to you. What have I done to deserve this? Have I ever done anything that you told me not? It's all because of Hughy,—my darling,—so it is; and it's cruel of you, and not like a husband; and it's not manly. It's very cruel. I didn't think anybody would have been so cruel as you are to me." Then she broke down and burst into tears.

"Have you done, Hermy?" said her husband.

"No; I've not done."

"Then go on again," said he.

But in truth she had done, and could only repeat her last accusation, "You're very, very cruel."

"You said that before."

"And I'll say it again. I'll tell everybody; so I will. I'll tell your uncle at the rectory, and he shall speak to you."

"Look here, Hermy; I can bear a deal of nonsense from you because some women are given to talk nonsense; but if I find you telling tales about me out of this house, and especially to my uncle, or indeed to anybody, I'll let you know what it is to be cruel."

"You can't be worse than you are."

"Don't try me; that's all. And as I suppose you have now said all that you've got to say, if you please we will regard that subject as finished." The poor woman had said all that she could say, and had no further means of carrying on the war. In her thoughts she could do so; in her thoughts she could wander forth out of the gloomy house in the night, and perish in the damp and cold, leaving a paper behind her to tell the world that her husband's cruelty had brought her to that pass. Or she would go to Julia and leave him for ever. Julia, she thought, would still receive her. But as to one thing she had certainly made up her mind; she would go with her complaint to Mrs. Clavering at the rectory, let her lord and master show his anger in whatever form he might please.

The next day Sir Hugh himself made her a proposition which somewhat softened the aspect of affairs. This he did in his usual voice, with something of a smile on his face, and speaking as though he were altogether oblivious of the scenes of yesterday. "I was thinking, Hermy," he said, "that you might have Julia down here while I am away."

"Have Julia here?"

"Yes; why not? She'll come, I'm sure, when she knows that my back is turned."

"I've never thought about asking her,—at least not lately."

"No; of course. But you might as well do so now. It seems that she never goes to Ongar Park, and, as far as I can learn, never will. I'm going to see her myself."

"You going to see her?"

"Yes; Lord Ongar's people want to know whether she can be induced to give up the place; that is, to sell her interest in it. I have promised to see her. Do you write her a letter first, and tell her that I want to see her; and ask her also to come here as soon as she can leave London."

"But wouldn't the lawyers do it better than you?"

"Well;—one would think so; but I am commissioned to make her a kind of apology from the whole Courton family. They fancy they've been hard upon her; and, by George, I believe they have. I may be able to say a word for myself too. If she isn't a fool she'll put her anger in her pocket, and come down to you."

Lady Clavering liked the idea of having her sister with her, but she was not quite meek enough to receive the permission now given her as full compensation for the injury done. She said that she would do as he had bidden her, and then went back to her own grievances. "I don't suppose Julia, even if she would come for a little time, would find it very pleasant to live in such a place as this, all alone."

"She wouldn't be all alone when you are with her," said Hugh, gruffly, and then again went out, leaving his wife to become used to her misfortune by degrees.

It was not surprising that Lady Clavering should dislike her solitude at Clavering Park house, nor surprising that Sir Hugh should find the place disagreeable. The house was a large, square, stone building, with none of the prettinesses of modern country-houses about it. The gardens were away from the house, and the cold desolate flat park came up close around the windows. The rooms were large and lofty,—very excellent for the purpose of a large household, but with nothing of that snug, pretty comfort which solitude requires for its solace. The furniture was old and heavy, and the hangings were dark in colour. Lady Clavering when alone there,—and she generally was alone,—never entered the rooms on the ground-floor. Nor did she ever pass through the wilderness of a hall by which the front-door was to be reached. Throughout more than half her days she never came downstairs at all; but when she did so, preparatory to being dragged about the parish lanes in the old family carriage, she was let out at a small side-door; and so it came to pass that during the absences of the lord of the mansion, the shutters were not even moved from any of the lower windows. Under such circumstances there can be no wonder that Lady Clavering regarded the place as a prison. "I wish you could come upon it unawares, and see how gloomy it is," she said to

him. "I don't think you'd stand it alone for two days, let alone all your life."

"I'll shut it up altogether if you like," said he.

"And where am I to go?" she asked.

"You can go to Moor Hall if you please." Now Moor Hall was a small house, standing on a small property belonging to Sir Hugh, in that part of Devonshire which lies north of Dartmoor, somewhere near the Holsworthy region, and which is perhaps as ugly, as desolate, and as remote as any part of England. Lady Clavering had heard much of Moor Hall, and dreaded it as the heroine, made to live in the big grim castle low down among the Apennines, dreads the smaller and grimmer castle which is known to exist somewhere higher up in the mountains.

"Why couldn't I go to Brighton?" said Lady Clavering boldly.

"Because I don't choose it," said Sir Hugh. After that she did go to the rectory, and told Mrs. Clavering all her troubles. She had written to her sister, having, however, delayed the doing of this for two or three days, and she had not at this time received an answer from Lady Ongar. Nor did she hear from her sister till after Sir Hugh had left her. It was on the day before his departure that she went to the rectory, finding herself driven to this act of rebellion by his threat of Moor Hall. "I will never go there unless I am dragged there by force," she said to Mrs. Clavering.

"I don't think he means that," said Mrs. Clavering. "He only wants to make you understand that you'd better remain at the Park."

"But if you knew what a house it is to be all alone in!"

"Dear Hermione, I do know! But you must come to us oftener, and let us endeavour to make it better for you."

"But how can I do that? How can I come to his uncle's house, just because my own husband has made my own home so wretched that I cannot bear it. I'm ashamed to do that. I ought not to be telling you all this, of course. I don't know what he'd do if he knew it; but it is so hard to bear it all without telling some one."

"My poor dear!"

"I sometimes think I'll ask Mr. Clavering to speak to him, and to tell him at once that I will not submit to it any longer. Of course he would be mad with rage, but if he were to kill me I should like it better than having to go on in this way. I'm sure he is only waiting for me to die."

Mrs. Clavering said all that she could to comfort the poor woman, but there was not much that she could say. She had strongly advocated the plan of having Lady Ongar at the Park, thinking perhaps that Harry would be more safe while that lady was at Clavering, than he might perhaps be if she remained in London. But Mrs. Clavering doubted much whether Lady Ongar would consent to make such a visit. She regarded Lady Ongar as a hard, worldly, pleasure-seeking woman,—sinned against perhaps in much, but also sinning in much herself,—to whom the desolation of the Park would be even more unendurable than it was to the elder sister. But of this, of course, she said nothing. Lady Clavering left her, some-

what quieted, if not comforted; and went back to pass her last evening with her husband.

"Upon second thought, I'll go by the first train," he said, as he saw her for a moment before she went up to dress. "I shall have to be off from here a little after six, but I don't mind that in summer." Thus she was to be deprived of such gratification as there might have been in breakfasting with him on the last morning! It might be hard to say in what that gratification would have consisted. She must by this time have learned that his presence gave her none of the pleasures usually expected from society. He slighted her in everything. He rarely vouchsafed to her those little attentions which all women expect from all gentlemen. If he handed her a plate, or cut for her a morsel of bread from the loaf, he showed by his manner and by his brow that the doing so was a nuisance to him. At their meals he rarely spoke to her,—having always at breakfast a paper or a book before him, and at dinner devoting his attention to a dog at his feet. Why should she have felt herself cruelly ill-used in this matter of his last breakfast,—so cruelly ill-used that she wept afresh over it as she dressed herself,—seeing that she would lose so little? Because she loved the man;—loved him, though she now thought that she hated him. We very rarely, I fancy, love those whose love we have not either possessed or expected,—or at any rate for whose love we have not hoped; but when it has once existed, ill-usage will seldom destroy it. Angry as she was with the man, ready as she was to complain of him, to rebel against him,—perhaps to separate herself from him for ever, nevertheless she found it to be a cruel grievance that she should not sit at table with him on the morning of his going. "Jackson shall bring me a cup of coffee as I'm dressing," he said, "and I'll breakfast at the club." She knew that there was no reason for this, except that breakfasting at his club was more agreeable to him than breakfasting with his wife.

She had got rid of her tears before she came down to dinner, but still she was melancholy and almost lachrymose. This was the last night, and she felt that something special ought to be said; but she did not know what she expected, or what it was that she herself wished to say. I think that she was longing for an opportunity to forgive him,—only that he would not be forgiven. If he would have spoken one soft word to her, she would have accepted that one word as an apology; but no such word came. He sat opposite to her at dinner, drinking his wine and feeding his dog; but he was no more gracious to her at this dinner than he had been on any former day. She sat there pretending to eat, speaking a dull word now and then, to which his answer was a monosyllable, looking out at him from under her eyes, through the candlelight, to see whether any feeling was moving him; and then having pretended to eat a couple of strawberries she left him to himself. Still, however, this was not the last. There would come some moment for an embrace,—for some cold half-embrace, in which he would be forced to utter something of a farewell.

He, when he was left alone, first turned his mind to the subject of Jack Stuart and his yacht. He had on that day received a letter from a noble friend,—a friend so noble that he was able to take liberties even with Sir Hugh Clavering,—in which his noble friend had told him that he was a fool to trust himself on so long an expedition in Jack Stuart's little boat. Jack, the noble friend said, knew nothing of the matter, and as for the masters who were hired for the sailing of such crafts, their only object was to keep out as long as possible, with an eye to their wages and perquisites. It might be all very well for Jack Stuart, who had nothing in the world to lose but his life and his yacht; but his noble friend thought that any such venture on the part of Sir Hugh was simple tomfoolery. But Sir Hugh was an obstinate man, and none of the Claverings were easily made afraid by personal danger. Jack Stuart might know nothing about the management of a boat, but Archie did. And as for the smallness of the craft,—he knew of a smaller craft which had been out on the Norway coast during the whole of the last season. So he drove that thought away from his mind, with no strong feelings of gratitude towards his noble friend.

And then for a few moments he thought of his own home. What had his wife done for him, that he should put himself out of his way to do much for her? She had brought him no money. She had added nothing either by her wit, beauty, or rank to his position in the world. She had given him no heir. What had he received from her that he should endure her commonplace conversation, and washed-out, dowdy prettinesses? Perhaps some momentary feeling of compassion, some twang of conscience, came across his heart, as he thought of it all; but if so he checked it instantly, in accordance with the teachings of his whole life. He had made his reflections on all these things, and had tutored his mind to certain resolutions, and would not allow himself to be carried away by any womanly softness. She had her house, her carriage, her bed, her board, and her clothes; and seeing how very little she herself had contributed to the common fund, her husband determined that in having those things she had all that she had a right to claim. Then he drank a glass of sherry, and went into the drawing-room with that hard smile upon his face, which he was accustomed to wear when he intended to signify to his wife that she might as well make the best of existing things, and not cause unnecessary trouble, by giving herself airs or assuming that she was unhappy.

He had his cup of coffee, and she had her cup of tea, and she made one or two little attempts at saying something special,—something that might lead to a word or two as to their parting; but he was careful and crafty, and she was awkward and timid,—and she failed. He had hardly been there an hour, when looking at his watch he declared that it was ten o'clock, and that he would go to bed. Well; perhaps it might be best to bring it to an end, and to go through this embrace, and have done with it! Any tender word that was to be spoken on either side, it

was now clear to her, must be spoken in that last farewell. There was a tear in her eye as she rose to kiss him; but the tear was not there of her own good will, and she strove to get rid of it without his seeing it. As he spoke he also rose, and having lit for himself a bed-candle was ready to go. "Good-by, Hermy," he said, submitting himself, with the candle in his hand, to the inevitable embrace.

"Good-by, Hugh; and God bless you," she said, putting her arms round his neck. "Pray,—pray take care of yourself."

"All right," he said. His position with the candle was awkward, and he wished that it might be over.

But she had a word prepared which she was determined to utter,—poor weak creature that she was. She still had her arm round his shoulders, so that he could not escape without shaking her off, and her forehead was almost resting on his bosom. "Hugh," she said, "you must not be angry with me for what I said to you."

"Very well," said he;—"I won't."

"And, Hugh," said she; "of course I can't like your going."

"Oh, yes, you will," said he.

"No;—I can't like it; but, Hugh, I will not think ill of it any more. Only be here as much as you can when you come home."

"All right," said he; then he kissed her forehead and escaped from her, and went his way, telling himself, as he went, that she was a fool.

That was the last he saw of her,—before his yachting commenced; but she,—poor fool,—was up by times in the morning, and, peeping out between her curtains as the early summer sun glanced upon her eyelids, saw him come forth from the porch and descend the great steps, and get into his dog-cart and drive himself away. Then, when the sound of the gig could be no longer heard, and when her eyes could no longer catch the last expiring speck of his hat, the poor fool took herself to bed again and cried herself to sleep.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

Captain Clavering makes his last Attempt.

The yachting scheme was first proposed to Archie by his brother Hugh. "Jack says that he can make a berth for you, and you'd better come," said the elder brother, understanding that when his edict had thus gone forth, the thing was as good as arranged. "Jack finds the boat and men, and I find the grub and wine,—and pay for the fishing," said Hugh; "so you need not make any bones about it." Archie was not disposed to make any bones about it as regarded his acceptance either of the berth or of the grub and wine, and as he would be expected to earn his passage by his work, there was no necessity for any scruple; but there arose the question whether he had not got more important fish to fry. He had not as yet

made his proposal to Lady Ongar, and although he now knew that he had nothing to hope from the Russian Spy,—nevertheless he thought that he might as well try his own hand at the venture. His resolution on this head was always stronger after dinner than before, and generally became stronger and more strong as the evening advanced;—so that he usually went to bed with a firm determination "to pop," as he called it to his friend Doodles, early on the next day; but distance affected him as well as the hour of the day, and his purpose would become surprisingly cool in the neighbourhood of Bolton Street. When, however, his brother suggested that he should be taken altogether away from the scene of action, he thought of the fine income and of Ongar Park with pangs of regret, and ventured upon a mild remonstrance. "But there's this affair of Julia, you know," said he.

"I thought that was all off," said Hugh.

"O dear, no; not off at all. I haven't asked her yet."

"I know you've not; and I don't suppose you ever will."

"Yes, I shall;—that is to say, I mean it. I was advised not to be in too much of a hurry; that is to say, I thought it best to let her settle down a little after her first seeing me."

"To recover from her confusion?"

"Well, not exactly that. I don't suppose she was confused."

"I should say not. My idea is that you haven't a ghost of chance, and that as you haven't done anything all this time, you need not trouble yourself now."

"But I have done something," said Archie, thinking of his seventy pounds.

"You may as well give it up, for she means to marry Harry."

"No!"

"But I tell you she does. While you've been thinking he's been doing. From what I hear he may have her to-morrow for the asking."

"But he's engaged to that girl whom they had with them down at the rectory," said Archie, in a tone which showed with what horror he should regard any inconstancy towards Florence Burton on the part of Harry Clavering.

"What does that matter? You don't suppose he'll let seven thousand a year slip through his fingers because he had promised to marry a little girl like her? If her people choose to proceed against him they'll make him pay swinging damages; that is all."

Archie did not like this idea at all, and became more than ever intent on his own matrimonial prospects. He almost thought that he had a right to Lady Ongar's money, and he certainly did think that a monstrous injustice was done to him by this idea of a marriage between her and his cousin. "I mean to ask her as I've gone so far, certainly," said he.

"You can do as you like about that."

"Yes; of course I can do as I like; but when a fellow has gone in for a thing, he likes to see it through." He was still thinking of the

seventy pounds which he had invested, and which he could now recover only out of Lady Ongar's pocket.

"And you mean to say you won't come to Norway?"

"Well; if she accepts me——"

"If she accepts you," said Hugh, "of course you can't come; but supposing she don't?"

"In that case, I might as well do that as anything else," said Archie. Whereupon Sir Hugh signified to Jack Stuart that Archie would join the party, and went down to Clavering with no misgiving on that head.

Some few days after this there was another little dinner at the military club, to which no one was admitted but Archie and his friend Doodles. Whenever these prandial consultations were held, Archie paid the bill. There were no spoken terms to that effect, but the regulation seemed to come naturally to both of them. Why should Doodles be taken from his billiards half-an-hour earlier than usual, and devote a portion of the calculating powers of his brain to Archie's service without compensation? And a richer vintage was needed when so much thought was required, the burden of which Archie would not of course allow to fall on his friend's shoulders. Were not this explained, the experienced reader would regard the devoted friendship of Doodles as exaggerated.

"I certainly shall ask her to-morrow," said Archie, looking with a thoughtful cast of countenance through the club window into the street. "It may be hurrying the matter a little, but I can't help that." He spoke in a somewhat boastful tone, as though he were proud of himself and had forgotten that he had said the same words once or twice before.

"Make her know that you're there; that's everything," said Doodles. "Since I fathomed that woman in Mount Street, I've felt that you must make the score off your own bat, if you're to make it at all."

"You did that well," said Archie, who knew that the amount of pleasing encouragement which he might hope to get from his friend, must depend on the praise which he himself should bestow. "Yes; you certainly did bowl her over uncommon well."

"That kind of thing just comes within my line," said Doodles, with conscious pride. "Now, as to asking Lady Ongar downright to marry me,—upon my word I believe I should be half afraid of doing it myself."

"I've none of that kind of feeling," said Archie.

"It comes more in your way, I daresay," said Doodles. "But for me, what I like is a little bit of management,—what I call a touch of the diplomatic. You'll be able to see her to-morrow?"

"I hope so. I shall go early,—that is, as soon as I've looked through the papers and written a few letters. Yes, I think she'll see me. And as for what Hugh says about Harry Clavering, why, d—— it, you know, a fellow can't go on in that way; can he?"

"Because of the other girl, you mean?"

"He has had her down among all our people, just as though they

were going to be married to-morrow. If a man is to do that kind of thing, what woman can be safe?"

"I wonder whether she likes him?" asked the crafty Doodles.

"She did like him, I fancy, in her calf days; but that means nothing. She knows what she's at now, bless you, and she'll look to the future. It's my son who'll have the Clavering property and be the baronet, not his. You see what a string to my bow that is."

When this banquet was over, Doodles made something of a resolution that it should be the last to be eaten on that subject. The matter had lost its novelty, and the price paid to him was not sufficient to secure his attention any longer. "I shall be here to-morrow at four," he said, as he rose from his chair with the view of retreating to the smoking-room, "and then we shall know all about it. Whichever way it's to be, it isn't worth your while keeping such a thing as that in hand any longer. I should say give her her chance to-morrow, and then have done with it." Archie in reply to this declared that those were exactly his sentiments, and then went away to prepare himself in silence and solitude for the next day's work.

On the following day at two o'clock Lady Ongar was sitting alone in the front room on the ground-floor in Bolton Street. Of Harry Clavering's illness she had as yet heard nothing, nor of his absence from London. She had not seen him since he had parted from her on that evening when he had asked her to be his wife, and the last words she had heard from his lips had made this request. She, indeed, had then bade him be true to her rival,—to Florence Burton. She had told him this in spite of her love,—of her love for him and of his for her. They two, she had said, could not now become man and wife;—but he had not acknowledged the truth of what she had said. She could not write to him. She could make no overtures. She could ask no questions. She had no friend in whom she could place confidence. She could only wait for him, till he should come to her or send to her, and let her know what was to be her fate.

As she now sat she held a letter in her hand which had just been brought to her from Sophie,—from her poor famished, but indefatigable Sophie. Sophie she had not seen since they had parted on the railway platform, and then the parting was supposed to be made in lasting enmity. Desolate as she was, she had congratulated herself much on her escape from Sophie's friendship, and was driven by no qualms of her heart to long for a renewal of the old ties. But it was not so with the more affectionate Sophie; and Sophie therefore had written,—as follows:—

Mount Street—Friday morning.

DEAREST DEAREST JULIE,—My heart is so sad that I cannot keep my silence longer. What; can such friendship as ours has been be made to die all in a minute? Oh, no;—not at least in my bosom, which is filled with love for my Julie. And my Julie will not turn from her friend, who has been so true to her,—ah, at such moments too,—oh, yes, at such moments!—just for an angry word, or a little

indiscretion. What was it after all about my brother? Bah! He is a fool; that is all. If you shall wish it, I will never speak to him again. What is my brother to me, compared to my Julie? My brother is nothing to me. I tell him we go to that accursed island,—accursed island because my Julie has quarrelled with me there,—and he arranges himself to follow us. What could I do? I could not tie him up by the leg in his London club. He is a man whom no one can tie up by the leg. Mon Dieu, no. He is very hard to tie up.

Do I wish him for your husband? Never! Why should I wish him for your husband? If I was a man, my Julie, I should wish you for myself. But I am not, and why should you not have him whom you like the best? If I was you, with your beauty and money and youth, I would have any man that I liked,—everything. I know, of course,—for did I not see? It is that young Clavering to whom your little heart wishes to render itself;—not the captain who is a fool,—such a fool! but the other who is not a fool, but a fine fellow;—and so handsome! Yes; there is no doubt as to that. He is beautiful as a Phœbus. [This was good-natured on the part of Sophie, who, as the reader may remember, hated Harry Clavering herself.]

Well,—why should he not be your own? As for your poor Sophie, she would do all in her power to assist the friend whom she love. There is that little girl,—yes; it is true as I told you. But little girls cannot have all they want always. He is a gay deceiver. These men who are so beautiful as Phœbus are always deceivers. But you need not be the one deceived;—you with your money and your beauty and your —what you call rank. No, I think not; and I think that little girl must put up with it, as other little girls have done, since the men first learned how to tell lies. That is my advice, and if you will let me I can give you good assistance.

Dearest Julie, think of all this, and do not banish your Sophie. I am so true to you, that I cannot live without you. Send me back one word of permission, and I will come to you, and kneel at your feet. And in the meantime, I am

Your most devoted friend,

SOPHIE.

Lady Ongar, on the receipt of this letter, was not at all changed in her purpose with reference to Madame Gordeloup. She knew well enough where her Sophie's heart was placed, and would yield to no further pressure from that quarter; but Sophie's reasoning, nevertheless, had its effect. She, Lady Ongar, with her youth, her beauty, her wealth, and her rank, why should she not have that one thing which alone could make her happy, seeing, as she did see, or as she thought she saw, that in making herself happy she could do so much, could confer such great blessings on him she loved? She had already found that the money she had received as the price of herself had done very little towards making her happy in her present state. What good was it to her that she had a carriage and horses and two footmen six feet high? One pleasant word from lips that she could love,—from the lips of man or woman that she could esteem,—would be worth it all. She had gone down to her pleasant place in the country,—a place so pleasant that it had a fame of its own among the luxuriantly pleasant seats of the English country gentry; she had gone there, expecting to be happy in the mere feeling that it was all her own; and the whole thing had been to her so unutterably sad, so wretched in the severity of its desolation, that she had been unable to endure her life amidst the shade of her own trees. All her apples hitherto had turned to ashes between her teeth, because her fate had forced her to attempt the

eating of them alone. But if she could give the fruit to him,—if she could make the apples over, so that they should all be his, and not hers, then would there not come to her some of the sweetness of the juice of them?

She declared to herself that she would not tempt this man to be untrue to his troth, were it not that in doing so she would so greatly benefit himself. Was it not manifest that Harry Clavering was a gentleman, qualified to shine among men of rank and fashion, but not qualified to make his way by his own diligence? In saying this of him, she did not know how heavy was the accusation that she brought against him; but what woman, within her own breast, accuses the man she loves? Were he to marry Florence Burton, would he not ruin himself, and probably ruin her also? But she could give him all that he wanted. Though Ongar Park to her alone was, with its rich pastures and spreading oaks and lowing cattle, desolate as the Dead Sea shore, for him,—and for her with him,—would it not be the very paradise suited to them? Would it not be the heaven in which such a Phœbus should shine amidst the gyrations of his satellites? A Phœbus going about his own field in knickerbockers, and with attendant satellites, would possess a divinity which, as she thought, might make her happy. As she thought of all this, and asked herself these questions, there was an inner conscience which told her that she had no right to Harry's love or Harry's hand; but still she could not cease to long that good things might come to her, though those good things had not been deserved. Alas, good things not deserved too often lose their goodness when they come! As she was sitting with Sophie's letter in her hand the door was opened, and Captain Clavering was announced.

Captain Archibald Clavering was again dressed in his very best, but he did not even yet show by his demeanour that aptitude for the business now in hand of which he had boasted on the previous evening to his friend. Lady Ongar, I think, partly guessed the object of his visit. She had perceived, or perhaps had unconsciously felt, on the occasion of his former coming, that the visit had not been made simply from motives of civility. She had known Archie in old days, and was aware that the splendour of his vestments had a significance. Well, if anything of that kind was to be done, the sooner it was done the better.

"Julia," he said, as soon as he was seated, "I hope I have the pleasure of seeing you quite well?"

"Pretty well, I thank you," said she.

"You have been out of town, I think?" She told him that she had been in the Isle of Wight for a day or two, and then there was a short silence. "When I heard that you were gone," he said, "I feared that perhaps you were ill!"

"O dear, no; nothing of that sort."

"I am so glad," said Archie; and then he was silent again. He had, however, as he was aware, thrown a great deal of expression into his inquiries after her health, and he had now to calculate how he could best use the standing-ground that he had made for himself.

"Have you seen my sister lately?" she asked.

"Your sister? no. She is always at Clavering. I think it doosed wrong of Hugh, the ways he goes on, keeping her down there, while he is up here in London. It isn't at all my idea of what a husband ought to do."

"I suppose she likes it," said Lady Ongar.

"Oh, if she likes it, that's a different thing, of course," said Archie. Then there was another pause.

"Don't you find yourself rather lonely here sometimes?" he asked.

Lady Ongar felt that it would be better for all parties that it should be over, and that it would not be over soon unless she could help him. "Very lonely indeed," she said; "but then I suppose that it is the fate of widows to be lonely."

"I don't see that at all," said Archie, briskly; "—unless they are old and ugly, and that kind of thing. When a widow has become a widow after she has been married ever so many years, why then I suppose she looks to be left alone; and I suppose they like it."

"Indeed, I can't say. I don't like it."

"Then you would wish to change?"

"It is a very intricate subject, Captain Clavering, and one which I do not think I am quite disposed to discuss at present. After a year or two, perhaps I shall go into society again. Most widows do, I believe."

"But I was thinking of something else," said Archie, working himself up to the point with great energy, but still with many signs that he was ill at ease at his work. "I was, by Jove!"

"And of what were you thinking, Captain Clavering?"

"I was thinking,—of course you know, Julia, that since poor little Hughy's death, I am the next in for the title?"

"Poor Hughy! I'm sure you are too generous to rejoice at that."

"Indeed I am. When two fellows offered me a dinner at the club on the score of my chances, I wouldn't have it. But there's the fact;—isn't it?"

"There is no doubt of that, I believe."

"None on earth; and the most of it is entailed, too; not that Hugh would leave an acre away from the title. I'm as safe as wax as far as that is concerned. I don't suppose he ever borrowed a shilling or mortgaged an acre in his life."

"I should think he was a prudent man."

"We are both of us prudent. I will say that of myself, though I oughtn't to say it. And now, Julia,—a few words are the best after all. Look here,—if you'll take me just as I am, I'm blessed if I shan't be the happiest fellow in all London. I shall indeed. I've always been uncommon fond of you, though I never said anything about it in the old days, because,—because you see, what's the use of a man asking a girl to marry him if they haven't got a farthing between them. I think it's wrong; I do indeed; but it's different now, you know." It certainly was very different now.

"Captain Clavering," she said, "I'm sorry you should have troubled yourself with such an idea as this."

"Don't say that, Julia. It's no trouble; it's a pleasure."

"But such a thing as you mean never can take place."

"Yes, it can. Why can't it? I ain't in a hurry. I'll wait your own time, and do just whatever you wish all the while. Don't say no without thinking about it, Julia."

"It is one of those things, Captain Clavering, which want no more thinking than what a woman can give to it at the first moment."

"Ah,—you think so now, because you're surprised a little."

"Well; I am surprised a little, as our previous intercourse was never of a nature to make such a proposition as this at all probable."

"That was merely because I didn't think it right," said Archie, who, now that he had worked himself into the vein, liked the sound of his own voice. "It was indeed."

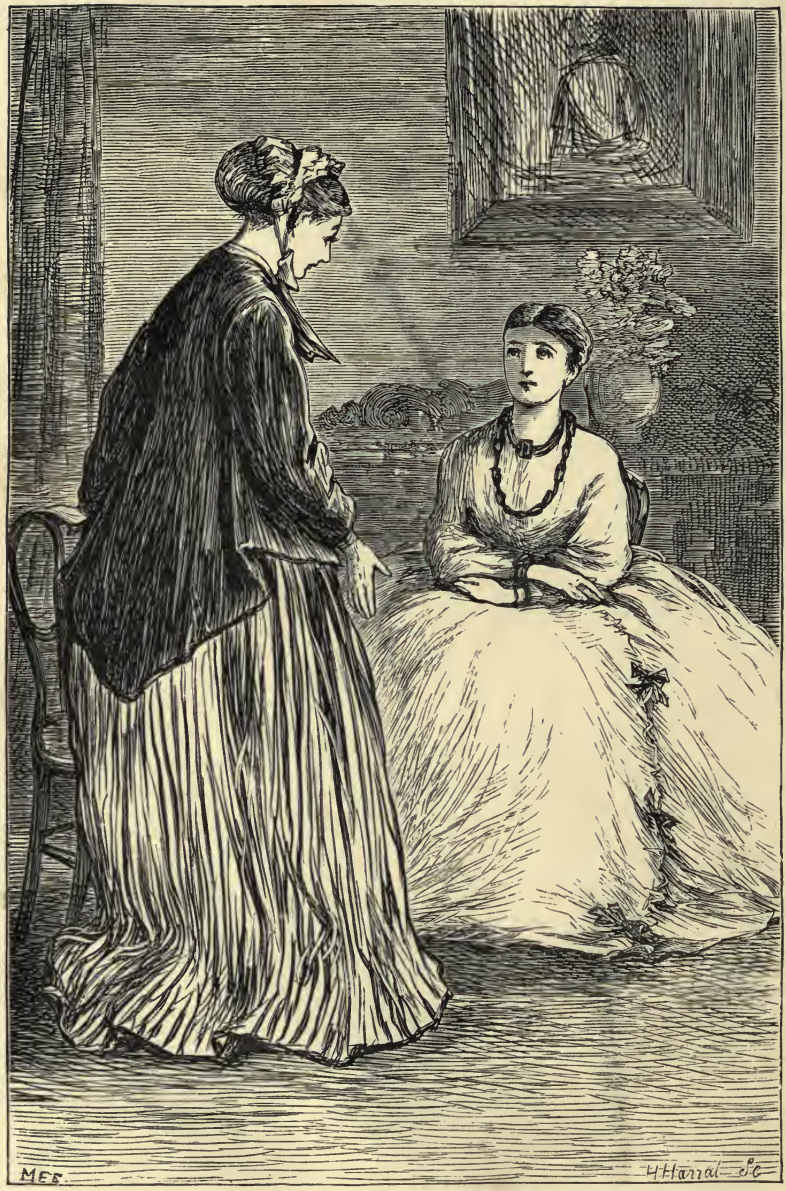
"And I don't think it right now. You must listen to me for a moment, Captain Clavering—for fear of a mistake. Believe me, any such plan as this is quite out of the question;—quite." In uttering that last word she managed to use a tone of voice which did make an impression on him. "I never can, under any circumstances, become your wife. You might as well look upon that as altogether decided, because it will save us both annoyance."

"You needn't be so sure yet, Julia."

"Yes, I must be sure. And unless you will promise me to drop the matter, I must,—to protect myself,—desire my servants not to admit you into the house again. I shall be sorry to do that, and I think you will save me from the necessity."

He did save her from that necessity, and before he went he gave her the required promise. "That's well," said she, tendering him her hand; "and now we shall part friends."

"I shall like to be friends," said he, in a crestfallen voice, and with that he took his leave. It was a great comfort to him that he had the scheme of Jack Stuart's yacht and the trip to Norway for his immediate consolation.



A Plea for Mercy.

THE

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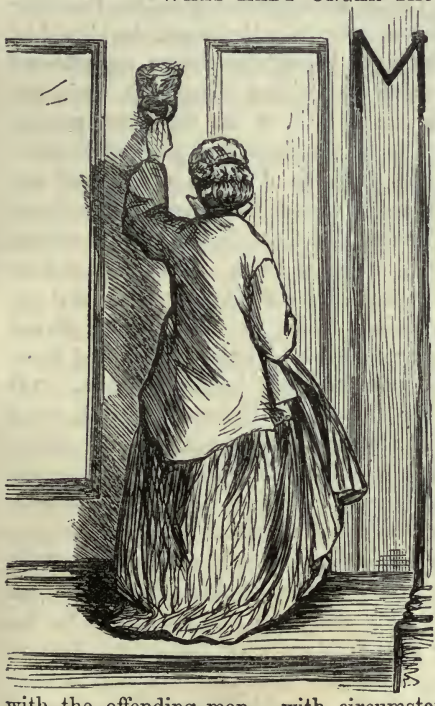
The Claverings.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

What Lady Ongar thought about it.



MRS. BURTON, it may perhaps be remembered, had formed in her heart a scheme of her own—a scheme of which she thought with much trepidation, and in which she could not request her husband's assistance, knowing well that he would not only not assist it, but that he would altogether disapprove of it. But yet she could not put it aside from her thoughts, believing that it might be the means of bringing Harry Clavering and Florence together. Her husband had now thoroughly condemned poor Harry, and had passed sentence against him,—not indeed openly to Florence herself, but very often in the hearing of his wife. Cecilia, womanlike, was more angry with circumstances than with the offending man,—with circumstances and with the woman who stood in Florence's way. She was perfectly willing to forgive Harry, if Harry could only be made to go right at last. He was good-looking and

pleasant, and had nice ways in a house, and was altogether too valuable as a lover to be lost without many struggles. So she kept to her scheme, and at last she carried it into execution.

She started alone from her house one morning, and getting into an omnibus at Brompton had herself put down on the rising ground in Piccadilly, opposite to the Green Park. Why she had hesitated to tell the omnibus-man to stop at Bolton Street can hardly be explained; but she had felt that there would be almost a declaration of guilt in naming that locality. So she got out on the little hill, and walked up in front of the Prime Minister's house,—as it was then,—and of the yellow palace built by one of our merchant princes, and turned into the street that was all but interdicted to her by her own conscience. She turned up Bolton Street, and with a trembling hand knocked at Lady Ongar's door.

Florence in the meantime was sitting alone in Onslow Terrace. She knew now that Harry was ill at Clavering,—that he was indeed very ill, though Mrs. Clavering had assured her that his illness was not dangerous. For Mrs. Clavering had written to herself,—addressing her with all the old familiarity and affection,—with a warmth of affection that was almost more than natural. It was clear that Mrs. Clavering knew nothing of Harry's sins. Or, might it not be possible, Cecilia had suggested, that Mrs. Clavering might have known, and have resolved potentially that those sins should be banished, and become ground for some beautifully sincere repentance? Ah, how sweet it would be to receive that wicked sheep back again into the sheepfold, and then to dock him a little of his wandering powers, to fix him with some pleasant clog, to tie him down as a prudent domestic sheep should be tied, and make him the pride of the flock! But all this had been part of Cecilia's scheme, and of that scheme poor Florence knew nothing. According to Florence's view Mrs. Clavering's letter was written under a mistake. Harry had kept his secret at home, and intended to keep it for the present. But there was the letter, and Florence felt that it was impossible for her to answer it without telling the whole truth. It was very painful to her to leave unanswered so kind a letter as that, and it was quite impossible that she should write of Harry in the old strain. "It will be best that I should tell her the whole," Florence had said, "and then I shall be saved the pain of any direct communication with him." Her brother, to whom Cecilia had repeated this, applauded his sister's resolution. "Let her face it and bear it, and live it down," he had said. "Let her do it at once, so that all this maudlin sentimentality may be at an end." But Cecilia would not accede to this, and as Florence was in truth resolved, and had declared her purpose plainly, Cecilia was driven to the execution of her scheme more quickly than she had intended. In the meantime, Florence took out her little desk and wrote her letter. In tears and an agony of spirit which none can understand but women who have been driven to do the same, was it written. Could she have allowed herself to express her thoughts with passion, it would have been comparatively easy; but it behoved her to be calm, to be very quiet in her words,—

almost reticent even in the language which she chose, and to abandon her claim not only without a reproach, but almost without an allusion to her love. Whilst Cecilia was away, the letter was written, and re-written and copied; but Mrs. Burton was safe in this, that her sister-in-law had promised that the letter should not be sent till she had seen it.

Mrs. Burton, when she knocked at Lady Ongar's door, had a little note ready for the servant between her fingers. Her compliments to Lady Ongar, and would Lady Ongar oblige her by an interview. The note contained simply that, and nothing more; and when the servant took it from her, she declared her intention of waiting in the hall till she had received an answer. But she was shown into the dining-room, and there she remained for a quarter of an hour, during which time she was by no means comfortable. Probably Lady Ongar might refuse to receive her; but should that not be the case,—should she succeed in making her way into that lady's presence, how should she find the eloquence wherewith to plead her cause? At the end of the fifteen minutes, Lady Ongar herself opened the door and entered the room. "Mrs. Burton," she said, smiling, "I am really ashamed to have kept you so long; but open confession, they say, is good for the soul, and the truth is that I was not dressed. Then she led the way upstairs, and placed Mrs. Burton on a sofa, and placed herself in her own chair,—from whence she could see well, but in which she could not be well seen,—and stretched out the folds of her morning dress gracefully, and made her visitor thoroughly understand that she was at home and at her ease.

We may, I think, surmise that Lady Ongar's open confession would do her soul but little good, as it lacked truth, which is the first requisite for all confessions. Lady Ongar had been sufficiently dressed to receive any visitor, but had felt that some special preparation was necessary for the reception of the one who had now come to her. She knew well who was Mrs. Burton, and surmised accurately the purpose for which Mrs. Burton had come. Upon the manner in which she now carried herself might hang the decision of the question which was so important to her,—whether that Phœbus in knickerbockers should or should not become lord of Ongar Park. To effect success now, she must maintain an ascendancy during this coming interview, and in the maintenance of all ascendancy, much depends on the outward man or woman; and she must think a little of the words she must use, and a little, too, of her own purpose. She was fully minded to get the better of Mrs. Burton if that might be possible, but she was not altogether decided on the other point. She wished that Harry Clavering might be her own. She would have wished to pension off that Florence Burton with half her wealth, had such pensioning been possible. But not the less did she entertain some half doubts whether it would not be well that she could abandon her own wishes, and give up her own hope of happiness. Of Mrs. Burton personally she had known nothing, and having expected to see a somewhat strong-featured and perhaps rather vulgar woman, and to hear a voice painfully indicative of a strong mind, she was agreeably surprised to

find a pretty, mild lady, who from the first showed that she was half afraid of what she herself was doing. "I have heard your name, Mrs. Burton," said Lady Ongar, "from our mutual friend, Mr. Clavering, and I have no doubt you have heard mine from him also." This she said in accordance with the little plan which during those fifteen minutes she had laid down for her own guidance.

Mrs. Burton was surprised, and at first almost silenced, by this open mentioning of a name which she had felt that she would have the greatest difficulty in approaching. She said, however, that it was so. She had heard Lady Ongar's name from Mr. Clavering. "We are connected, you know," said Lady Ongar. "My sister is married to his first-cousin, Sir Hugh; and when I was living with my sister at Clavering, he was at the rectory there. That was before my own marriage." She was perfectly easy in her manner, and flattered herself that the ascendancy was complete.

"I have heard as much from Mr. Clavering," said Cecilia.

"And he was very civil to me immediately on my return home. Perhaps you may have heard that also. He took this house for me, and made himself generally useful, as young men ought to do. I believe he is in the same office with your husband; is he not? I hope I may not have been the means of making him idle?"

This was all very well and very pretty, but Mrs. Burton was already beginning to feel that she was doing nothing towards the achievement of her purpose. "I suppose he has been idle," she said, "but I did not mean to trouble you about that." Upon hearing this, Lady Ongar smiled. This supposition that she had really intended to animadvert upon Harry Clavering's idleness was amusing to her as she remembered how little such idleness would signify if she could only have her way.

"Poor Harry!" she said. "I supposed his sins would be laid at my door. But my idea is, you know, that he never will do any good at such work as that."

"Perhaps not;—that is, I really can't say. I don't think Mr. Burton has ever expressed any such opinion; and if he had ——"

"If he had, you wouldn't mention it."

"I don't suppose I should, Lady Ongar;—not to a stranger."

"Harry Clavering and I are not strangers," said Lady Ongar, changing the tone of her voice altogether as she spoke.

"No; I know that. You have known him longer than we have. I am aware of that."

"Yes; before he ever dreamed of going into your husband's business, Mrs. Burton; long before he had ever been to—Stratton."

The name of Stratton was an assistance to Cecilia, and seemed to have been spoken with the view of enabling her to commence her work. "Yes," she said, "but nevertheless he did go to Stratton. He went to Stratton, and there he became acquainted with my sister-in-law, Florence Burton."

"I am aware of it, Mrs. Burton."

"And he also became engaged to her."

"I am aware of that too. He has told me as much himself."

"And has he told you whether he means to keep, or to break that engagement?"

"Ah, Mrs. Burton, is that question fair? Is it fair either to him, or to me? If he has taken me into his confidence and has not taken you, should I be doing well to betray him? Or if there can be anything in such a secret specially interesting to myself, why should I be made to tell it to you?"

"I think the truth is always the best, Lady Ongar."

"Truth is always better than a lie;—so at least people say, though they sometimes act differently; but silence may be better than either."

"This is a matter, Lady Ongar, in which I cannot be silent. I hope you will not be angry with me for coming to you,—or for asking you these questions——"

"O dear, no."

"But I cannot be silent. My sister-in-law must at any rate know what is to be her fate."

"Then why do you not ask him?"

"He is ill at present."

"Ill! Where is he ill? Who says he is ill?" And Lady Ongar, though she did not quite leave her chair, raised herself up and forgot all her preparations. "Where is he, Mrs. Burton? I have not heard of his illness."

"He is at Clavering;—at the parsonage."

"I have heard nothing of this. What ails him? If he be really ill, dangerously ill, I conjure you to tell me. But pray tell me the truth. Let there be no tricks in such a matter as this."

"Tricks, Lady Ongar!"

"If Harry Clavering be ill, tell me what ails him. Is he in danger?"

"His mother in writing to Florence says that he is not in danger; but that he is confined to the house. He has been taken by some fever." On that very morning Lady Ongar had received a letter from her sister, begging her to come to Clavering Park during the absence of Sir Hugh; but in the letter no word had been said as to Harry's illness. Had he been seriously, or at least dangerously ill, Hermione would certainly have mentioned it. All this flashed across Julia's mind as these tidings about Harry reached her. If he were not really in danger, or even if he were, why should she betray her feeling before this woman? "If there had been much in it," she said, resuming her former position and manners, "I should no doubt have heard of it from my sister."

"We hear that it is not dangerous," continued Mrs. Burton; "but he is away, and we cannot see him. And, in truth, Lady Ongar, we cannot see him any more until we know that he means to deal honestly by us."

"Am I the keeper of his honesty?"

"From what I have heard, I think you are. If you will tell me that I have heard falsely, I will go away and beg your pardon for my intrusion.

But if what I have heard be true, you must not be surprised that I show this anxiety for the happiness of my sister. If you knew her, Lady Ongar, you would know that she is too good to be thrown aside with indifference."

"Harry Clavering tells me that she is an angel,—that she is perfect."

"And if he loves her, will it not be a shame that they should be parted?"

"I said nothing about his loving her. Men are not always fond of perfection. The angels may be too angelic for this world."

"He did love her."

"So I suppose;—or at any rate he thought that he did."

"He did love her, and I believe he loves her still."

"He has my leave to do so, Mrs. Burton."

Cecilia, though she was somewhat afraid of the task which she had undertaken, and was partly awed by Lady Ongar's style of beauty and demeanour, nevertheless felt that if she still hoped to do any good, she must speak the truth out at once. She must ask Lady Ongar whether she held herself to be engaged to Harry Clavering. If she did not do this, nothing could come of the present interview.

"You say that, Lady Ongar, but do you mean it?" she asked. "We have been told that you also are engaged to marry Mr. Clavering."

"Who has told you so?"

"We have heard it. I have heard it, and have been obliged to tell my sister that I had done so."

"And who told you? Did you hear it from Harry Clavering himself?"

"I did. I heard it in part from him."

"Then why have you come beyond him to me? He must know. If he has told you that he is engaged to marry me, he must also have told you that he does not intend to marry Miss Florence Burton. It is not for me to defend him or to accuse him. Why do you come to me?"

"For mercy and forbearance," said Mrs. Burton, rising from her seat and coming over to the side of the room in which Lady Ongar was seated.

"And Miss Burton has sent you?"

"No; she does not know that I am here; nor does my husband know it. No one knows it. I have come to tell you that before God this man is engaged to become the husband of Florence Burton. She has learned to love him, and has now no other chance of happiness."

"But what of his happiness?"

"Yes; we are bound to think of that. Florence is bound to think of that above all things."

"And so am I. I love him too;—as fondly, perhaps, as she can do. I loved him first, before she had even heard his name."

"But, Lady Ongar——"

"Yes; you may ask the question if you will, and I will answer it truly." They were both standing now and confronting each other. "Or

I will answer it without your asking it. I was false to him. I would not marry him because he was poor; and then I married another because he was rich. All that is true. But it does not make me love him the less now. I have loved him through it all. Yes; you are shocked, but it is true. I have loved him through it all. And what am I to do now, if he still loves me? I can give him wealth now."

"Wealth will not make him happy."

"It has not made me happy; but it may help to do so with him. But with me at any rate there can be no doubt. It is his happiness to which I am bound to look. Mrs. Burton, if I thought that I could make him happy, and if he would come to me, I would marry him to-morrow, though I broke your sister's heart by doing so. But if I felt that she could do so more than I, I would leave him to her, though I broke my own. I have spoken to you very openly. Will she say as much as that?"

"She would act in that way. I do not know what she would say."

"Then let her do so, and leave him to be the judge of his own happiness. Let her pledge herself that no reproaches shall come from her, and I will pledge myself equally. It was I who loved him first, and it is I who have brought him into this trouble. I owe him everything. Had I been true to him, he would never have thought of, never have seen, Miss Florence Burton."

All that was, no doubt, true, but it did not touch the question of Florence's right. The fact on which Mrs. Burton wished to insist, if only she knew how, was this, that Florence had not sinned at all, and that Florence therefore ought not to bear any part of the punishment. It might be very true that Harry's fault was to be excused in part because of Lady Ongar's greater and primary fault;—but why should Florence be the scapegoat?

"You should think of his honour as well as his happiness," said Mrs. Burton at last.

"That is rather severe, Mrs. Burton, considering that it is said to me in my own house. Am I so low as that, that his honour will be tarnished if I become his wife?" But she, in saying this, was thinking of things of which Mrs. Burton knew nothing.

"His honour will be tarnished," said she, "if he do not marry her whom he has promised to marry. He was welcomed by her father and mother to their house, and then he made himself master of her heart. But it was not his till he had asked for it, and had offered his own and his hand in return for it. Is he not bound to keep his promise? He cannot be bound to you after any such fashion as that. If you are solicitous for his welfare, you should know that if he would live with the reputation of a gentleman, there is only one course open to him."

"It is the old story," said Lady Ongar; "the old story! Has not somebody said that the gods laugh at the perjuries of lovers? I do not know that men are inclined to be much more severe than the gods. These broken hearts are what women are doomed to bear."

"And that is to be your answer to me, Lady Ongar?"

"No; that is not my answer to you. That is the excuse that I make for Harry Clavering. My answer to you has been very explicit. Pardon me if I say that it has been more explicit than you had any right to expect. I have told you that I am prepared to take any step that may be most conducive to the happiness of the man whom I once injured, but whom I have always loved. I will do this, let it cost myself what it may; and I will do this let the cost to any other woman be what it may. You cannot expect that I should love another woman better than myself." She said this, still standing, not without something more than vehemence in her tone. In her voice, in her manner, and in her eye there was that which amounted almost to ferocity. She was declaring that some sacrifice must be made, and that she recked little whether it should be of herself or of another. As she would immolate herself without hesitation, if the necessity should exist, so would she see Florence Burton destroyed without a twinge of remorse, if the destruction of Florence would serve the purpose which she had in view. You and I, O reader, may feel that the man for whom all this was to be done was not worth the passion. He had proved himself to be very far from such worth. But the passion, nevertheless, was there, and the woman was honest in what she was saying.

After this Mrs. Burton got herself out of the room as soon as she found an opening which allowed her to go. In making her farewell speech, she muttered some indistinct apology for the visit which she had been bold enough to make. "Not at all," said Lady Ongar. "You have been quite right;—you are fighting your battle for the friend you love bravely; and were it not that the cause of the battle must, I fear, separate us hereafter, I should be proud to know one who fights so well for her friends. And when all this is over and has been settled, in whatever way it may be settled, let Miss Burton know from me that I have been taught to hold her name and character in the highest possible esteem." Mrs. Burton made no attempt at further speech, but left the room with a low curtsey.

Till she found herself out in the street, she was unable to think whether she had done most harm or most good by her visit to Bolton Street,—whether she had in any way served Florence, or whether she had simply confessed to Florence's rival the extent of her sister's misery. That Florence herself would feel the latter to be the case, when she should know it all, Mrs. Burton was well aware. Her own ears had tingled with shame as Harry Clavering had been discussed as a grand prize for which her sister was contending with another woman,—and contending with so small a chance of success. It was terrible to her that any woman dear to her should seem to seek for a man's love. And the audacity with which Lady Ongar had proclaimed her own feelings had been terrible also to Cecilia. She was aware that she was meddling with things which were foreign to her nature, and which would be odious to her husband. But yet, was not the battle worth fighting? It was not to be endured that Florence should seek after this thing; but, after all, the possession of the

thing in question was the only earthly good that could give any comfort to poor Florence. Even Cecilia, with all her partiality for Harry, felt that he was not worth the struggle; but it was for her now to estimate him at the price which Florence might put upon him,—not at her own price.

But she must tell Florence what had been done, and tell her on that very day of her meeting with Lady Ongar. In no other way could she stop that letter which she knew that Florence would have already written to Mrs. Clavering. And could she now tell Florence that there was ground for hope? Was it not the fact that Lady Ongar had spoken the simple and plain truth when she had said that Harry must be allowed to choose the course which appeared to him to be the best for him? It was hard, very hard, that it should be so. And was it not true also that men, as well as gods, excuse the perjuries of lovers? She wanted to have back Harry among them as one to be forgiven easily, to be petted much, and to be loved always; but, in spite of the softness of her woman's nature, she wished that he might be punished sorely if he did not so return. It was grievous to her that he should any longer have a choice in the matter. Heavens and earth! was he to be allowed to treat a woman as he had treated Florence, and was nothing to come of it? In spite both of gods and men, the thing was so grievous to Cecilia Burton, that she could not bring herself to acknowledge that it was possible. Such things had not been done in the world which she had known.

She walked the whole way home to Brompton, and had hardly perfected any plan when she reached her own door. If only Florence would allow her to write the letter to Mrs. Clavering, perhaps something might be done in that way. So she entered the house prepared to tell the story of her morning's work.

And she must tell it also to her husband in the evening! It had been hard to do the thing without his knowing of it beforehand; but it would be impossible to her to keep the thing a secret from him, now that it was done.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

How to Dispose of a Wife.

When Sir Hugh came up to town there did not remain to him quite a week before the day on which he was to leave the coast of Essex in Jack Stuart's yacht for Norway, and he had a good deal to do in the meantime in the way of provisioning the boat. Fortnum and Mason, no doubt, would have done it all for him without any trouble on his part, but he was not a man to trust any Fortnum or any Mason as to the excellence of the article to be supplied, or as to the price. He desired to have good wine,—very good wine; but he did not desire to pay a very high price. No one knew better than Sir Hugh that good wine cannot be bought cheap,—but things may be costly and yet not dear; or they may be both. To such matters Sir Hugh was wont to pay very close attention

himself. He had done something in that line before he left London, and immediately on his return he went to the work again, summoning Archie to his assistance, but never asking Archie's opinion,—as though Archie had been his head-butler.

Immediately on his arrival in London he cross-questioned his brother as to his marriage prospects. "I suppose you are going with us?" Hugh said to Archie, as he caught him in the hall of the house in Berkeley Square on the morning after his arrival.

"O dear, yes," said Archie. "I thought that was quite understood. I have been getting my traps together." The getting of his traps together had consisted in the ordering of a sailor's jacket with brass buttons, and three pair of white duck trousers.

"All right," said Sir Hugh. "You had better come with me into the City this morning. I am going to Boxall's in Great Thames Street."

"Are you going to breakfast here?" asked Archie.

"No; you can come to me at the Union in about an hour. I suppose you have never plucked up courage to ask Julia to marry you?"

"Yes, I did," said Archie.

"And what answer did you get?" Archie had found himself obliged to repudiate with alacrity the attack upon his courage which his brother had so plainly made; but, beyond that, the subject was one which was not pleasing to him. "Well, what did she say to you?" asked his brother, who had no idea of sparing Archie's feelings in such a matter.

"She said;—indeed I don't remember exactly what it was that she did say."

"But she refused you?"

"Yes;—she refused me. I think she wanted me to understand that I had come to her too soon after Ongar's death."

"Then she must be an infernal hypocrite;—that's all." But of any hypocrisy in this matter the reader will acquit Lady Ongar, and will understand that Archie had merely lessened the severity of his own fall by a clever excuse. After that the two brothers went to Boxall's in the City, and Archie, having been kept fagging all day, was sent in the evening to dine by himself at his own club.

Sir Hugh also was desirous of seeing Lady Ongar, and had caused his wife to say as much in that letter which she wrote to her sister. In this way an appointment had been made without any direct intercourse between Sir Hugh and his sister-in-law. They two had never met since the day on which Sir Hugh had given her away in Clavering Church. To Hugh Clavering, who was by no means a man of sentiment, this signified little or nothing. When Lady Ongar had returned a widow, and when evil stories against her had been rife, he had thought it expedient to have nothing to do with her. He did not himself care much about his sister-in-law's morals; but should his wife become much complicated with a sister damaged in character, there might come of it trouble and annoyance. Therefore, he had resolved that Lady Ongar should be dropped. But

during the last few months things had in some respects changed. The Courton people,—that is to say, Lord Ongar's family,—had given Hugh Clavering to understand that, having made inquiry, they were disposed to acquit Lady Ongar, and to declare their belief that she was subject to no censure. They did not wish themselves to know her, as no intimacy between them could now be pleasant; but they had felt it to be incumbent on them to say as much as that to Sir Hugh. Sir Hugh had not even told his wife, but he had twice suggested that Lady Ongar should be asked to Clavering Park. In answer to both these invitations, Lady Ongar had declined to go to Clavering Park.

And now Sir Hugh had a commission on his hands from the same Courton people, which made it necessary that he should see his sister-in-law, and Julia had agreed to receive him. To him, who was very hard in such matters, the idea of his visit was not made disagreeable by any remembrance of his own harshness to the woman whom he was going to see. He cared nothing about that, and it had not occurred to him that she would care much. But, in truth, she did care very much, and when the hour was coming on which Sir Hugh was to appear, she thought much of the manner in which it would become her to receive him. He had condemned her in that matter as to which any condemnation is an insult to a woman; and he had so condemned her, being her brother-in-law and her only natural male friend. In her sorrow she should have been able to lean upon him; but from the first, without any inquiry, he had believed the worst of her, and had withdrawn from her altogether his support, when the slightest support from him would have been invaluable to her. Could she forgive this? Never; never! She was not a woman to wish to forgive such an offence. It was an offence which it would be despicable in her to forgive. Many had offended her, some had injured her, one or two had insulted her; but to her thinking, no one had so offended her, had so injured her, had so grossly insulted her, as he had done. In what way then would it become her to receive him? Before his arrival she had made up her mind on this subject, and had resolved that she would, at least, say no word of her own wrongs.

"How do you do, Julia?" said Sir Hugh, walking into the room with a step which was perhaps unnaturally quick, and with his hand extended. Lady Ongar had thought of that too. She would give much to escape the touch of his hand, if it were possible; but she had told herself that she would best consult her own dignity by declaring no actual quarrel. So she put out her fingers and just touched his palm.

"I hope Hermy is well?" she said.

"Pretty well, thank you. She is rather lonely since she lost her poor little boy, and would be very glad if you would go to her."

"I cannot do that; but if she would come to me I should be delighted."

"You see it would not suit her to be in London so soon after Hughy's death."

"I am not bound to London. I would go anywhere else,—except to Clavering."

"You never go to Ongar Park, I am told?"

"I have been there."

"But they say you do not intend to go again?"

"Not at present, certainly. Indeed, I do not suppose I shall ever go there. I do not like the place."

"That's just what they have told me. It is about that—partly—that I want to speak to you. If you don't like the place, why shouldn't you sell your interest in it back to the family? They'd give you more than the value for it."

"I do not know that I should care to sell it."

"Why not, if you don't mean to use the house? I might as well explain at once what it is that has been said to me. John Courton, you know, is acting as guardian for the young earl, and they don't want to keep up so large a place as the Castle. Ongar Park would just suit Mrs. Courton,"—Mrs. Courton was the widowed mother of the young earl,—"and they would be very happy to buy your interest."

"Would not such a proposition come best through a lawyer?" said Lady Ongar.

"The fact is this,—they think they have been a little hard on you."

"I have never accused them."

"But they feel it themselves, and they think that you might take it perhaps amiss if they were to send you a simple message through an attorney. Courton told me that he would not have allowed any such proposition to be made, if you had seemed disposed to use the place. They wish to be civil, and all that kind of thing."

"Their civility or incivility is indifferent to me," said Julia.

"But why shouldn't you take the money?"

"The money is equally indifferent to me."

"You mean then to say that you won't listen to it? Of course they can't make you part with the place if you wish to keep it."

"Not more than they can make you sell Clavering Park. I do not, however, wish to be uncivil, and I will let you know through my lawyer what I think about it. All such matters are best managed by lawyers."

After that Sir Hugh said nothing further about Ongar Park. He was well aware, from the tone in which Lady Ongar answered him, that she was averse to talk to him on that subject; but he was not conscious that his presence was otherwise disagreeable to her, or that she would resent any interference from him on any subject because he had been cruel to her. So after a little while he began again about Hermione. As the world had determined upon acquitting Lady Ongar, it would be convenient to him that the two sisters should be again intimate, especially as Julia was a rich woman. His wife did not like Clavering Park, and he certainly did not like Clavering Park himself. If he could once get the house shut up, he might manage to keep it shut for some years to come.

His wife was now no more than a burden to him, and it would suit him well to put off the burden on to his sister-in-law's shoulders. It was not that he intended to have his wife altogether dependent on another person, but he thought that if they two were established together, in the first instance merely as a summer arrangement, such establishment might be made to assume some permanence. This would be very pleasant to him. Of course he would pay a portion of the expense,—as small a portion as might be possible,—but such a portion as might enable him to live with credit before the world.

"I wish I could think that you and Hermy might be together while I am absent," he said.

"I shall be very happy to have her if she will come to me," Julia replied.

"What,—here, in London? I am not quite sure that she wishes to come up to London at present."

"I have never understood that she had any objection to being in town," said Lady Ongar.

"Not formerly, certainly; but now since her boy's death——"

"Why should his death make more difference to her than to you?" To this question Sir Hugh made no reply. "If you are thinking of society, she could be nowhere safer from any such necessity than with me. I never go out anywhere. I have never dined out, or even spent an evening in company since Lord Ongar's death. And no one would come here to disturb her."

"I didn't mean that."

"I don't quite know what you did mean. From different causes she and I are left pretty nearly equally without friends."

"Hermione is not left without friends," said Sir Hugh with a tone of offence.

"Were she not, she would not want to come to me. Your society is in London, to which she does not come, or in other country-houses than your own, to which she is not taken. She lives altogether at Clavering, and there is no one there, except your uncle."

"Whatever neighbourhood there is she has,—just like other women."

"Just like some other women, no doubt. I shall remain in town for another month, and after that I shall go somewhere; I don't much care where. If Hermy will come to me as my guest I shall be most happy to have her. And the longer she will stay with me the better. Your coming home need make no difference, I suppose."

There was a keenness of reproach in her tone as she spoke, which even he could not but feel and acknowledge. He was very thick-skinned to such reproaches, and would have left this unnoticed had it been possible. Had she continued speaking he would have done so. But she remained silent, and sat looking at him, saying with her eyes the same thing that she had already spoken with her words. Thus he was driven to speak. "I don't know," said he, "whether you intend that for a sneer."

She was perfectly indifferent whether or no she offended him. Only that she had believed that the maintenance of her own dignity forbade it, she would have openly rebuked him, and told him that he was not welcome in her house. No treatment from her could, as she thought, be worse than he had deserved from her. His first enmity had injured her, but she could afford to laugh at his present anger. "It is hard to talk to you about Hermy without what you are pleased to call a sneer. You simply wish to rid yourself of her."

"I wish no such thing, and you have no right to say so."

"At any rate you are ridding yourself of her society; and if under those circumstances she likes to come to me I shall be glad to receive her. Our life together will not be very cheerful, but neither she nor I ought to expect a cheerful life."

He rose from his chair now with a cloud of anger upon his brow. "I can see how it is," said he; "because everything has not gone smooth with yourself you choose to resent it upon me. I might have expected that you would not have forgotten in whose house you met Lord Ongar."

"No, Hugh; I forget nothing; neither when I met him, nor how I married him, nor any of the events that have happened since. My memory, unfortunately, is very good."

"I did all I could for you, and should have been safe from your insolence."

"You should have continued to stay away from me, and you would have been quite safe. But our quarrelling in this way is foolish. We can never be friends,—you and I; but we need not be open enemies. Your wife is my sister, and I say again that if she likes to come to me, I shall be delighted to have her."

"My wife," said he, "will go to the house of no person who is insolent to me." Then he took his hat, and left the room without further word or sign of greeting. In spite of his calculations and caution as to money,—in spite of his well-considered arrangements and the comfortable provision for his future ease which he had proposed to himself, he was a man who had not his temper so much under control as to enable him to postpone his anger to his prudence. That little scheme for getting rid of his wife was now at an end. He would never permit her to go to her sister's house after the manner in which Julia had just treated him!

When he was gone Lady Ongar walked about her own room smiling, and at first was well pleased with herself. She had received Archie's overture with decision, but at the same time with courtesy, for Archie was weak, and poor, and powerless. But she had treated Sir Hugh with scorn, and had been enabled to do so without the utterance of any actual reproach as to the wrongs which she herself had endured from him. He had put himself in her power, and she had not thrown away the opportunity. She had told him that she did not want his friendship, and would not be his friend; but she had done this without any loud abuse unbecoming to her either as a countess, a widow, or a lady. For

Hermione she was sorry. Hermione now could hardly come to her. But even as to that she did not despair. As things were going on, it would become almost necessary that her sister and Sir Hugh should be parted. Both must wish it; and if this were arranged, then Hermione should come to her.

But from this she soon came to think again about Harry Clavering. How was that matter to be decided, and what steps would it become her to take as to its decision? Sir Hugh had proposed to her that she should sell her interest in Ongar Park, and she had promised that she would make known her decision on that matter through her lawyer. As she had been saying this she was well aware that she would never sell the property;—but she had already resolved that she would at once give it back, without purchase-money, to the Ongar family, were it not kept that she might hand it over to Harry Clavering as a fitting residence for his lordship. If he might be there, looking after his cattle, going about with the steward subservient at his heels, ministering justice to the Enoch Gubbys and others, she would care nothing for the wants of any of the Courton people. But if such were not to be the destiny of Ongar Park,—if there were to be no such Adam in that Eden,—then the mother of the little lord might take herself thither, and revel among the rich blessings of the place without delay, and with no difficulty as to price. As to price,—had she not already found the money-bag that had come to her to be too heavy for her hands?

But she could do nothing till that question was settled; and how was she to settle it? Every word that had passed between her and Cecilia Burton had been turned over and over in her mind, and she could only declare to herself as she had then declared to her visitor, that it must be as Harry should please. She would submit, if he required her submission; but she could not bring herself to take steps to secure her own misery.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

Farewell to Doodles.

At last came the day on which the two Claverings were to go down to Harwich, and put themselves on board Jack Stuart's yacht. The hall of the house in Berkeley Square was strewed with portmanteaus, gun-cases, and fishing-rods, whereas the wine and packets of preserved meat, and the bottled beer and fish in tins, and the large box of cigars, and the prepared soups, had been sent down by Boxall, and were by this time on board the boat. Hugh and Archie were to leave London this day by train at 5 P.M., and were to sleep on board. Jack Stuart was already there, having assisted in working the yacht round from Brightlingsea.

On that morning Archie had a farewell breakfast at his club with Doodles, and after that, having spent the intervening hours in the billiard-

room, a farewell luncheon. There had been something of melancholy in this last day between the friends, originating partly in the failure of Archie's hopes as to Lady Ongar, and partly perhaps in the bad character which seemed to belong to Jack Stuart and his craft. "He has been at it for years, and always coming to grief," said Doodles. "He is just like a man I know, who has been hunting for the last ten years, and can't sit a horse at a fence yet. He has broken every bone in his skin, and I don't suppose he ever saw a good thing to a finish. He never knows whether hounds are in cover, or where they are. His only idea is to follow another man's red coat till he comes to grief;—and yet he will go on hunting. There are some people who never will understand what they can do, and what they can't." In answer to this, Archie reminded his friend that on this occasion Jack Stuart would have the advantage of an excellent dry-nurse, acknowledged to be very great on such occasions. Would not he, Archie Clavering, be there to pilot Jack Stuart and his boat? But, nevertheless, Doodles was melancholy, and went on telling stories about that unfortunate man who would continue to break his bones, though he had no aptitude for out-of-door sports. "He'll be carried home on a stretcher some day, you know," said Doodles.

"What does it matter if he is," said Archie, boldly, thinking of himself and of the danger predicted for him. "A man can only die once."

"I call it quite a tempting of Providence," said Doodles.

But their conversation was chiefly about Lady Ongar and the Spy. It was only on this day that Doodles had learned that Archie had in truth offered his hand, and been rejected; and Captain Clavering was surprised by the extent of his friend's sympathy. "It's a doosed disagreeable thing,—a very disagreeable thing indeed," said Doodles. Archie, who did not wish to be regarded as specially unfortunate, declined to look at the matter in this light; but Doodles insisted. "It would cut me up like the very mischief," he said. "I know that; and the worst of it is, that perhaps you wouldn't have gone on, only for me. I meant it all for the best, old fellow. I did, indeed. There; that's the game to you. I'm playing uncommon badly this morning; but the truth is, I'm thinking of those women," Now as Doodles was playing for a little money, this was really civil on his part.

And he would persevere in talking about the Spy, as though there were something in his remembrance of the lady which attracted him irresistibly to the subject. He had always boasted that in his interview with her he had come off with the victory, nor did he now cease to make such boasts; but still he spoke of her and her powers with an awe which would have completely opened the eyes of any one a little more sharp on such matters than Archie Clavering. He was so intent on this subject that he sent the marker out of the room so that he might discuss it with more freedom, and might plainly express his views as to her influence on his friend's fate.

"By George! she's a wonderful woman. Do you know I can't help

thinking of her at night. She keeps me awake;—she does, upon my honour."

"I can't say she keeps me awake, but I wish I had my seventy pounds back again."

"Do you know, if I were you, I shouldn't grudge it. I should think it worth pretty nearly all the money to have had the dealing with her."

"Then you ought to go halves."

"Well, yes;—only that I ain't flush, I would. When one thinks of it, her absolutely taking the notes out of your waistcoat-pocket, upon my word it's beautiful! She'd have had it out of mine, if I hadn't been doosed sharp."

"She understood what she was about, certainly."

"What I should like to know is this; did she or did she not tell Lady Ongar what she was to do;—about you I mean? I daresay she did after all."

"And took my money for nothing?"

"Because you didn't go high enough, you know."

"But that was your fault. I went as high as you told me."

"No, you didn't, Clavvy; not if you remember. But the fact is, I don't suppose you could go high enough. I shouldn't be surprised if such a woman as that wanted—thousands! I shouldn't indeed. I shall never forget the way in which she swore at me;—and how she abused me about my family. I think she must have had some special reason for disliking Warwickshire, she said such awful hard things about it."

"How did she know that you came from Warwickshire?"

"She did know it. If I tell you something don't you say anything about it. I have an idea about her."

"What is it?"

"I didn't mention it before, because I don't talk much of those sort of things. I don't pretend to understand them, and it is better to leave them alone."

"But what do you mean?"

Doodles looked very solemn as he answered. "I think she's a medium —or a media, or whatever it ought to be called."

"What! one of those spirit-rapping people?" And Archie's hair almost stood on end as he asked the question.

"They don't rap now,—not the best of them, that is. That was the old way, and seems to have been given up."

"But what do you suppose she did?"

"How did she know that the money was in your waistcoat-pocket, now? How did she know that I came from Warwickshire? And then she had a way of going about the room as though she could have raised herself off her feet in a moment if she had chosen. And then her swearing, and the rest of it,—so unlike any other woman, you know."

"But do you think she could have made Julia hate me?"

"Ah, I can't tell that. There are such lots of things going on now-

a-days that a fellow can understand nothing about! But I've no doubt of this,—if you were to tie her up with ropes ever so, I don't in the least doubt but what she'd get out."

Archie was awe-struck, and made two or three strokes after this; but then he plucked up his courage and asked a question,—

"Where do you suppose they get it from, Doodles?"

"That's just the question."

"Is it from—— the devil, do you think?" said Archie, whispering the name of the evil one in a very low voice.

"Well, yes; I suppose that's most likely."

"Because they don't seem to do a great deal of harm with it after all. As for my money, she would have had that any way, for I intended to give it to her."

"There are people who think," said Doodles, "that the spirits don't come from anywhere, but are always floating about."

"And then one person catches them, and another doesn't?" asked Archie.

"They tell me that it depends upon what the mediums or medias eat and drink," said Doodles, "and upon what sort of minds they have. They must be cleverish people, I fancy, or the spirits wouldn't come to them."

"But you never hear of any swell being a medium. Why don't the spirits go to a prime minister or some of those fellows? Only think what a help they'd be."

"If they come from the devil," suggested Doodles, "he wouldn't let them do any real good."

"I've heard a deal about them," said Archie, "and it seems to me that the mediums are always poor people, and that they come from nobody knows where. The Spy is a clever woman I daresay——"

"There isn't much doubt about that," said the admiring Doodles.

"But you can't say she's respectable, you know. If I was a spirit I wouldn't go to a woman who wore such dirty stockings as she had on."

"That's nonsense, Clavvy. What does a spirit care about a woman's stockings?"

"But why don't they ever go to the wise people? that's what I want to know." And as he asked the question boldly he struck his ball sharply, and, lo, the three balls rolled vanquished into three different pockets. "I don't believe about it," said Archie, as he readjusted the score. "The devil can't do such things as that or there'd be an end of everything; and as to spirits in the air, why should there be more spirits now than there were four-and-twenty years ago?"

"That's all very well, old fellow," said Doodles, "but you and I ain't clever enough to understand everything." Then that subject was dropped, and Doodles went back for a while to the perils of Jack Stuart's yacht.

After the lunch, which was in fact Archie's early dinner, Doodles was going to leave his friend, but Archie insisted that his brother captain

should walk with him up to Berkeley Square, and see the last of him into his cab. Doodles had suggested that Sir Hugh would be there, and that Sir Hugh was not always disposed to welcome his brother's friends to his own house after the most comfortable modes of friendship; but Archie explained that on such an occasion as this there need be no fear on that head; he and his brother were going away together, and there was a certain feeling of jollity about the trip which would divest Sir Hugh of his roughness. "And besides," said Archie, "as you will be there to see me off, he'll know that you're not going to stay yourself." Convinced by this, Doodles consented to walk up to Berkeley Square.

Sir Hugh had spent the greatest part of this day at home, immersed among his guns and rods, and their various appurtenances. He also had breakfasted at his club, but had ordered his luncheon to be prepared for him at home. He had arranged to leave Berkeley Square at four, and had directed that his lamb chops should be brought to him exactly at three. He was himself a little late in coming downstairs, and it was ten minutes past the hour when he desired that the chops might be put on the table, saying that he himself would be in the drawing-room in time to meet them. He was a man solicitous about his lamb chops, and careful that the asparagus should be hot; solicitous also as to that bottle of Lafitte by which those comestibles were to be accompanied and which was, of its own nature, too good to be shared with his brother Archie. But as he was on the landing, by the drawing-room door, descending quickly, conscious that in obedience to his orders the chops had been already served, he was met by a servant who, with disturbed face and quick voice, told him that there was a lady waiting for him in the hall.

"D—— it!" said Sir Hugh.

"She has just come, Sir Hugh, and says that she specially wants to see you."

"Why the devil did you let her in?"

"She walked in when the door was opened, Sir Hugh, and I couldn't help it. She seemed to be a lady, Sir Hugh, and I didn't like not to let her inside the door."

"What's the lady's name?" asked the master.

"It's a foreign name, Sir Hugh. She said she wouldn't keep you five minutes." The lamb chops, and the asparagus, and the Lafitte were in the dining-room, and the only way to the dining-room lay through the hall to which the foreign lady had obtained an entrance. Sir Hugh, making such calculations as the moments allowed, determined that he would face the enemy, and pass on to his banquet over her prostrate body. He went quickly down into the hall, and there was encountered by Sophie Gordeloup, who, skipping over the gun-cases, and rushing through the portmanteaus, caught the baronet by the arm before he had been able to approach the dining-room door. "Sir 'Oo," she said, "I am so glad to have caught you. You are going away, and I have things to tell you which you must hear—yes; it is well for you I have caught you, Sir 'Oo." Sir Hugh

looked as though he by no means participated in this feeling, and saying something about his great hurry begged that he might be allowed to go to his food. Then he added that, as far as his memory served him, he had not the honour of knowing the lady who was addressing him.

"You come in to your little dinner," said Sophie, "and I will tell you everything as you are eating. Don't mind me. You shall eat and drink, and I will talk. I am Madame Gordeloup,—Sophie Gordeloup. Ah,—you know the name now. Yes. That is me. Count Pateroff is my brother. You know Count Pateroff. He knowed Lord Ongar, and I knowed Lord Ongar. We know Lady Ongar. Ah,—you understand now that I can have much to tell. It is well you was not gone without seeing me? Eh; yes! You shall eat and drink, but suppose you send that man into the kitchen?"

Sir Hugh was so taken by surprise that he hardly knew how to act on the spur of the moment. He certainly had heard of Madame Gordeloup, though he had never before seen her. For years past her name had been familiar to him in London, and when Lady Ongar had returned as a widow it had been, to his thinking, one of her worst offences that this woman had been her friend. Under ordinary circumstances his judgment would have directed him to desire the servant to put her out into the street as an impostor, and to send for the police if there was any difficulty. But it certainly might be possible that this woman had something to tell with reference to Lady Ongar which it would suit his purposes to hear. At the present moment he was not very well inclined to his sister-in-law, and was disposed to hear evil of her. So he passed on into the dining-room and desired Madame Gordeloup to follow him. Then he closed the room door, and standing up with his back to the fireplace, so that he might be saved from the necessity of asking her to sit down, he declared himself ready to hear anything that his visitor might have to say.

"But you will eat your dinner, Sir 'Oo? You will not mind me. I shall not care."

"Thank you, no;—if you will just say what you have got to say, I will be obliged to you."

"But the nice things will be so cold! Why should you mind me? Nobody minds me."

"I will wait, if you please, till you have done me the honour of leaving me."

"Ah, well,—you Englishmen are so cold and ceremonious. But Lord Ongar was not with me like that. I knew Lord Ongar so well."

"Lord Ongar was more fortunate than I am."

"He was a poor man who did kill himself. Yes. It was always that bottle of Cognac. And there was other bottles was worser still. Never mind; he has gone now, and his widow has got the money. It is she has been a fortunate woman! Sir 'Oo, I will sit down here in the arm-chair." Sir Hugh made a motion with his hand, not daring to forbid her to do as she was minded. "And you, Sir 'Oo;—will not you sit down also?"

"I will continue to stand if you will allow me.

"Very well; you shall do as most pleases you. As I did walk here, and shall walk back, I will sit down."

"And now if you have anything to say, Madame Gordeloup," said Sir Hugh, looking at the silver covers which were hiding the chops and the asparagus, and looking also at his watch, "perhaps you will be good enough to say it."

"Anything to say! Yes, Sir 'Oo, I have something to say. It is a pity you will not sit at your dinner."

"I will not sit at my dinner till you have left me. So now, if you will be pleased to proceed——"

"I will proceed. Perhaps you don't know that Lord Ongar died in these arms?" And Sophie, as she spoke, stretched out her skinny hands, and put herself as far as possible into the attitude in which it would be most convenient to nurse the head of a dying man upon her bosom. Sir Hugh, thinking to himself that Lord Ongar could hardly have received much consolation in his fate from this incident, declared that he had not heard the fact before. "No; you have not heard it. She have tell nothing to her friends here. He die abroad, and she has come back with all the money; but she tell nothing to anybody here, so I must tell."

"But I don't care how he died, Madame Gordeloup. It is nothing to me."

"But yes, Sir 'Oo. The lady, your wife, is the sister to Lady Ongar. Is not that so? Lady Ongar did live with you before she was married. Is not that so? Your brother and your cousin both wishes to marry her and have all the money. Is not that so? Your brother has come to me to help him, and has sent the little man out of Warwickshire. Is not that so?"

"What the d—— is all that to me?" said Sir Hugh, who did not quite understand the story as the lady was telling it.

"I will explain, Sir 'Oo, what the d—— it is to you; only I wish you were eating the nice things on the table. This Lady Ongar is treating me very bad. She treat my brother very bad too. My brother is Count Pateroff. We have been put to—oh, such expenses for her! It have nearly ruined me. I make a journey to your London here altogether for her. Then, for her, I go down to that accursed little island;—what you call it?—where she insult me. Oh! all my time is gone. Your brother and your cousin, and the little man out of Warwickshire, all coming to my house,—just as it please them."

"But what is this to me?" shouted Sir Hugh.

"A great deal to you," screamed back Madame Gordeloup. "You see I know everything,—everything. I have got papers."

"What do I care for your papers? Look here, Madame Gordeloup, you had better go away."

"Not yet, Sir 'Oo; not yet. You are going away to Norway—I know; and I am ruined before you come back."

"Look here, madame; do you mean that you want money from me?"

"I want my rights, Sir 'Oo. Remember, I know everything;—everything; oh, such things! If they were all known,—in the newspapers, you understand, or that kind of thing, that lady in Bolton Street would lose all her money to-morrow. Yes. There is uncles to the little lord; yes! Ah, how much would they give me, I wonder? They would not tell me to go away."

Sophie was perhaps justified in the estimate she had made of Sir Hugh's probable character from the knowledge which she had acquired of his brother Archie; but, nevertheless, she had fallen into a great mistake. There could hardly have been a man then in London less likely to fall into her present views than Sir Hugh Clavering. Not only was he too fond of his money to give it away without knowing why he did so; but he was subject to none of that weakness by which some men are prompted to submit to such extortions. Had he believed her story, and had Lady Ongar been really dear to him, he would never have dealt with such a one as Madame Gordeloup otherwise than through the police.

"Madame Gordeloup," said he, "if you don't immediately take yourself off, I shall have you put out of the house."

He would have sent for a constable at once, had he not feared that by doing so, he would retard his journey.

"What!" said Sophie, whose courage was as good as his own. "Me put out of the house! Who shall touch me?"

"My servant shall; or if that will not do, the police. Come, walk." And he stepped over towards her as though he himself intended to assist in her expulsion by violence.

"Well, you are there; I see you; and what next?" said Sophie. "You, and your valk! I can tell you things fit for you to know, and you say, Valk. If I valk, I will valk to some purpose. I do not often valk for nothing when I am told—Valk!" Upon this, Sir Hugh rang the bell with some violence. "I care nothing for your bells, or for your servants, or for your policemen. I have told you that your sister owe me a great deal of money, and you say,—Valk. I vill valk." Thereupon the servant came into the room, and Sir Hugh, in an angry voice, desired him to open the front door. "Yes,—open vide," said Sophie, who, when anger came upon her, was apt to drop into a mode of speaking English which she was able to avoid in her cooler moments. "Sir 'Oo, I am going to valk, and you shall hear of my valking."

"Am I to take that as a threat?" said he.

"Not a tret at all," said she; "only a promise. Ah, I am good to keep my promises! Yes, I make a promise. Your poor wife,—down with the daises; I know all, and she shall hear too. That is another promise. And your brother, the captain. Oh! here he is, and the little man out of Warwickshire." She had got up from her chair, and had moved towards the door with the intention of going; but just as she was passing out into the hall, she encountered Archie and Doodles. Sir Hugh, who had been

altogether at a loss to understand what she had meant by the man out of Warwickshire, followed her into the hall, and became more angry than before at finding that his brother had brought a friend to his house at so very inopportune a moment. The wrath in his face was so plainly expressed that Doodles could perceive it, and wished himself away. The presence also of the Spy was not pleasant to the gallant captain. Was the wonderful woman ubiquitous, that he should thus encounter her again, and that so soon after all the things that he had spoken of her on this morning? "How do you do, gentlemen?" said Sophie. "There is a great many boxes here, and I with my crinoline have not got room." Then she shook hands, first with Archie, and then with Doodles; and asked the latter why he was not as yet gone to Warwickshire. Archie, in almost mortal fear, looked up into his brother's face. Had his brother learned the story of that seventy pounds? Sir Hugh was puzzled beyond measure at finding that the woman knew the two men; but having still an eye to his lamb chops, was chiefly anxious to get rid of Sophie and Doodles together.

"This is my friend Boodle,—Captain Boodle," said Archie, trying to put a bold face upon the crisis. "He has come to see me off."

"Very kind of him," said Sir Hugh. "Just make way for this lady, will you? I want to get her out of the house if I can. Your friend seems to know her; perhaps he'll be good enough to give her his arm?"

"Who;—I?" said Doodles. "No; I don't know her particularly. I did meet her once before, just once,—in a casual way."

"Captain Booddle and me is very good friends," said Sophie. "He come to my house and behave himself very well; only he is not so handy a man as your brother, Sir 'Oo."

Archie trembled, and he trembled still more when his brother, turning to him, asked him if he knew the woman.

"Yes; he know the woman very well," said Sophie. "Why do you not come any more to see me? You send your little friend; but I like you better yourself. You come again when you return, and all that shall be made right."

But still she did not go. She had now seated herself on a gun-case which was resting on a portmanteau, and seemed to be at her ease. The time was going fast, and Sir Hugh, if he meant to eat his chops, must eat them at once.

"See her out of the hall, into the street," he said to Archie; "and if she gives trouble, send for the police. She has come here to get money from me by threats, and only that we have no time, I would have her taken to the lock-up house at once." Then Sir Hugh retreated into the dining-room and shut the door.

"Lock-up-ouse!" said Sophie, scornfully. "What is dat?

"He means a prison," said Doodles.

"Prison! I know who is most likely be in a prison. Tell me of a prison! Is he a minister of state that he can send out order for me to be

made prisoner? Is there lettres de cachet now in England? I think not. Prison, indeed!"

"But really, Madame Gordeloup, you had better go; you had, indeed," said Archie.

"You, too—you bid me go? Did I bid you go when you came to me? Did I not tell you, sit down? Was I not polite? Did I send for a police? or talk of lock-up-ouse to you? No. It is English that do these things; only English."

Archie felt that it was incumbent on him to explain that his visit to her house had been made under other circumstances,—that he had brought money instead of seeking it; and had, in fact, gone to her simply in the way of her own trade. He did begin some preliminaries to this explanation; but as the servant was there, and as his brother might come out from the dining-room,—and as also he was aware that he could hardly tell the story much to his own advantage, he stopped abruptly, and, looking piteously at Doodles, implored him to take the lady away.

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind just seeing her into Mount Street," said Archie.

"Who; I?" said Doodles, electrified.

"It is only just round the corner," said Archie.

"Yes, Captain Booddle, we will go," said Sophie. "This is a bad house; and your Sir 'Oo,—I do not like him at all. Lock-up, indeed! I tell you he shall very soon be locked up himself. There is what you call Davy's locker. I know;—yes."

Doodles also trembled when he heard this anathema, and thought once more of the character of Jack Stuart and his yacht.

"Pray go with her," said Archie.

"But I had come to see you off."

"Never mind," said Archie. "He is in such a taking, you know. God bless you, old fellow; good-by! I'll write and tell you what fish we get, and mind you tell me what Turriper does for the Bedfordshire. Good-by, Madame Gordeloup—good-by."

There was no escape for him, so Doodles put on his hat and prepared to walk away to Mount Street with the Spy under his arm,—the Spy as to whose avocations, over and beyond those of her diplomatic profession, he had such strong suspicions! He felt inclined to be angry with his friend, but the circumstances of his parting hardly admitted of any expression of anger.

"Good-by, Clavvy," he said. "Yes; I'll write; that is, if I've got anything to say."

"Take care of yourself, captain," said Sophie.

"All right," said Archie.

"Mind you come and see me when you come back," said Sophie.

"Of course I will," said Archie.

"And we'll make that all right for you yet. Gentlemen, when they have so much to gain, shouldn't take a No too easy. You come with your

handy glove, and we'll see about it again." Then Sophie walked off leaning upon the arm of Captain Boodle, and Archie stood at the door watching them till they turned out of sight round the corner of the square. At last he saw them no more, and then he returned to his brother.

And as we shall see Doodles no more,—or almost no more,—we will now bid him adieu civilly. The pair were not ill-matched, though the lady perhaps had some advantage in acuteness, given to her no doubt by the experience of a longer life. Doodles, as he walked along two sides of the square with the fair burden on his arm, felt himself to be in some sort proud of his position, though it was one from which he would not have been sorry to escape, had escape been possible. A remarkable phenomenon was the Spy, and to have walked round Berkeley Square with such a woman leaning on his arm, might in coming years be an event to remember with satisfaction. In the meantime he did not say much to her, and did not quite understand all that she said to him. At last he came to the door which he well remembered, and then he paused. He did not escape even then. After a while the door was opened, and those who were passing might have seen Captain Boodle, slowly and with hesitating steps, enter the narrow passage before the lady. Then Sophie followed, and closed the door behind her. As far as this story goes, what took place at that interview cannot be known. Let us bid farewell to Doodles, and wish him a happy escape.

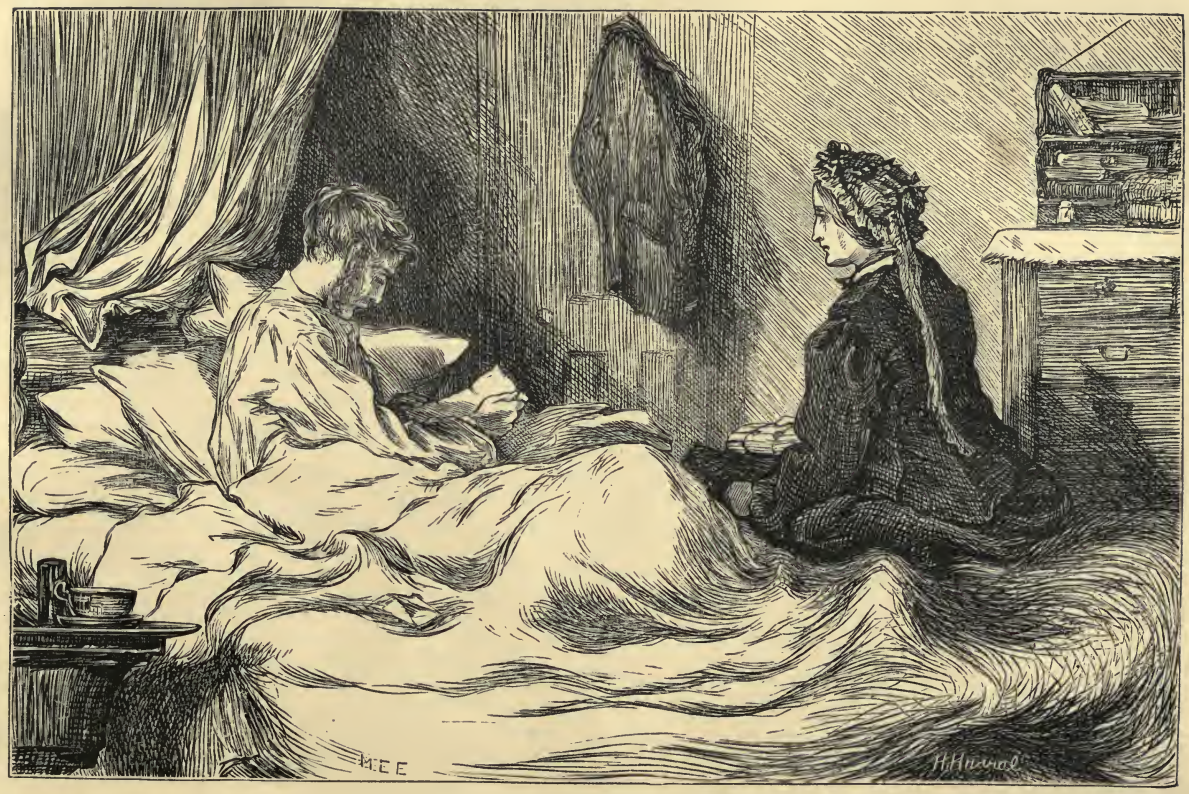
"How did you come to know that woman?" said Hugh to his brother, as soon as Archie was in the dining-room.

"She was a friend of Julia's," said Archie.

"You haven't given her money?" Hugh asked.

"O dear, no," said Archie.

Immediately after that they got into their cab; the things were pitched on the top; and,—for a while,—we may bid adieu to them also.



THE SHEEP RETURNS TO THE FOLD.

THE

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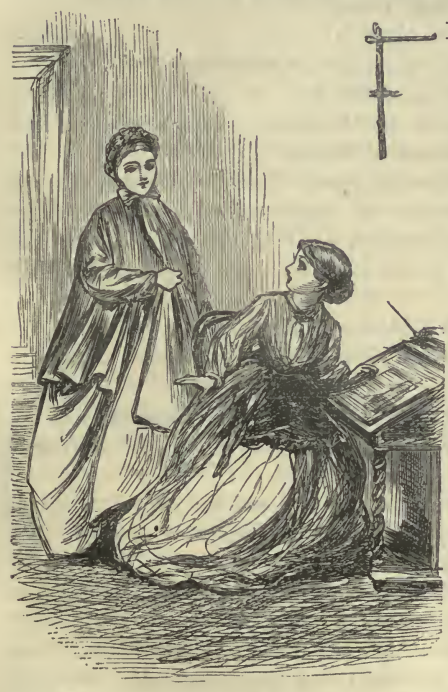
The Claverings.

CHAPTER XL.

SHEWING HOW MRS. BURTON FOUGHT HER BATTLE.



"FLORENCE, I have been to Bolton Street and I have seen Lady Ongar." Those were the first words which Cecilia Burton spoke to her sister-in-law, when she found Florence in the drawing-room on her return from the visit which she had made to the countess. Florence had still before her the desk on which she had been writing; and the letter in its envelope addressed to Mrs. Clavering, but as yet unclosed, was lying beneath her blotting-paper. Florence, who had never dreamed of such an undertaking on Cecilia's part, was astounded at the tidings which she heard. Of course her first effort was made to learn from her sister's tone and countenance what had been the result of this interview;—but she could learn nothing from either. There was no radiance as of joy in Mrs. Burton's face, nor was there written there anything of despair. Her voice was serious and

almost solemn, and her manner was very grave;—but that was all. "You have seen her?" said Florence, rising up from her chair.

"Yes, dear. I may have done wrong. Theodore, I know, will say so. But I thought it best to try to learn the truth before you wrote to Mrs. Clavering."

"And what is the truth? But perhaps you have not learned it?"

"I think I have learned all that she could tell me. She has been very frank."

"Well;—what is the truth? Do not suppose, dearest, that I cannot bear it. I hope for nothing now. I only want to have this settled, that I may be at rest."

Upon this Mrs. Burton took the suffering girl in her arms and caressed her tenderly. "My love," said she, "it is not easy for us to be at rest. You cannot be at rest as yet."

"I can. I will be so, when I know that this is settled. I do not wish to interfere with his fortune. There is my letter to his mother, and now I will go back to Stratton."

"Not yet, dearest; not yet," said Mrs. Burton, taking the letter in her hand, but refraining from withdrawing it at once from the envelope. "You must hear what I have heard to-day."

"Does she say that she loves him?"

"Ah, yes;—she loves him. We must not doubt that."

"And he;—what does she say of him?"

"She says what you also must say, Florence;—though it is hard that it should be so. It must be as he shall decide."

"No," said Florence, withdrawing herself from the arm that was still around her. "No; it shall not be as he may choose to decide. I will not so submit myself to him. It is enough as it is. I will never see him more;—never. To say that I do not love him would be untrue, but I will never see him again."

"Stop, dear; stop. What if it be no fault of his?"

"No fault of his that he went to her when we—we—we—he and I—were, as we were, together!"

"Of course there has been some fault; but, Flo dearest, listen to me. You know that I would ask you to do nothing from which a woman should shrink."

"I know that you would give your heart's blood for me;—but nothing will be of avail now. Do not look at me with melancholy eyes like that. Cissy, it will not kill me. It is only the doubt that kills one."

"I will not look at you with melancholy eyes, but you must listen to me. She does not herself know what his intention is."

"But I know it,—and I know my own. Read my letter, Cissy. There is not one word of anger in it, nor will I ever utter a reproach. He knew her first. If he loved her through it all, it was a pity he could not be constant to his love, even though she was false to him."

"But you won't hear me, Flo. As far as I can learn the truth,—

as I myself most firmly believe,—when he went to her on her return to England, he had no other intention than that of visiting an old friend."

"But what sort of friend, Cissy?"

"He had no idea then of being untrue to you. But when he saw her the old intimacy came back. That was natural. Then he was dazzled by her beauty."

"Is she then so beautiful?"

"She is very beautiful."

"Let him go to her," said Florence, tearing herself away from her sister's arm, and walking across the room with a quick and almost angry step. "Let her have him. Cissy, there shall be an end of it. I will not condescend to solicit his love. If she is such as you say, and if beauty with him goes for everything,—what chance could there be for such as me?"

"I did not say that beauty with him went for everything."

"Of course it does. I ought to have known that it would be so with such a one as him. And then she is rich also,—wonderfully rich! What right can I have to think of him?"

"Florence, you are unjust. You do not even suspect that it is her money."

"To me it is the same thing. I suppose that a woman who is so beautiful has a right to everything. I know that I am plain, and I will be—content—in future—to think no more——" Poor Florence, when she had got as far as that, broke down, and could go on no further with the declaration which she had been about to make as to her future prospects. Mrs. Burton, taking advantage of this, went on with her story, struggling, not altogether unsuccessfully, to assume a calm tone of unimpassioned reason.

"As I said before, he was dazzled——"

"Dazzled!—oh!"

"But even then he had no idea of being untrue to you."

"No; he was untrue without an idea. That is worse."

"Florence, you are perverse, and are determined to be unfair. I must beg that you will hear me to the end, so that then you may be able to judge what course you ought to follow." This Mrs. Burton said with the air of a great authority; after which she continued in a voice something less stern—"He thought of doing no injury to you when he went to see her; but something of the feeling of his old love grew upon him when he was in her company, and he became embarrassed by his position before he was aware of his own danger. He might, of course, have been stronger." Here Florence exhibited a gesture of strong impatience, though she did not speak. "I am not going to defend him altogether, but I think you must admit that he was hardly tried. Of course I cannot say what passed between them, but I can understand how easily they might recur to the old scenes;—how naturally she would wish for a renewal of the love

which she had been base enough to betray! She does not, however, consider herself as at present engaged to him. That you may know for certain. It may be that she has asked him for such a promise, and that he has hesitated. If so, his staying away from us, and his not writing to you, can be easily understood."

"And what is it you would have me do?"

"He is ill now. Wait till he is well. He would have been here before this, had not illness prevented him. Wait till he comes."

"I cannot do that, Cissy. Wait I must, but I cannot wait without offering him, through his mother, the freedom which I have so much reason to know that he desires."

"We do not know that he desires it. We do not know that his mother even suspects him of any fault towards you. Now that he is there,—at home,—away from Bolton Street——"

"I do not care to trust to such influences as that, Cissy. If he could not spend this morning with her in her own house, and then as he left her feel that he preferred me to her, and to all the world, I would rather be as I am than take his hand. He shall not marry me from pity, nor yet from a sense of duty. We know the old story,—how the devil would be a monk when he was sick. I will not accept his sick-bed allegiance, or have to think that I owe my husband to a mother's influence over him while he is ill."

"You will make me think, Flo, that you are less true to him than she is."

"Perhaps it is so. Let him have what good such truth as hers can do him. For me, I feel that it is my duty to be true to myself. I will not condescend to indulge my heart at the cost of my pride as a woman."

"Oh, Florence, I hate that word pride."

"You would not hate it for yourself, in my place."

"You need take no shame to love him."

'Have I taken shame to love him?" said Florence, rising again from her chair. "Have I been missish or coy about my love? From the moment in which I knew that it was a pleasure to myself to regard him as my future husband, I have spoken of my love as being always proud of it. I have acknowledged it as openly as you can do yours for Theodore. I acknowledge it still, and will never deny it. Take shame that I have loved him! No. But I should take to myself great shame should I ever be brought so low as to ask him for his love, when once I had learned to think that he had transferred it from myself to another woman." Then she walked the length of the room, backwards and forwards, with hasty steps, not looking at her sister-in-law, whose eyes were now filled with tears. "Come, Cissy," she then said, "we will make an end of this. Read my letter if you choose to read it,—though indeed it is not worth the reading, and then let me send it to the post."

Mrs. Burton now opened the letter and read it very slowly. It was stern and almost unfeeling in the calmness of the words chosen; but in

those words her proposed marriage with Harry Clavering was absolutely abandoned. "I know," she said, "that your son is more warmly attached to another lady than he is to me, and under those circumstances, for his sake as well as for mine, it is necessary that we should part. Dear Mrs. Clavering, may I ask you to make him understand that he and I are never to recur to the past? If he will send me back any letters of mine,—should any have been kept,—and the little present which I once gave him, all will have been done which need be done, and all have been said which need be said. He will receive in a small parcel his own letters and the gifts which he has made me." There was in this a tone of completeness,—as of a business absolutely finished,—of a judgment admitting no appeal, which did not at all suit Mrs. Burton's views. A letter, quite as becoming on the part of Florence, might, she thought, be written, which would still leave open a door for reconciliation. But Florence was resolved, and the letter was sent.

The part which Mrs. Burton had taken in this conversation had surprised even herself. She had been full of anger with Harry Clavering,—as wrathful with him as her nature permitted her to be; and yet she had pleaded his cause with all her eloquence, going almost so far in her defence of him as to declare that he was blameless. And in truth she was prepared to acquit him of blame,—to give him full absolution without penance,—if only he could be brought back again into the fold. Her wrath against him would be very hot should he not so return;—but all should be more than forgiven if he would only come back, and do his duty with affectionate and patient fidelity. Her desire was, not so much that justice should be done, as that Florence should have the thing coveted, and that Florence's rival should not have it. According to the arguments, as arranged by her feminine logic, Harry Clavering would be all right or all wrong according as he might at last bear himself. She desired success, and, if she could only be successful, was prepared to forgive everything. And even yet she would not give up the battle, though she admitted to herself that Florence's letter to Mrs. Clavering made the contest more difficult than ever. It might, however, be that Mrs. Clavering would be good enough, just enough, true enough, clever enough, to know that such a letter as this, coming from such a girl and written under such circumstances, should be taken as meaning nothing. Most mothers would wish to see their sons married to wealth, should wealth throw itself in their way;—but Mrs. Clavering, possibly, might not be such a mother as that.

In the meantime there was before her the terrible necessity of explaining to her husband the step which she had taken without his knowledge, and of which she knew that she must tell him the history before she could sit down to dinner with him in comfort. "Theodore," she said, creeping in out of her own chamber to his dressing-room, while he was washing his hands, "you mustn't be angry with me, but I have done something to-day."

"And why must I not be angry with you?"

"You know what I mean. You mustn't be angry—especially about this,—because I don't want you to be."

"That's conclusive," said he. It was manifest to her that he was in a good humour, which was a great blessing. He had not been tried with his work as he was often wont to be, and was therefore willing to be playful.

"What do you think I've done?" said she. "I have been to Bolton Street and have seen Lady Ongar."

"No!"

"I have, Theodore, indeed."

Mr. Burton had been rubbing his face vehemently with a rough towel at the moment in which the communication had been made to him, and so strongly was he affected by it that he was stopped in his operation and brought to a stand in his movement, looking at his wife over the towel as he held it in both his hands. "What on earth has made you do such a thing as that?" he said.

"I thought it best. I thought that I might hear the truth,—and so I have. I could not bear that Florence should be sacrificed whilst anything remained undone that was possible."

"Why didn't you tell me that you were going?"

"Well, my dear; I thought it better not. Of course I ought to have told you, but in this instance I thought it best just to go without the fuss of mentioning it."

"What you really mean is, that if you had told me I should have asked you not to go."

"Exactly."

"And you were determined to have your own way?"

"I don't think, Theodore, I care so much about my own way as some women do. I am sure I always think your opinion is better than my own;—that is, in most things."

"And what did Lady Ongar say to you?" He had now put down the towel, and was seated in his arm-chair, looking up into his wife's face.

"It would be a long story to tell you all that she said."

"Was she civil to you?"

"She was not uncivil. She is a handsome, proud woman, prone to speak out what she thinks and determined to have her own way when it is possible; but I think that she intended to be civil to me personally."

"What is her purpose now?"

"Her purpose is clear enough. She means to marry Harry Clavering if she can get him. She said so. She made no secret of what her wishes are."

"Then, Cissy, let her marry him, and do not let us trouble ourselves further in the matter."

"But Florence, Theodore! Think of Florence!"

"I am thinking of her, and I think that Harry Clavering is not worth her acceptance. She is as the traveller that fell among thieves. She is

hurt and wounded, but not dead. It is for you to be the Good Samaritan, but the oil which you should pour into her wounds is not a renewed hope as to that worthless man. Let Lady Ongar have him. As far as I can see, they are fit for each other."

Then she went through with him, diligently, all the arguments which she had used with Florence, palliating Harry's conduct, and explaining the circumstances of his disloyalty, almost as those circumstances had in truth occurred. "I think you are too hard on him," she said. "You can't be too hard on falsehood," he replied. "No, not while it exists. But you would not be angry with a man for ever, because he should once have been false? But we do not know that he is false." "Do we not?" said he. "But never mind; we must go to dinner now. Does Florence know of your visit?" Then, before she would allow him to leave his room, she explained to him what had taken place between herself and Florence, and told him of the letter that had been written to Mrs. Clavering. "She is right," said he. "That way out of her difficulty is the best that is left to her." But, nevertheless, Mrs. Burton was resolved that she would not as yet surrender.

Theodore Burton, when he reached the drawing-room, went up to his sister and kissed her. Such a sign of the tenderness of love was not common with him, for he was one of those who are not usually demonstrative in their affection. At the present moment he said nothing of what was passing in his mind, nor did she. She simply raised her face to meet his lips, and pressed his hand as she held it. What need was there of any further sign between them than this? Then they went to dinner, and their meal was eaten almost in silence. Almost every moment Cecilia's eye was on her sister-in-law. A careful observer, had there been one there, might have seen this; but, while they remained together downstairs, there occurred among them nothing else to mark that all was not well with them.

Nor would the brother have spoken a word during the evening on the subject that was so near to all their hearts had not Florence led the way. When they were at tea, and when Cecilia had already made up her mind that there was to be no further discussion that night, Florence suddenly broke forth.

"Theodore," she said, "I have been thinking much about it, and I believe I had better go home, to Stratton, to-morrow."

"Oh, no," said Cecilia, eagerly.

"I believe it will be better that I should," continued Florence. "I suppose it is very weak in me to own it; but I am unhappy, and, like the wounded bird, I feel that it will be well that I should hide myself."

Cecilia was at her feet in a moment. "Dearest Flo," she said. "Is not this your home as well as Stratton?"

"When I am able to be happy it is. Those who have light hearts may have more homes than one; but it is not so with those whose hearts are heavy. I think it will be best for me to go."

"You shall do exactly as you please," said her brother. "In such a matter I will not try to persuade you. I only wish that we could tend to comfort you."

"You do comfort me. If I know that you think I am doing right, that will comfort me more than anything. Absolute and immediate comfort is not to be had when one is sorrowful."

"No, indeed," said her brother. "Sorrow should not be killed too quickly. I always think that those who are impervious to grief must be impervious also to happiness. If you have feelings capable of the one, you must have them capable also of the other!"

"You should wait at any rate, till you get an answer from Mrs. Clavering," said Cecilia.

"I do not know that she has any answer to send to me."

"Oh, yes; she must answer you, if you will think of it. If she accepts what you have said——"

"She cannot but accept it."

"Then she must reply to you. There is something which you have asked her to send to you; and I think you should wait, at any rate, till it reaches you here. Mind I do not think her answer will be of that nature; but it is clear that you should wait for it whatever it may be." Then Florence, with the concurrence of her brother's opinion, consented to remain in London for a few days, expecting the answer which would be sent by Mrs. Clavering;—and after that no further discussion took place as to her trouble.

CHAPTER XLI.

The Sheep returns to the Fold.

Harry Clavering had spoken solemn words to his mother, during his illness, which both he and she regarded as a promise that Florence should not be deserted by him. After that promise nothing more was said between them on the subject for a few days. Mrs. Clavering was contented that the promise had been made, and Harry himself, in the weakness consequent upon his illness, was willing enough to accept the excuse which his illness gave him for postponing any action in the matter. But the fever had left him, and he was sitting up in his mother's room, when Florence's letter reached the parsonage,—and, with the letter, the little parcel which she herself had packed up so carefully. On the day before that a few words had passed between the rector and his wife, which will explain the feelings of both of them in the matter.

"Have you heard," said he,—speaking in a voice hardly above a whisper, although no third person was in the room—"that Harry is again thinking of making Julia his wife?"

"He is not thinking of doing so," said Mrs. Clavering. "They who say so, do him wrong."

"It would be a great thing for him as regards money."

"But he is engaged,—and Florence Burton has been received here as his future wife. I could not endure to think that it should be so. At any rate, it is not true."

"I only tell you what I heard," said the rector, gently sighing, partly in obedience to his wife's implied rebuke, and partly at the thought that so grand a marriage should not be within his son's reach. The rector was beginning to be aware that Harry would hardly make a fortune at the profession which he had chosen, and that a rich marriage would be an easy way out of all the difficulties which such a failure promised. The rector was a man who dearly loved easy ways out of difficulties. But in such matters as these his wife he knew was imperative and powerful, and he lacked the courage to plead for a cause that was prudent, but ungenerous.

When Mrs. Clavering received the letter and parcel on the next morning, Harry Clavering was still in bed. With the delightful privilege of a convalescent invalid, he was allowed in these days to get up just when getting up became more comfortable than lying in bed, and that time did not usually come till eleven o'clock was past;—but the postman reached the Clavering parsonage by nine. The letter, as we know, was addressed to Mrs. Clavering herself, as was also the outer envelope which contained the packet; but the packet itself was addressed in Florence's clear hand-writing to Harry Clavering, Esq. "That is a large parcel to come by post, mamma," said Fanny.

"Yes, my dear; but it is something particular."

"It's from some tradesman, I suppose?" said the rector.

"No; it's not from a tradesman," said Mrs. Clavering. But she said nothing further, and both husband and daughter perceived that it was not intended that they should ask further questions.

Fanny, as usual, had taken her brother his breakfast, and Mrs. Clavering did not go up to him till that ceremony had been completed and removed. Indeed it was necessary that she should study Florence's letter in her own room before she could speak to him about it. What the parcel contained she well knew, even before the letter had been thoroughly read; and I need hardly say that the treasure was sacred in her hands. When she had finished the perusal of the letter there was a tear,—a gentle tear, in each eye. She understood it all, and could fathom the strength and weakness of every word which Florence had written. But she was such a woman,— exactly such a woman, — as Cecilia Burton had pictured to herself. Mrs. Clavering was good enough, great enough, true enough, clever enough to know that Harry's love for Florence should be sustained, and his fancy for Lady Ongar overcome. At no time would she have been proud to see her son prosperous only in the prosperity of a wife's fortune; but she would have been thoroughly ashamed of him, had he resolved to pursue such prosperity under his present circumstances.

But her tears,—though they were there in the corners of her eyes,—were not painful tears. Dear Florence! She was suffering bitterly now.

This very day would be a day of agony to her. There had been for her, doubtless, many days of agony during the past month. That the letter was true in all its words Mrs. Clavering did not doubt. That Florence believed that all was over between her and Harry, Mrs. Clavering was as sure as Florence had intended that she should be. But all should not be over, and the days of agony should soon be at an end. Her boy had promised her, and to her he had always been true. And she understood, too, the way in which these dangers had come upon him, and her judgment was not heavy upon her son ;—her gracious boy, who had ever been so good to her ! It might be that he had been less diligent at his work than he should have been,—that on that account further delay would still be necessary ; but Florence would forgive that, and he had promised that Florence should not be deserted.

Then she took the parcel in her hands, and considered all its circumstances,—how precious had once been its contents, and how precious doubtless they still were, though they had been thus repudiated ! And she thought of the moments,—nay, rather of the hours,—which had been passed in the packing of that little packet. She well understood how a girl would linger over such dear pain, touching the things over and over again, allowing herself to read morsels of the letters at which she had already forbidden herself even to look,—till every word had been again seen and weighed, again caressed and again abjured. She knew how those little trinkets would have been fondled ! How salt had been the tears that had fallen on them, and how carefully the drops would have been removed. Every fold in the paper of the two envelopes, with the little morsels of wax just adequate for their purpose, told of the lingering painful care with which the work had been done. Ah ! the parcel should go back at once with words of love that should put an end to all that pain ! She, who had sent these loved things away, should have her letters again, and should touch her little treasures with fingers that should take pleasure in the touching. She should again read her lover's words with an enduring delight. Mrs. Clavering understood it all, as though she also were still a girl with a lover of her own.

Harry was beginning to think that the time had come in which getting up would be more comfortable than lying in bed, when his mother knocked at his door and entered his room. "I was just going to make a move, mother," he said, having reached that stage of convalescence in which some shame comes upon the idler.

"But I want to speak to you first, my dear," said Mrs. Clavering. "I have got a letter for you, or rather a parcel." Harry held out his hand, and taking the packet, at once recognized the writing of the address.

"You know from whom it comes, Harry ?"

"Oh, yes, mother."

"And do you know what it contains ?" Harry, still holding the packet, looked at it, but said nothing. "I know," said his mother ; "for she has written and told me. Will you see her letter to me ?" Again Harry

held out his hand, but his mother did not at once give him the letter. "First of all, my dear, let us know that we understand each other. This dear girl,—to me she is inexpressibly dear,—is to be your wife?"

"Yes, mother;—it shall be so."

"That is my own boy! Harry, I have never doubted you;—have never doubted that you would be right at last. Now you shall see her letter. But you must remember that she has had cause to make her unhappy."

"I will remember."

"Had you not been ill, everything would of course have been all right before now." As to the correctness of this assertion the reader probably will have doubts of his own. Then she handed him the letter, and sat on his bed-side while he read it. At first he was startled, and made almost indignant at the firmness of the girl's words. She gave him up as though it were a thing quite decided, and uttered no expression of her own regret in doing so. There was no soft woman's wail in her words. But there was in them something which made him unconsciously long to get back the thing which he had so nearly thrown away from him. They inspired him with a doubt whether he might yet succeed, which very doubt greatly increased his desire. As he read the letter for the second time, Julia became less beautiful in his imagination, and the charm of Florence's character became stronger.

"Well, dear?" said his mother, when she saw that he had finished the second reading of the epistle.

He hardly knew how to express, even to his mother, all his feelings,—the shame that he felt, and with the shame something of indignation that he should have been so repulsed. And of his love, too, he was afraid to speak. He was willing enough to give the required assurance, but after that he would have preferred to have been left alone. But his mother could not leave him without some further word of agreement between them as to the course which they would pursue.

"Will you write to her, mother, or shall I?"

"I shall write, certainly,—by to-day's post. I would not leave her an hour if I could help it, without an assurance of your unaltered affection."

"I could go to town to-morrow, mother;—could I not?"

"Not to-morrow, Harry. It would be foolish. Say on Monday."

"And you will write to-day?"

"Certainly."

"I will send a line also,—just a line."

"And the parcel?"

"I have not opened it yet.

"You know what it contains. Send it back at once, Harry;—at once. If I understand her feelings, she will not be happy till she gets it into her hands again. We will send Jem over to the post-office, and have it registered."

When so much was settled, Mrs. Clavering went away about the affairs

of her house, thinking as she did so of the loving words with which she would strive to give back happiness to Florence Burton.

Harry, when he was alone, slowly opened the parcel. He could not resist the temptation of doing this, and of looking again at the things which she had sent back to him. And he was not without an idea,—perhaps a hope—that there might be with them some short note,—some scrap containing a few words for himself. If he had any such hope he was disappointed. There were his own letters, all scented with lavender from the casket in which they had been preserved; there was the rich bracelet which had been given with some little ceremony, and the cheap brooch which he had thrown to her as a joke, and which she had sworn that she would value the most of all because she could wear it every day; and there was the pencil-case which he had fixed on to her watch-chain, while her fingers were touching his fingers, caressing him for his love while her words were rebuking him for his awkwardness. He remembered it all as the things lay strewed upon his bed. And he re-read every word of his own words. "What a fool a man makes of himself," he said to himself at last, with something of the cheeriness of laughter about his heart. But as he said so he was quite ready to make himself a fool after the same fashion again,—if only there were not in his way that difficulty of recommencing. Had it been possible for him to write again at once in the old strain,—without any reference to his own conduct during the last month, he would have begun his fooling without waiting to finish his dressing.

"Did you open the parcel?" his mother asked him, some hour or so before it was necessary that Jem should be started on his mission.

"Yes; I thought it best to open it."

"And have you made it up again?"

"Not yet, mother."

"Put this with it, dear." And his mother gave him a little jewel, a cupid in mosaic surrounded by tiny diamonds, which he remembered her to wear ever since he had first noticed the things she had worn. "Not from me, mind. I give it to you. Come;—will you trust me to pack them?" Then Mrs. Clavering again made up the parcel, and added the trinket which she had brought with her.

Harry at last brought himself to write a few words. "Dearest, dearest Florence,—They will not let me out, or I would go to you at once. My mother has written, and though I have not seen her letter, I know what it contains. Indeed, indeed you may believe it all. May I not venture to return the parcel? I do send it back and implore you to keep it. I shall be in town, I think, on Monday, and will go to Onslow Crescent,—instantly. Your own, H. C." Then there was scrawled a postscript which was worth all the rest put together,—was better than his own note, better than his mother's letter, better than the returned packet. "I love no one better than you;—no one half so well,—neither now, nor ever did." These words, whether wholly true or only partially so, were

at least to the point; and were taken by Cecilia Burton, when she heard of them, as a confession of faith that demanded instant and plenary absolution.

The trouble which had called Harry down to Clavering remained, I regret to say, almost in full force now that his prolonged visit had been brought so near its close. Mr. Saul, indeed, had agreed to resign his curacy, and was already on the look-out for similar employment in some other parish. And since his interview with Fanny's father he had never entered the rectory, or spoken to Fanny. Fanny had promised that there should be no such speaking, and indeed no danger of that kind was feared. Whatever Mr. Saul might do he would do openly,—nay, audaciously. But though there existed this security, nevertheless things as regarded Fanny were very unpleasant. When Mr. Saul had commenced his courtship, she had agreed with her family in almost ridiculing the idea of such a lover. There had been a feeling with her as with the others that poor Mr. Saul was to be pitied. Then she had come to regard his overtures as matters of grave import,—not indeed avowing to her mother anything so strong as a return of his affection, but speaking of his proposal as one to which there was no other objection than that of a want of money. Now, however, she went moping about the house as though she were a victim of true love, condemned to run unsmoothly for ever; as though her passion for Mr. Saul were too much for her, and she were waiting in patience till death should relieve her from the cruelty of her parents. She never complained. Such victims never do complain. But she moped and was wretched, and when her mother questioned her, struggling to find out how strong this feeling might in truth be, Fanny would simply make her dutiful promises,—promises which were wickedly dutiful,—that she would never mention the name of Mr. Saul any more. Mr. Saul in the meantime went about his parish duties with grim energy, supplying the rector's shortcomings without a word. He would have been glad to preach all the sermons and read all the services during these six months, had he been allowed to do so. He was constant in the schools,—more constant than ever in his visitings. He was very courteous to Mr. Clavering when the necessities of their position brought them together. For all this Mr. Clavering hated him,—unjustly. For a man placed as Mr. Saul was placed a line of conduct exactly level with that previously followed is impossible, and it was better that he should become more energetic in his duties than less so. It will be easily understood that all these things interfered much with the general happiness of the family at the rectory at this time.

The Monday came, and Harry Clavering, now convalescent and simply interesting from the remaining effects of his illness, started on his journey from London. There had come no further letters from Onslow Terrace to the parsonage, and, indeed, owing to the intervention of Sunday, none could have come unless Florence had written by return of post. Harry made his journey, beginning it with some promise of happiness to himself, —but becoming somewhat uneasy as his train drew near to London. He

had behaved badly, and he knew that in the first place he must own that he had done so. To men such a necessity is always grievous. Women not unfrequently like the task. To confess, submit, and be accepted as confessing and submitting, comes naturally to the feminine mind. The cry of peccavi sounds soft and pretty when made by sweet lips in a loving voice. But a man who can own that he has done amiss without a pang, —who can so own it to another man, or even to a woman,—is usually but a poor creature. Harry must now make such confession, and therefore he became uneasy. And then, for him, there was another task behind the one which he would be called upon to perform this evening,—a task which would have nothing of pleasantness in it to redeem its pain. He must confess not only to Florence,—where his confession might probably have its reward,—but he must confess also to Julia. This second confession would, indeed, be a hard task to him. That, however, was to be postponed till the morrow. On this evening he had pledged himself that he would go direct to Onslow Terrace; and this he did as soon after he had reached his lodgings as was possible. It was past six when he reached London, and it was not yet eight when, with palpitating heart, he knocked at Mr. Burton's door.

I must take the reader back with me for a few minutes, in order that we may see after what fashion the letters from Clavering were received by the ladies in Onslow Terrace. On that day Mr. Burton had been required to go out of London by one of the early trains, and had not been in the house when the postman came. Nothing had been said between Cecilia and Florence as to their hopes or fears in regard to an answer from Clavering;—nothing at least since that conversation in which Florence had agreed to remain in London for yet a few days; but each of them was very nervous on the matter. Any answer, if sent at once from Clavering, would arrive on this morning; and therefore, when the well-known knock was heard, neither of them was able to maintain her calmness perfectly. But yet nothing was said, nor did either of them rise from her seat at the breakfast-table. Presently the girl came in with apparently a bundle of letters, which she was still sorting when she entered the room. There were two or three for Mr. Burton, two for Cecilia, and then two besides the registered packet for Florence. For that a receipt was needed, and as Florence had seen the address and recognized the writing, she was hardly able to give her signature. As soon as the maid was gone, Cecilia could keep her seat no longer. "I know those are from Clavering," she said, rising from her chair, and coming round to the side of the table. Florence instinctively swept the packet into her lap, and, leaning forward, covered the letters with her hands. "Oh, Florence, let us see them; let us see them at once. If we are to be happy let us know it." But Florence paused, still leaning over her treasures, and hardly daring to show her burning face. Even yet it might be that she was rejected. Then Cecilia went back to her seat, and simply looked at her sister with beseeching eyes. "I think I'll go upstairs," said Florence. "Are you afraid of me,

Flo?" Cecilia answered reproachfully. "Let me see the outside of them." Then Florence brought them round the table, and put them into her sister's hands. "May I open this one from Mrs. Clavering?" Florence nodded her head. Then the seal was broken, and in one minute the two women were crying in each other's arms. "I was quite sure of it," said Cecilia, through her tears,—"perfectly sure. I never doubted it for a moment. How could you have talked of going to Stratton?" At last Florence got herself away up to the window, and gradually mustered courage to break the envelope of her lover's letter. It was not at once that she showed the postscript to Cecilia, nor at once that the packet was opened. That last ceremony she did perform in the solitude of her own room. But before the day was over the postscript had been shown, and the added trinket had been exhibited. "I remember it well," said Florence. "Mrs. Clavering wore it on her forehead when we dined at Lady Clavering's." Mrs. Burton in all this saw something of the gentle persuasion which the mother had used, but of that she said nothing. That he should be back again, and should have repented, was enough for her.

Mr. Burton was again absent, when Harry Clavering knocked in person at the door; but on this occasion his absence had been specially arranged by him with a view to Harry's comfort. "He won't want to see me this evening," he had said. "Indeed you'll all get on a great deal better without me." He therefore had remained away from home, and not being a club man, had dined most uncomfortably at an eating-house. "Are the ladies at home?" Harry asked, when the door was opened. Oh, yes; they were at home. There was no danger that they should be found out on such an occasion as this. The girl looked at him pleasantly, calling him by his name as she answered him, as though she too desired to show him that he had again been taken into favour,—into her favour as well as that of her mistress.

He hardly knew what he was doing as he ran up the steps to the drawing-room. He was afraid of what was to come; but nevertheless he rushed at his fate as some young soldier rushes at the trench in which he feels that he may probably fall. So Harry Clavering hurried on, and before he had looked round upon the room which he had entered, found his fate with Florence on his bosom.

Alas, alas! I fear that justice was outraged in the welcome that Harry received on that evening. I have said that he would be called upon to own his sins, and so much, at least, should have been required of him. But he owned no sin! I have said that a certain degradation must attend him in that first interview after his reconciliation. Instead of this the hours that he spent that evening in Onslow Terrace were hours of one long ovation. He was, as it were, put upon a throne as a king who had returned from his conquest, and those two women did him honour, almost kneeling at his feet. Cecilia was almost as tender with him as Florence, pleading to her own false heart the fact of his illness as his excuse. There was

something of the pallor of the sick-room left with him,—a slight tenuity in his hands and brightness in his eye which did him yeoman's service. Had he been quite robust, Cecilia might have felt that she could not justify to herself the peculiar softness of her words. After the first quarter of an hour he was supremely happy. His awkwardness had gone, and as he sat with his arm round Florence's waist, he found that the little pencil-case had again been attached to her chain, and as he looked down upon her he saw that the cheap brooch was again on her breast. It would have been pretty, could an observer have been there, to see the skill with which they both steered clear of any word or phrase which could be disagreeable to him. One might have thought that it would have been impossible to avoid all touch of a rebuke. The very fact that he was forgiven would seem to imply some fault that required pardon. But there was no hint at any fault. The tact of women excels the skill of men; and so perfect was the tact of these women that not a word was said which wounded Harry's ear. He had come again into their fold, and they were rejoiced and showed their joy. He who had gone astray had repented, and they were beautifully tender to the repentant sheep.

CHAPTER XLII.

RESTITUTION.

HARRY stayed a little too long with his love,—a little longer at least than had been computed, and in consequence met Theodore Burton in the Crescent as he was leaving it. This meeting could hardly be made without something of pain, and perhaps it was well for Harry that he should have such an opportunity as this for getting over it quickly. But when he saw Mr. Burton under the bright gas-lamp he would very willingly have avoided him, had it been possible.

"Well, Harry?" said Burton, giving his hand to the repentant sheep.

"How are you, Burton?" said Harry, trying to speak with an unconcerned voice. Then in answer to an inquiry as to his health, he told of his own illness, speaking of that confounded fever having made him very low. He intended no deceit, but he made more of the fever than was necessary.

"When will you come back to the shop?" Burton asked. It must be remembered that though the brother could not refuse to welcome back to his home his sister's lover, still he thought that the engagement was a misfortune. He did not believe in Harry as a man of business, and had almost rejoiced when Florence had been so nearly quit of him. And now there was a taint of sarcasm in his voice as he asked as to Harry's return to the chambers in the Adelphi.

"I can hardly quite say as yet," said Harry, still pleading his illness. "They were very much against my coming up to London so soon. Indeed I should not have done it had I not felt so very—very anxious to see

Florence. I don't know, Burton, whether I ought to say anything to you about that."

"I suppose you have said what you had to say to the women?"

"Oh, yes. I think they understand me completely, and I hope that I understand them."

"In that case I don't know that you need say anything to me. Come to the Adelphi as soon as you can; that's all. I never think myself that a man becomes a bit stronger after an illness by remaining idle." Then Harry passed on, and felt that he had escaped easily in that interview.

But as he walked home he was compelled to think of the step which he must next take. When he had last seen Lady Ongar he had left her with a promise that Florence was to be deserted for her sake. As yet that promise would by her be supposed to be binding. Indeed he had thought it to be binding on himself till he had found himself under his mother's influence at the parsonage. During his last few weeks in London he had endured an agony of doubt; but in his vacillations the pendulum had always veered more strongly towards Bolton Street than to Onslow Crescent. Now the swinging of the pendulum had ceased altogether. From henceforth Bolton Street must be forbidden ground to him, and the sheepfold in Onslow Crescent must be his home till he should have established a small peculiar fold for himself. But, as yet, he had still before him the task of communicating his final decision to the lady in Bolton Street. As he walked home he determined that he had better do so in the first place by letter, and so eager was he as to the propriety of doing this at once, that on his return to his lodgings he sat down, and wrote the letter before he went to his bed. It was not very easily written. Here, at any rate, he had to make those confessions of which I have before spoken;—confessions which it may be less difficult to make with pen and ink than with spoken words, but which when so made are more degrading. The word that is written is a thing capable of permanent life, and lives frequently to the confusion of its parent. A man should make his confessions always by word of mouth if it be possible. Whether such a course would have been possible to Harry Clavering may be doubtful. It might have been that in a personal meeting the necessary confession would not have got itself adequately spoken. Thinking, perhaps, of this he wrote his letter as follows on that night.

Bloomsbury Square, July, 186—.

The date was easily written, but how was he to go on after that? In what form of affection or indifference was he to address her whom he had at that last meeting called his own, his dearest Julia? He got out of his difficulty in the way common to ladies and gentlemen under such stress, and did not address her by any name or any epithet. The date he allowed to remain, and then he went away at once to the matter of his subject.

I feel that I owe it you at once to tell you what has been my history during the last few weeks. I came up from Clavering to-day, and have since that been with Mrs. and Miss Burton. Immediately on my return from them I sit down to write you.

After having said so much, Harry probably felt that the rest of his letter would be surplusage. Those few words would tell her all that it was required that she should know. But courtesy demanded that he should say more, and he went on with his confession.

You know that I became engaged to Miss Burton soon after your own marriage. I feel now that I should have told you this when we first met; but yet, had I done so, it would have seemed as though I told it with a special object. I don't know whether I make myself understood in this. I can only hope that I do so.

Understood! Of course she understood it all. She required no blundering explanation from him to assist her intelligence.

I wish now that I had mentioned it. It would have been better for both of us. I should have been saved much pain; and you, perhaps, some uneasiness.

I was called down to Clavering a few weeks ago, about some business in the family, and then became ill,—so that I was confined to my bed instead of returning to town. Had it not been for this I should not have left you so long in suspense,—that is if there has been suspense. For myself, I have to own that I have been very weak, —worse than weak, I fear you will think. I do not know whether your old regard for me will prompt you to make any excuse for me, but I am well sure that I can make none for myself which will not have suggested itself to you without my urging it. If you choose to think that I have been heartless,—or rather, if you are able so to think of me, no words of mine, written or spoken now, will remove that impression from your mind.

I believe that I need write nothing further. You will understand from what I have said all that I should have to say were I to refer at length to that which has passed between us. All that is over now, and it only remains for me to express a hope that you may be happy. Whether we shall ever see each other again who shall say?—but if we do I trust that we may not meet as enemies. May God bless you here and hereafter.

HARRY CLAVERING.

When the letter was finished Harry sat for a while by his open window looking at the moon, over the chimney-pots of his square, and thinking of his career in life as it had hitherto been fulfilled. The great promise of his earlier days had not been kept. His plight in the world was now poor enough, though his hopes had been so high! He was engaged to be married, but had no income on which to marry. He had narrowly escaped great wealth. Ah!—It was hard for him to think of that without a regret; but he did strive so to think of it. Though he told himself that it would have been evil for him to have depended on money which had been procured by the very act which had been to him an injury,—to have dressed himself in the feathers which had been plucked from Lord Ongar's wings,—it was hard for him to think of all that he had missed, and rejoice thoroughly that he had missed it. But he told himself that he so rejoiced, and endeavoured to be glad that he had not soiled his hands with riches which never would have belonged to the woman he had loved had she not earned them by being false to him. Early on the following morning he sent off his letter, and then, putting himself into a cab, bowled down to Onslow Crescent. The sheepfold now was very pleasant to him when the head

shepherd was away, and so much gratification it was natural that he should allow himself.

That evening, when he came from his club, he found a note from Lady Ongar. It was very short, and the blood rushed to his face as he felt ashamed at seeing with how much apparent ease she had answered him. He had written with difficulty, and had written awkwardly. But there was nothing awkward in her words.

DEAR HARRY,—We are quits now. I do not know why we should ever meet as enemies. I shall never feel myself to be an enemy of yours. I think it would be well that we should see each other, and if you have no objection to seeing me, I will be at home any evening that you may call. Indeed I am at home always in the evening. Surely, Harry, there can be no reason why we should not meet. You need not fear that there will be danger in it.

Will you give my compliments to Miss Florence Burton, with my best wishes for her happiness. Your Mrs. Burton I have seen,—as you may have heard, and I congratulate you on your friend.

Yours always, J. O.

The writing of this letter seemed to have been easy enough, and certainly there was nothing in it that was awkward; but I think that the writer had suffered more in the writing than Harry had done in producing his longer epistle. But she had known how to hide her suffering, and had used a tone which told no tale of her wounds. We are quits now, she had said, and she had repeated the words over and over again to herself as she walked up and down her room. Yes! they were quits now,—if the reflection of that fact could do her any good. She had ill-treated him in her early days; but, as she had told herself so often, she had served him rather than injured him by that ill-treatment. She had been false to him; but her falsehood had preserved him from a lot which could not have been fortunate. With such a clog as she would have been round his neck,—with such a wife, without a shilling of fortune, how could he have risen in the world? No! Though she had deceived him, she had served him. Then,—after that,—had come the tragedy of her life, the terrible days in thinking of which she still shuddered, the days of her husband and Sophie Gordeloup,—that terrible deathbed, those attacks upon her honour, misery upon misery, as to which she never now spoke a word to any one, and as to which she was resolved that she never would speak again. She had sold herself for money, and had got the price; but the punishment of her offence had been very heavy. And now, in these latter days, she had thought to compensate the man she had loved for the treachery with which she had used him. That treachery had been serviceable to him, but not the less should the compensation be very rich. And she would love him too. Ah, yes; she had always loved him! He should have it all now,—everything, if only he would consent to forget that terrible episode in her life, as she would strive to forget it. All that should remain to remind them of Lord Ongar would be the wealth that should henceforth belong to Harry Clavering. Such had been her dream, and

Harry had come to her with words of love which made it seem to be a reality. He had spoken to her words of love which he was now forced to withdraw, and the dream was dissipated. It was not to be allowed to her to escape her penalty so easily as that! As for him, they were now quits. That being the case, there could be no reason why they should quarrel.

But what now should she do with her wealth, and especially how should she act in respect to that place down in the country? Though she had learned to hate Ongar Park during her solitary visit there, she had still looked forward to the pleasure the property might give her, when she should be able to bestow it upon Harry Clavering. But that had been part of her dream, and the dream was now over. Through it all she had been conscious that she might hardly dare to hope that the end of her punishment should come so soon,—and now she knew that it was not to come. As far as she could see, there was no end to her punishment in prospect for her. From her first meeting with Harry Clavering on the platform of the railway station his presence, or her thoughts of him, had sufficed to give some brightness to her life,—had enabled her to support the friendship of Sophie Gordeloup, and also to support her solitude when poor Sophie had been banished. But now she was left without any resource. As she sat alone, meditating on all this, she endeavoured to console herself with the reflection that, after all, she was the one whom Harry loved,—whom Harry would have chosen, had he been free to choose. But the comfort to be derived from that was very poor. Yes; he had loved her once,—nay, perhaps he loved her still. But when that love was her own she had rejected it. She had rejected it, simply declaring to him, to her friends, and to the world at large, that she preferred to be rich. She had her reward, and, bowing her head upon her hands, she acknowledged that the punishment was deserved.

Her first step after writing her note to Harry was to send for Mr. Turnbull, her lawyer. She had expected to see Harry on the evening of the day on which she had written, but instead of that she received a note from him in which he said that he would come to her before long. Mr. Turnbull was more instant in obeying her commands, and was with her on the morning after he received her injunction. He was almost a perfect stranger to her, having only seen her once and that for a few moments after her return to England. Her marriage settlements had been prepared for her by Sir Hugh's attorney; but during her sojourn in Florence it had become necessary that she should have some one in London to look after her own affairs, and Mr. Turnbull had been recommended to her by lawyers employed by her husband. He was a prudent, sensible man, who recognized it to be his imperative interest to look after his client's interest. And he had done his duty by Lady Ongar in that trying time immediately after her return. An offer had then been made by the Courton family to give Julia her income without opposition if she would surrender Ongar Park. To this she had made objections with indignation, and Mr. Turn-

bull, though he had at first thought that she would be wise to comply with the terms proposed, had done her work for her with satisfactory expedition. Since those days she had not seen him, but now she had summoned him, and he was with her in Bolton Street.

"I want to speak to you, Mr. Turnbull," she said, "about that place down in Surrey. I don't like it."

"Not like Ongar Park?" he said. "I have always heard that it is so charming."

"It is not charming to me. It is a sort of property that I don't want, and I mean to give it up."

"Lord Ongar's uncles would buy your interest in it, I have no doubt."

"Exactly. They have sent to me, offering to do so. My brother-in-law, Sir Hugh Clavering, called on me with a message from them saying so. I thought that he was very foolish to come, and so I told him. Such things should be done by one's lawyers. Don't you think so, Mr. Turnbull?" Mr. Turnbull smiled as he declared that, of course, he, being a lawyer, was of that opinion. "I am afraid they will have thought me uncivil," continued Julia, "as I spoke rather brusquely to Sir Hugh Clavering. I am not inclined to take any steps through Sir Hugh Clavering; but I do not know that I have any reason to be angry with the little lord's family."

"Really, Lady Ongar, I think not. When your ladyship returned there was some opposition thought of for a while, but I really do not think it was their fault."

"No; it was not their fault."

"That was my feeling at the time; it was indeed."

"It was the fault of Lord Ongar,—of my husband. As regards all the Courtons I have no word of complaint to make. It is not to be expected,—it is not desirable that they and I should be friends. It is impossible, after what has passed, that there should be such friendship. But they have never injured me, and I wish to oblige them. Had Ongar Park suited me I should, doubtless, have kept it; but it does not suit me, and they are welcome to have it back again."

"Has a price been named, Lady Ongar?"

"No price need be named. There is to be no question of a price. Lord Ongar's mother is welcome to the place,—or rather to such interest as I have in it."

"And to pay a rent?" suggested Mr. Turnbull.

"To pay no rent! Nothing would induce me to let the place, or to sell my right in it. I will have no bargain about it. But as nothing also will induce me to live there, I am not such a dog in the manger as to wish to keep it. If you will have the kindness to see Mr. Courton's lawyer and to make arrangements about it."

"But, Lady Ongar; what you call your right in the estate is worth over twenty thousand pounds. It is indeed. You could borrow twenty thousand pounds on the security of it to-morrow."

"But I don't want to borrow twenty thousand pounds."

"No, no; exactly. Of course you don't. But I point out that fact to show the value. You would be making a present of that sum of money to people who do not want it,—who have no claim upon you. I really don't see how they could take it."

"Mrs. Courton wishes to have the place very much."

"But, my lady, she has never thought of getting it without paying for it. Lady Ongar, I really cannot advise you to take any such step as that. Indeed, I cannot. I should be wrong, as your lawyer, if I did not point out to you that such a proceeding would be quite romantic,—quite so; what the world would call Quixotic. People don't expect such things as that. They don't, indeed."

"People don't often have such reasons as I have," said Lady Ongar. Mr. Turnbull sat silent for a while, looking as though he were unhappy. The proposition made to him was one which, as a lawyer, he felt to be very distasteful to him. He knew that his client had no male friends in whom she confided, and he felt that the world would blame him if he allowed this lady to part with her property in the way she had suggested. "You will find that I am in earnest," she continued, smiling. "And you may as well give way to my vagaries with a good grace."

"They would not take it, Lady Ongar."

"At any rate we can try them. If you will make them understand that I don't at all want the place, and that it will go to rack and ruin because there is no one to live there, I am sure they will take it."

Then Mr. Turnbull again sat silent and unhappy, thinking with what words he might best bring forward his last and strongest argument against this rash proceeding.

"Lady Ongar," he said, "in your peculiar position there are double reasons why you should not act in this way."

"What do you mean, Mr. Turnbull? What is my peculiar position?"

"The world will say that you have restored Ongar Park, because you were afraid to keep it. Indeed, Lady Ongar, you had better let it remain as it is."

"I care nothing for what the world says," she exclaimed, rising quickly from her chair;—"nothing; nothing!"

"You should really hold by your rights; you should, indeed. Who can possibly say what other interests may be concerned? You may marry, and live for the next fifty years, and have a family. It is my duty, Lady Ongar, to point out these things to you."

"I am sure you are quite right, Mr. Turnbull," she said, struggling to maintain a quiet demeanour. "You, of course, are only doing your duty. But whether I marry or whether I remain as I am, I shall give up this place. And as for what the world, as you call it, may say, I will not deny that I cared much for that on my immediate return. What people said then made me very unhappy. But I care nothing for it now. I have established my rights, and that has been sufficient. To me it seems that

the world, as you call it, has been civil enough in its usage of me lately. It is only of those who should have been my friends that I have a right to complain. If you will please to do this thing for me, I will be obliged to you."

"If you are quite determined about it——"

"I am quite determined. What is the use of the place to me? I never shall go there. What is the use even of the money that comes to me? I have no purpose for it. I have nothing to do with it."

There was something in her tone as she said this which well filled him with pity.

"You should remember," he said, "how short a time it is since you became a widow. Things will be different with you soon."

"My clothes will be different, if you mean that," she answered; "but I do not know that there will be any other change in me. But I am wrong to trouble you with all this. If you will let Mr. Courton's lawyer know, with my compliments to Mrs. Courton, that I have heard that she would like to have the place, and that I do not want it, I will be obliged to you." Mr. Turnbull having by this time perceived that she was quite in earnest, took his leave, having promised to do her bidding.

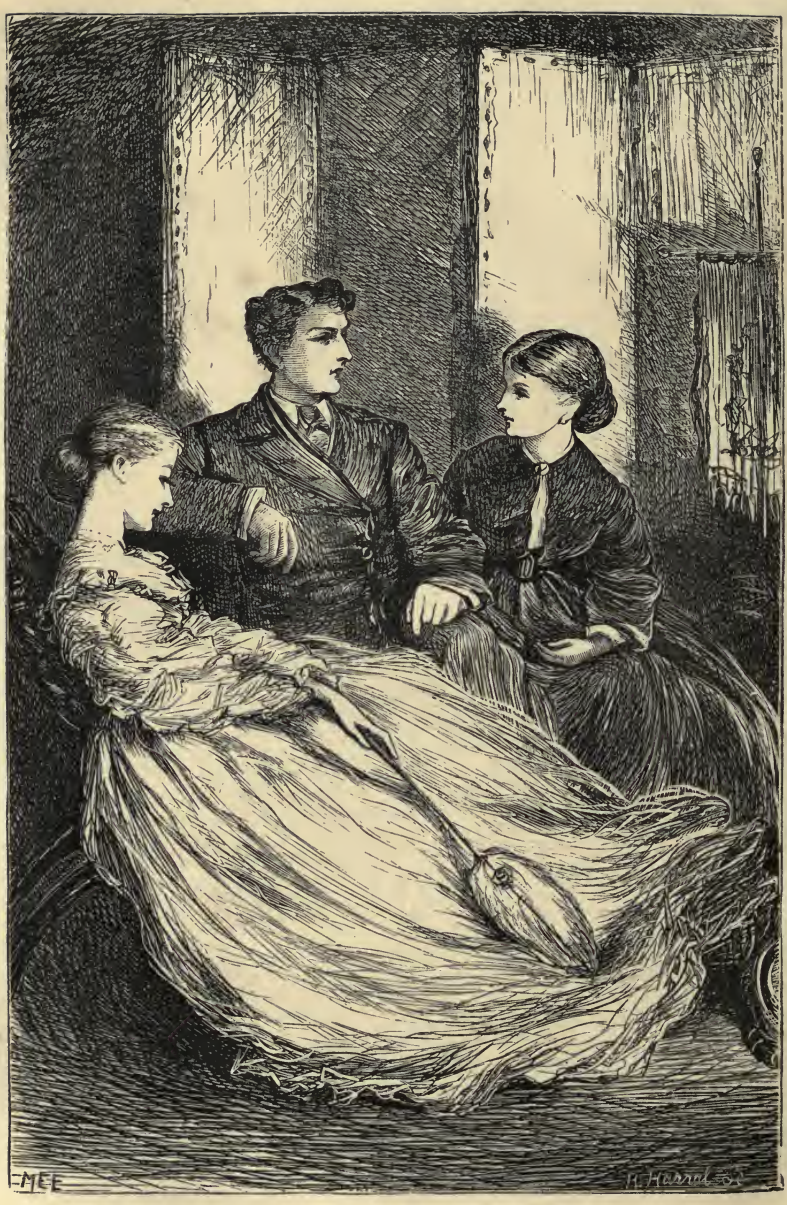
In this interview, she had told her lawyer only a part of the plan which was now running in her head. As for giving up Ongar Park, she took to herself no merit for that. The place had been odious to her ever since she had endeavoured to establish herself there and had found that the clergyman's wife would not speak to her,—that even her own housekeeper would hardly condescend to hold converse with her. She felt that she would be a dog in the manger to keep the place in her own possession. But she had thoughts beyond this,—resolutions only as yet half-formed as to a wider surrender. She had disgraced herself, ruined herself, robbed herself of all happiness by the marriage she had made. Her misery had not been simply the misery of that lord's lifetime. As might have been expected, that was soon over. But an enduring wretchedness had come after that from which she saw no prospect of escape. What was to be her future life, left as she was and would be, in desolation? If she were to give it all up,—all the wealth that had been so ill-gotten,—might there not then be some hope of comfort for her?

She had been willing enough to keep Lord Ongar's money, and use it for the purposes of her own comfort, while she had still hoped that comfort might come from it. The remembrance of all that she had to give had been very pleasant to her, as long as she had hoped that Harry Clavering would receive it at her hands. She had not at once felt that the fruit had all turned to ashes. But now,—now that Harry was gone from her,—now that she had no friend left to her whom she could hope to make happy by her munificence,—the very knowledge of her wealth was a burden to her. And as she thought of her riches in these first days of her desertion, as she had indeed been thinking since Cecilia Burton had been with her, she came to understand that she was degraded by their acquisition. She had done that

which had been unpardonably bad, and she felt like Judas when he stood with the price of his treachery in his hand. He had given up his money, and would not she do as much? There had been a moment in which she had nearly declared all her purpose to the lawyer, but she was held back by the feeling that she ought to make her plans certain before she communicated them to him.

She must live. She could not go out and hang herself as Judas had done. And then there was her title and rank, of which she did not know whether it was within her power to divest herself. She sorely felt the want of some one from whom in her present need she might ask counsel; of some friend to whom she could trust to tell her in what way she might now best atone for the evil she had done. Plans ran through her head which were thrown aside almost as soon as made, because she saw that they were impracticable. She even longed in these days for her sister's aid, though of old she had thought but little of Hermy as a counsellor. She had no friend whom she might ask;—unless she might still ask Harry Clavering.

If she did not keep it all might she still keep something,—enough for decent life,—and yet comfort herself with the feeling that she had expiated her sin? And what would be said of her when she had made this great surrender? Would not the world laugh at her instead of praising her,—that world as to which she had assured Mr. Turnbull that she did not care what its verdict about her might be? She had many doubts. Ah! why had not Harry Clavering remained true to her? But her punishment had come upon her with all its severity, and she acknowledged to herself now that it was not to be avoided.



HARRY SAT BETWEEN THEM, LIKE A SHEEP AS HE WAS, VERY MEEKLY.

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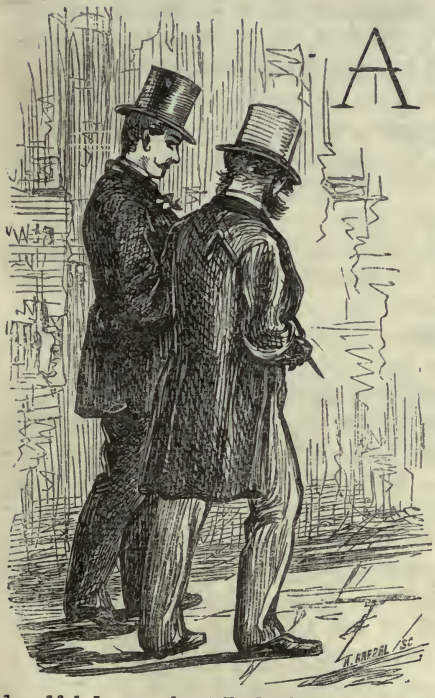
The Claverings.

CHAPTER XLIII.

Lady Ongar's Revenge.



AT last came the night which Harry had fixed for his visit to Bolton Street. He had looked forward certainly with no pleasure to the interview, and now that the time for it had come, was disposed to think that Lady Ongar had been unwise in asking for it. But he had promised that he would go, and there was no possible escape.

He dined that evening in Onslow Crescent, where he was now again established with all his old comfort. He had again gone up to the children's nursery with Cecilia, had kissed them all in their cots, and made himself quite at home in the establishment. It was with them there as though there had been no dreadful dream about Lady Ongar. It was so altogether with Cecilia and Florence, and even Mr. Burton was allowing himself to be brought round

to a charitable view of Harry's character. Harry on this day had gone to the chambers in the Adelphi for an hour, and walking away with Theodore Burton had declared his intention of working like a horse. "If you were to say like a man, it would perhaps be better," said Burton. "I must leave you to say that," answered Harry; "for the present I will content myself with the horse." Burton was willing to hope, and allowed himself once more to fall into his old pleasant way of talking about the business as though there were no other subject under the sun so full of manifold interest. He was very keen at the present moment about Metropolitan railways, and was ridiculing the folly of those who feared that the railway projectors were going too fast. "But we shall never get any thanks," he said. "When the thing has been done, and thanks are our due, people will look upon all our work so much as a matter of course that it will never occur to them to think that they owe us anything. They will have forgotten all their cautions, and will take what they get as though it were simply their due. Nothing astonishes me so much as the fear people feel before a thing is done when I join it with their want of surprise or admiration afterwards." In this way even Theodore Burton had resumed his terms of intimacy with Harry Clavering.

Harry had told both Cecilia and Florence of his intended visit to Bolton Street, and they had all become very confidential on the subject. In most such cases we may suppose that a man does not say much to one woman of the love which another woman has acknowledged for himself. Nor was Harry Clavering at all disposed to make any such boast. But in this case, Lady Ongar herself had told everything to Mrs. Burton. She had declared her passion, and had declared also her intention of making Harry her husband if he would take her. Everything was known, and there was no possibility of sparing Lady Ongar's name.

"If I had been her I would not have asked for such a meeting," Cecilia said. The three were at this time sitting together, for Mr. Burton rarely joined them in their conversation.

"I don't know," said Florence. "I do not see why she and Harry should not remain as friends."

"They might be friends without meeting now," said Cecilia.

"Hardly. If the awkwardness were not got over at once it would never be got over. I almost think she is right, though if I was her I should long to have it over." That was Florence's judgment in the matter. Harry sat between them, like a sheep as he was, very meekly,—not without some enjoyment of his sheepdom, but still feeling that he was a sheep. At half-past eight he started up, having already been told that a cab was waiting for him at the door. He pressed Cecilia's hand as he went, indicating his feeling that he had before him an affair of some magnitude, and then of course had a word or two to say to Florence in private on the landing. Oh, those delicious private words the need for which comes so often during those short halcyon days of one's lifetime! They were so pleasant that Harry would fain have returned to repeat them

after he was seated in his cab; but the inevitable wheels carried him onwards with cruel velocity, and he was in Bolton Street before the minutes had sufficed for him to collect his thoughts.

Lady Ongar, when he entered the room, was sitting in her accustomed chair, near a little work-table which she always used, and did not rise to meet him. It was a pretty chair, soft and easy, made with a back for lounging, but with no arms to impede the circles of a lady's hoop. Harry knew the chair well and had spoken of its graceful comfort in some of his visits to Bolton Street. She was seated there when he entered; and though he was not sufficiently experienced in the secrets of feminine attire to know at once that she had dressed herself with care, he did perceive that she was very charming, not only by force of her own beauty, but by the aid also of her dress. And yet she was in deep mourning,—in the deepest mourning; nor was there anything about her of which complaint might fairly be made by those who do complain on such subjects. Her dress was high round her neck, and the cap on her head was indisputably a widow's cap; but enough of her brown hair was to be seen to tell of its rich loveliness; and the black dress was so made as to show the full perfection of her form; and with it all there was that graceful feminine brightness that care and money can always give, and which will not come without care and money. It might be well, she had thought, to surrender her income, and become poor and dowdy hereafter, but there could be no reason why Harry Clavering should not be made to know all that he had lost.

"Well, Harry," she said, as he stepped up to her and took her offered hand. "I am glad that you have come that I may congratulate you. Better late than never; eh, Harry?"

How was he to answer her when she spoke to him in this strain? "I hope it is not too late," he said, hardly knowing what the words were which were coming from his mouth.

"Nay; that is for you to say. I can do it heartily, Harry, if you mean that. And why not? Why should I not wish you happy? I have always liked you,—have always wished for you happiness. You believe that I am sincere when I congratulate you;—do you not?"

"Oh, yes; you are always sincere."

"I have always been so to you. As to any sincerity beyond that we need say nothing now. I have always been your good friend,—to the best of my ability. Ah, Harry; you do not know how much I have thought of your welfare; how much I do think of it. But never mind that. Tell me something now of this Florence Burton of yours. Is she tall?" I believe that Lady Ongar, when she asked this question, knew well that Florence was short of stature.

"No; she is not tall," said Harry.

"What,—a little beauty? Upon the whole I think I agree with your taste. The most lovely women that I have ever seen have been small, bright, and perfect in their proportions. It is very rare that a tall woman

has a perfect figure." Julia's own figure was quite perfect. "Do you remember Constance Vane? Nothing ever exceeded her beauty." Now Constance Vane,—she at least who had in those days been Constance Vane, but who now was the stout mother of two or three children,—had been a waxen doll of a girl, whom Harry had known, but had neither liked nor admired. But she was highly bred, and belonged to the cream of English fashion; she had possessed a complexion as pure in its tints as are the interior leaves of a blush rose,—and she had never had a thought in her head, and hardly ever a word on her lips. She and Florence Burton were as poles asunder in their differences. Harry felt this at once, and had an indistinct notion that Lady Ongar was as well aware of the fact as was he himself. "She is not a bit like Constance Vane," he said.

"Then what is she like? If she is more beautiful than what Miss Vane used to be, she must be lovely indeed."

"She has no pretensions of that kind," said Harry, almost sulkily.

"I have heard that she was so very beautiful!" Lady Ongar had never heard a word about Florence's beauty;—not a word. She knew nothing personally of Florence beyond what Mrs. Burton had told her. But who will not forgive her the little deceit that was necessary to her little revenge?

"I don't know how to describe her," said Harry. "I hope the time may soon come when you will see her, and be able to judge for yourself."

"I hope so too. It shall not be my fault if I do not like her."

"I do not think you can fail to like her. She is very clever, and that will go further with you than mere beauty. Not but what I think her very,—very pretty."

"Ah,—I understand. She reads a great deal, and that sort of thing. Yes; that is very nice. But I shouldn't have thought that that would have taken you. You used not to care much for talent and learning,—not in women I mean."

"I don't know about that," said Harry, looking very foolish.

"But a contrast is what you men always like. Of course I ought not to say that, but you will know of what I am thinking. A clever, highly-educated woman like Miss Burton will be a much better companion to you than I could have been. You see I am very frank, Harry." She wished to make him talk freely about himself, his future days, and his past days, while he was simply anxious to say on these subjects as little as possible. Poor woman! The excitement of having a passion which she might indulge was over with her,—at any rate for the present. She had played her game and had lost wofully; but before she retired altogether from the gaming-table she could not keep herself from longing for a last throw of the dice.

"These things, I fear, go very much by chance," said Harry.

"You do not mean me to suppose that you are taking Miss Burton by chance. That would be as uncomplimentary to her as to yourself."

"Chance, at any rate, has been very good to me in this instance."

"Of that I am sure. Do not suppose that I am doubting that. It is not only the paradise that you have gained, but the pandemonium that you have escaped!" Then she laughed slightly, but the laughter was uneasy, and made her angry with herself. She had especially determined to be at ease during this meeting, and was conscious that any falling off in that respect on her part would put into his hands the power which she was desirous of exercising.

"You are determined to rebuke me, I see," said he. "If you choose to do so, I am prepared to bear it. My defence, if I have a defence, is one that I cannot use."

"And what would be your defence?"

"I have said that I cannot use it."

"As if I did not understand it all! What you mean to say is this,—that when your good stars sent you in the way of Florence Burton, you had been ill-treated by her who would have made your pandemonium for you, and that she therefore,—she who came first and behaved so badly—can have no right to find fault with you in that you have obeyed your good stars and done so well for yourself. That is what you call your defence. It would be perfect, Harry,—perfect, if you had only whispered to me a word of Miss Burton when I first saw you after my return home. It is odd to me that you should not have written to me and told me when I was abroad with my husband. It would have comforted me to have known that the wound which I had given had been cured;—that is, if there was a wound."

"You know that there was a wound."

"At any rate, it was not mortal. But when are such wounds mortal? When are they more than skin-deep?"

"I can say nothing as to that now."

"No, Harry; of course you can say nothing. Why should you be made to say anything? You are fortunate and happy, and have all that you want. I have nothing that I want."

There was a reality in the tone of sorrow in which this was spoken which melted him at once;—and the more so in that there was so much in her grief which could not but be flattering to his vanity. "Do not say that, Lady Ongar," he exclaimed.

"But I do say it. What have I got in the world that is worth having? My possessions are ever so many thousands a year,—and a damaged name."

"I deny that. I deny it altogether. I do not think that there is one who knows of your story who believes ill of you."

"I could tell you of one, Harry, who thinks very ill of me;—nay, of two; and they are both in this room. Do you remember how you used to teach me that terribly conceited bit of Latin,—Nil conscire sibi? Do you suppose that I can boast that I never grow pale as I think of my own fault? I am thinking of it always, and my heart is ever becoming paler

and paler. And as to the treatment of others;—I wish I could make you know what I suffered when I was fool enough to go to that place in Surrey. The coachman who drives me no doubt thinks that I poisoned my husband, and the servant who let you in just now supposes me to be an abandoned woman because you are here."

"You will be angry with me, perhaps, if I say that these feelings are morbid and will die away. They show the weakness which has come from the ill-usage you have suffered."

"You are right in part, no doubt. I shall become hardened to it all, and shall fall into some endurable mode of life in time. But I can look forward to nothing. What future have I? Was there ever any one so utterly friendless as I am? Your kind cousin has done that for me;—and yet he came here to me the other day, smiling and talking as though he were sure that I should be delighted by his condescension. I do not think that he will ever come again."

"I did not know you had seen him."

"Yes; I saw him;—but I did not find much relief from his visit. We won't mind that, however. We can talk about something better than Hugh Clavering during the few minutes that we have together;—can we not? And so Miss Burton is very learned and very clever?"

"I did not quite say that."

"But I know she is. What a comfort that will be to you! I am not clever, and I never should have become learned. Oh, dear! I had but one merit, Harry;—I was fond of you."

"And how did you show it?" He did not speak these words, because he would not triumph over her, nor was he willing to express that regret on his own part which these words would have implied;—but it was impossible for him to avoid a thought of them. He remained silent, therefore, taking up some toy from the table into his hands, as though that would occupy his attention.

"But what a fool I am to talk of it;—am I not? And I am worse than a fool. I was thinking of you when I stood up in church to be married;—thinking of that offer of your little savings. I used to think of you at every harsh word that I endured;—of your modes of life when I sat through those terrible nights by that poor creature's bed;—of you when I knew that the last day was coming. I thought of you always, Harry, when I counted up my gains. I never count them up now. Ah, how I thought of you when I came to this house in the carriage which you had provided for me, when I had left you at the station almost without speaking a word to you! I should have been more gracious had I not had you in my thoughts throughout my whole journey home from Florence. And after that I had some comfort in believing that the price of my shame might make you rich without shame. Oh, Harry, I have been disappointed! You will never understand what I felt when first that evil woman told me of Miss Burton."

"Oh, Julia, what am I to say?"

"You can say nothing; but I wonder that you had not told me."

"How could I tell you? Would it not have seemed that I was vain enough to have thought of putting you on your guard."

"And why not? But never mind. Do not suppose that I am rebuking you. As I said in my letter, we are quits now, and there is no place for scolding on either side. We are quits now; but I am punished and you are rewarded."

Of course he could not answer this. Of course he was hard pressed for words. Of course he could neither acknowledge that he had been rewarded, nor assert that a share of the punishment of which she spoke had fallen upon him also. This was the revenge with which she had intended to attack him. That she should think that he had in truth been punished and not rewarded, was very natural. Had he been less quick in forgetting her after her marriage, he would have had his reward without any punishment. If such were her thoughts, who shall quarrel with her on that account?

"I have been very frank with you," she continued. "Indeed, why should I not be so? People talk of a lady's secret, but my secret has been no secret from you? That I was made to tell it under,—under,—what I will call an error,—was your fault; and it is that that has made us quits."

"I know that I have behaved badly to you."

"But then unfortunately you know also that I had deserved bad treatment. Well; we will say no more about it. I have been very candid with you, but then I have injured no one by my candour. You have not said a word to me in reply; but then your tongue is tied by your duty to Miss Burton,—your duty and your love together, of course. It is all as it should be, and now I will have done. When are you to be married, Harry?"

"No time has been fixed. I am a very poor man, you know."

"Alas, alas,—yes. When mischief is done, how badly all the things turn out. You are poor and I am rich, and yet we cannot help each other."

"I fear not."

"Unless I could adopt Miss Burton, and be a sort of mother to her. You would shrink, however, from any such guardianship on my part. But you are clever, Harry, and can work when you please, and will make your way. If Miss Burton keeps you waiting now by any prudent fear on her part, I shall not think so well of her as I am inclined to do."

"The Burtons are all prudent people."

"Tell her, from me, with my love,—not to be too prudent. I thought to be prudent, and see what has come of it."

"I will tell her what you say."

"Do, please; and, Harry, look here. Will she accept a little present from me? You, at any rate, for my sake, will ask her to do so. Give her this,—it is only a trifle,"—and she put her hand on a small jeweller's

box, which was close to her arm upon the table, "and tell her,—of course she knows all our story, Harry?"

"Yes; she knows it all."

"Tell her that she whom you have rejected sends it with her kindest wishes to her whom you have taken."

"No; I will not tell her that."

"Why not? It is all true. I have not poisoned the little ring, as the ladies would have done some centuries since. They were grander then than we are now, and perhaps hardly worse, though more cruel. You will bid her take it,—will you not?"

"I am sure she will take it without bidding on my part."

"And tell her not to write me any thanks. She and I will both understand that that had better be omitted. If, when I shall see her at some future time as your wife, it shall be on her finger, I shall know that I am thanked." Then Harry rose to go. "I did not mean by that to turn you out, but perhaps it may be as well. I have no more to say,—and as for you, you cannot but wish that the penance should be over." Then he pressed her hand, and with some muttered farewell, bade her adieu. Again she did not rise from her chair, but nodding at him with a sweet smile, let him go without another word.

CHAPTER XLIV.

Shewing what Happened off Heligoland.

During the six weeks after this, Harry Clavering settled down to his work at the chambers in the Adelphi with exemplary diligence. Florence, having remained a fortnight in town after Harry's return to the sheepfold, and having accepted Lady Ongar's present,—not without a long and anxious consultation with her sister-in-law on the subject,—had returned in fully restored happiness to Stratton. Mrs. Burton was at Ramsgate with the children, and Mr. Burton was in Russia with reference to a line of railway which was being projected from Moscow to Astracan. It was now September, and Harry, in his letters home, declared that he was the only person left in London. It was hard upon him,—much harder than it was upon the Wallikers and other young men whom fate retained in town, for Harry was a man given to shooting,—a man accustomed to pass the autumnal months in a country house. And then, if things had chanced to go one way instead of another, he would have had his own shooting down at Ongar Park with his own friends,—admiring him at his heels; or if not so this year, he would have been shooting elsewhere with the prospect of these rich joys for years to come. As it was, he had promised to stick to the shop, and was sticking to it manfully. Nor do I think that he allowed his mind to revert to those privileges which might have been his, at all more frequently than any of my readers would have done

in his place. He was sticking to the shop, and though he greatly disliked the hot desolation of London in those days, being absolutely afraid to frequent his club at such a period of the year,—and though he hated Walliker mortally,—he was fully resolved to go on with his work. Who could tell what might be his fate? Perhaps in another ten years he might be carrying that Russian railway on through the deserts of Siberia. Then there came to him suddenly tidings which disturbed all his resolutions, and changed the whole current of his life.

At first there came a telegram to him from the country, desiring him to go down at once to Clavering, but not giving him any reason. Added to the message were these words,—"We are all well at the parsonage;"—words evidently added in thoughtfulness. But before he had left the office there came to him there a young man from the bank at which his cousin Hugh kept his account, telling him the tidings to which the telegram no doubt referred. Jack Stuart's boat had been lost, and his two cousins had gone to their graves beneath the sea! The master of the boat, and Stuart himself, with a boy, had been saved. The other sailors whom they had with them, and the ship's steward, had perished with the Claverings. Stuart, it seemed, had caused tidings of the accident to be sent to the rector of Clavering and to Sir Hugh's bankers. At the bank they had ascertained that their late customer's cousin was in town, and their messenger had thereupon been sent, first to Bloomsbury Square, and from thence to the Adelphi.

Harry had never loved his cousins. The elder he had greatly disliked, and the younger he would have disliked had he not despised him. But not the less on that account was he inexpressibly shocked when he first heard what had happened. The lad said that there could, as he imagined, be no mistake. The message had come, as he believed, from Holland, but of that he was not certain. There could, however, be no doubt about the fact. It distinctly stated that both brothers had perished. Harry had known when he received the message from home, that no train would take him till three in the afternoon, and had therefore remained at the office; but he could not remain now. His head was confused, and he could hardly bring himself to think how this matter would affect himself. When he attempted to explain his absence to an old serious clerk there, he spoke of his own return to the office as certain. He should be back, he supposed, in a week at the furthest. He was thinking then of his promises to Theodore Burton, and had not begun to realize the fact that his whole destiny in life would be changed. He said something, with a long face, of the terrible misfortune which had occurred, but gave no hint that that misfortune would be important in its consequences to himself. It was not till he had reached his lodgings in Bloomsbury Square that he remembered that his own father was now the baronet, and that he was his father's heir. And then for a moment he thought about the property. He believed that it was entailed, but even of that he was not certain. But if it were unentailed, to whom could his cousin have left it? He

endeavoured, however, to expel such thoughts from his mind, as though there was something ungenerous in entertaining them. He tried to think of the widow, but even in doing that he could not tell himself that there was much ground for genuine sorrow. No wife had ever had less joy from her husband's society than Lady Clavering had had from that of Sir Hugh. There was no child to mourn the loss,—no brother, no unmarried sister. Sir Hugh had had friends,—as friendship goes with such men; but Harry could not but doubt whether among them all there would be one who would feel anything like true grief for his loss. And it was the same with Archie. Who in the world would miss Archie Clavering? What man or woman would find the world to be less bright because Archie Clavering was sleeping beneath the waves? Some score of men at his club would talk of poor Clavvy for a few days,—would do so without any pretence at the tenderness of sorrow; and then even of Archie's memory there would be an end. Thinking of all this as he was carried down to Clavering, Harry could not but acknowledge that the loss to the world had not been great; but, even while telling himself this, he would not allow himself to take comfort in the prospect of his heirship. Once, perhaps, he did speculate how Florence should bear her honours as Lady Clavering; but this idea he swept away from his thoughts as quickly as he was able.

The tidings had reached the parsonage very late on the previous night; so late that the rector had been disturbed in his bed to receive them. It was his duty to make known to Lady Clavering the fact that she was a widow, but this he could not do till the next morning. But there was little sleep that night for him or for his wife! He knew well enough that the property was entailed. He felt with sufficient strength what it was to become a baronet at a sudden blow, and to become also the owner of the whole Clavering property. He was not slow to think of the removal to the great house, of the altered prospects of his son, and of the mode of life which would be fitting for himself in future. Before the morning came he had meditated who should be the future rector of Clavering, and had made some calculations as to the expediency of resuming his hunting. Not that he was a heartless man,—or that he rejoiced at what had happened. But a man's ideas of generosity change as he advances in age, and the rector was old enough to tell himself boldly that this thing that had happened could not be to him a cause of much grief. He had never loved his cousins, or pretended to love them. His cousin's wife he did love, after a fashion, but in speaking to his own wife of the way in which this tragedy would affect Hermione, he did not scruple to speak of her widowhood as a period of coming happiness.

"She will be cut to pieces," said Mrs. Clavering. "She was attached to him as earnestly as though he had treated her always well."

"I believe it; but not the less will she feel her release, unconsciously; and her life, which has been very wretched, will gradually become easy to her."

Even Mrs. Clavering could not deny that this would be so, and then

they reverted to matters which more closely concerned themselves. "I suppose Harry will marry at once now," said the mother.

"No doubt;—it is almost a pity; is it not?" The rector,—as we will still call him,—was thinking that Florence was hardly a fitting wife for his son with his altered prospects. Ah, what a grand thing it would have been if the Clavering property and Lady Ongar's jointure could have gone together!

"Not a pity at all," said Mrs. Clavering. "You will find that Florence will make him a very happy man."

"I dare say;—I dare say. Only he would hardly have taken her had this sad accident happened before he saw her. But if she will make him happy that is everything. I have never thought much about money myself. If I find any comfort in these tidings it is for his sake, not for my own. I would sooner remain as I am." This was not altogether untrue, and yet he was thinking of the big house and the hunting.

"What will be done about the living?" It was early in the morning when Mrs. Clavering asked this question. She had thought much about the living during the night. And so had the rector;—but his thoughts had not run in the same direction as hers. He made no immediate answer, and then she went on with her question. "Do you think that you will keep it in your own hands?"

"Well,—no; why should I? I am too idle about it as it is. I should be more so under these altered circumstances."

"I am sure you would do your duty if you resolved to keep it, but I don't see why you should do so."

"Clavering is a great deal better than Humbleton," said the rector. Humbleton was the name of the parish held by Mr. Fielding, his son-in-law.

But the idea here put forward did not suit the idea which was running in Mrs. Clavering's mind. "Edward and Mary are very well off," she said. "His own property is considerable, and I don't think they want anything. Besides, he would hardly like to give up a family living."

"I might ask him at any rate."

"I was thinking of Mr. Saul," said Mrs. Clavering boldly.

"Of Mr. Saul!" The image of Mr. Saul, as rector of Clavering, perplexed the new baronet egregiously.

"Well;—yes. He is an excellent clergyman. No one can deny that." Then there was silence between them for a few moments. "In that case he and Fanny would of course marry. It is no good concealing the fact that she is very fond of him."

"Upon my word I can't understand it," said the rector.

"It is so,—and as to the excellence of his character there can be no doubt." To this the rector made no answer, but went away into his dressing-room, that he might prepare himself for his walk across the park to the great house. While they were discussing who should be the future incumbent of the living, Lady Clavering was still sleeping in unconscious-

ness of her fate. Mr. Clavering greatly dreaded the task which was before him, and had made a little attempt to induce his wife to take the office upon herself; but she had explained to him that it would be more seemly that he should be the bearer of the tidings. "It would seem that you were wanting in affection for her if you do not go yourself," his wife had said to him. That the rector of Clavering was master of himself and of his own actions, no one who knew the family ever denied, but the instances in which he declined to follow his wife's advice were not many.

It was about eight o'clock when he went across the park. He had already sent a messenger with a note to beg that Lady Clavering would be up to receive him. As he would come very early, he had said, perhaps she would see him in her own room. The poor lady had, of course, been greatly frightened by this announcement; but this fear had been good for her, as they had well understood at the rectory; the blow, dreadfully sudden as it must still be, would be somewhat less sudden under this preparation. When Mr. Clavering reached the house the servant was in waiting to show him upstairs to the sitting-room which Lady Clavering usually occupied when alone. She had been there waiting for him for the last half-hour.

"Mr. Clavering, what is it?" she exclaimed, as he entered with tidings of death written on his visage. "In the name of heaven, what is it? You have something to tell me of Hugh."

"Dear Hermione," he said, taking her by the hand.

"What is it? Tell me at once. Is he still alive?"

The rector still held her by the hand, but spoke no word. He had been trying as he came across the park to arrange the words in which he should tell his tale, but now it was told without any speech on his part.

"He is dead. Why do you not speak? Why are you so cruel?"

"Dearest Hermione, what am I to say to comfort you?"

What he might say after this was of little moment, for she had fainted. He rang the bell, and then, when the servants were there,—the old housekeeper and Lady Clavering's maid,—he told to them, rather than to her, what had been their master's fate.

"And Captain Archie?" asked the housekeeper.

The rector shook his head, and the housekeeper knew that the rector was now the baronet. Then they took the poor widow to her own room, —should I not rather call her, as I may venture to speak the truth, the enfranchised slave than the poor widow?—and the rector, taking up his hat, promised that he would send his wife across to their mistress. His morning's task had been painful, but it had been easily accomplished. As he walked home among the oaks of Clavering Park, he told himself, no doubt, that they were now all his own.

That day at the rectory was very sombre, if it was not actually sad. The greater part of the morning Mrs. Clavering passed with the widow, and sitting near her sofa she wrote sundry letters to those who were connected

with the family. The longest of these was to Lady Ongar, who was now at Tenby; and in that there was a pressing request from Hermione that her sister would come to her at Clavering Park. "Tell her," said Lady Clavering, "that all her anger must be over now." But Mrs. Clavering said nothing of Julia's anger. She merely urged the request that Julia would come to her sister. "She will be sure to come," said Mrs. Clavering. "You need have no fear on that head."

"But how can I invite her here, when the house is not my own?"

"Pray do not talk in that way, Hermione. The house will be your own for any time that you may want it. Your husband's relations are your dear friends; are they not?" But this allusion to her husband brought her to another fit of hysterical tears. "Both of them gone," she said. "Both of them gone!" Mrs. Clavering knew well that she was not alluding to the two brothers, but to her husband and to her baby. Of poor Archie no one had said a word,—beyond that one word spoken by the housekeeper. For her, it had been necessary that she should know who was now the master of Clavering Park.

Twice in the day Mrs. Clavering went over to the big house, and on her second return, late in the evening, she found her son. When she arrived, there had already been some few words on the subject between him and his father.

"You have heard of it, Harry?"

"Yes; a clerk came to me from the banker's."

"Dreadful; is it not? Quite terrible to think of!"

"Indeed it is, sir. I was never so shocked in my life."

"He would go in that cursed boat, though I know that he was advised against it," said the father, holding up his hands and shaking his head. "And now both of them gone;—both gone at once!"

"How does she bear it?"

"Your mother is with her now. When I went in the morning,—I had written a line, and she expected bad news,—she fainted. Of course, I could do nothing. I can hardly say that I told her. She asked the question, and then saw by my face that her fears were well-founded. Upon my word, I was glad when she did faint;—it was the best thing for her."

"It must have been very painful for you."

"Terrible;—terrible;" and the rector shook his head. "It will make a great difference in your prospects, Harry."

"And in your life, sir! So to say, you are as young a man as myself."

"Am I? I believe I was about as young when you were born. But I don't think at all about myself in this matter. I am too old to care to change my manner of living. It won't affect me very much. Indeed, I hardly know yet how it may affect me. Your mother thinks I ought to give up the living. If you were in orders, Harry——"

"I'm very glad, sir, that I am not."

"I suppose so. And there is no need; certainly, there is no need.

You will be able to do pretty nearly what you like about the property. I shall not care to interfere."

"Yes, you will, sir. It feels strange now, but you will soon get used to it. I wonder whether he left a will."

"It can't make any difference to you, you know. Every acre of the property is entailed. She has her settlement. Eight hundred a year, I think it is. She'll not be a rich woman like her sister. I wonder where she'll live. As far as that goes, she might stay at the house, if she likes it. I'm sure your mother wouldn't object."

Harry on this occasion asked no question about the living, but he also had thought of that. He knew well that his mother would befriend Mr. Saul, and he knew also that his father would ultimately take his mother's advice. As regarded himself he had no personal objection to Mr. Saul, though he could not understand how his sister should feel any strong regard for such a man.

Edward Fielding would make a better neighbour at the parsonage, and then he thought whether an exchange might not be made. After that, and before his mother's return from the great house, he took a stroll through the park with Fanny. Fanny altogether declined to discuss any of the family prospects, as they were affected by the accident which had happened. To her mind the tragedy was so terrible that she could only feel its tragic element. No doubt she had her own thoughts about Mr. Saul as connected with it. "What would he think of this sudden death of the two brothers? How would he feel it? If she could be allowed to talk to him on the matter, what would he say of their fate here and hereafter? Would he go to the great house to offer the consolations of religion to the widow?" Of all this she thought much; but no picture of Mr. Saul as rector of Clavering, or of herself as mistress in her mother's house, presented itself to her mind. Harry found her to be a dull companion, and he, perhaps, consoled himself with some personal attention to the oak trees. The trees loomed larger upon him now than they had ever done before.

On the third day, the rector went up to London, leaving Harry at the parsonage. It was necessary that lawyers should be visited, and that such facts as to the loss should be proved as were capable of proof. There was no doubt at all as to the fate of Sir Hugh and his brother. The escape of Mr. Stuart and of two of those employed by him prevented the possibility of a doubt. The vessel had been caught in a gale off Heligoland, and had foundered. They had all striven to get into the yacht's boat, but those who had succeeded in doing so had gone down. The master of the yacht had seen the two brothers perish. Those who were saved had been picked up off the spars to which they had attached themselves. There was no doubt in the way of the new baronet, and no difficulty.

Nor was there any will made either by Sir Hugh or his brother. Poor Archie had nothing to leave, and that he should have left no will was not

remarkable. But neither had there been much in the power of Sir Hugh to bequeath, nor was there any great cause for a will on his part. Had he left a son, his son would have inherited everything. He had, however, died childless, and his wife was provided for by her settlement. On his marriage he had made the amount settled as small as his wife's friends would accept, and no one who knew the man expected that he would increase the amount after his death. Having been in town for three days the rector returned,—being then in full possession of the title; but this he did not assume till after the second Sunday from the date of the telegram which brought the news.

In the meantime Harry had written to Florence, to whom the tidings were as important as to any one concerned. She had left London very triumphant,—quite confident that she had nothing now to fear from Lady Ongar or from any other living woman, having not only forgiven Harry his sins, but having succeeded also in persuading herself that there had been no sins to forgive,—having quarrelled with her brother half-a-dozen times in that he would not accept her arguments on this matter. He too would forgive Harry,—had forgiven him; was quite ready to omit all further remark on the matter; but could not bring himself when urged by Florence to admit that her Apollo had been altogether godlike. Florence had thus left London in triumph, but she had gone with a conviction that she and Harry must remain apart for some indefinite time, which probably must be measured by years. "Let us see at the end of two years," she had said; and Harry had been forced to be content. But how would it be with her now?

Harry of course began his letter by telling her of the catastrophe, with the usual amount of epithets. It was very terrible, awful, shocking,—the saddest thing that had ever happened! The poor widow was in a desperate state, and all the Claverings were nearly beside themselves. But when this had been duly said, he allowed himself to go into their own home question. "I cannot fail," he wrote, "to think of this chiefly as it concerns you,—or rather, as it concerns myself in reference to you. I suppose I shall leave the business now. Indeed, my father seems to think that my remaining there would be absurd, and my mother agrees with him. As I am the only son, the property will enable me to live easily without a profession. When I say 'me,' of course you will understand what 'me' means. The better part of 'me' is so prudent, that I know she will not accept this view of things without ever so much consideration, and, therefore, she must come to Clavering to hear it discussed by the elders. For myself, I cannot bear to think that I should take delight in the results of this dreadful misfortune; but how am I to keep myself from being made happy by the feeling that we may now be married without further delay? After all that has passed, nothing will make me happy or even permanently comfortable till I can call you fairly my own. My mother has already said that she hopes you will come here in about a fortnight,—that is, as soon as we shall have fallen tolerably into our

places again; but she will write herself before that time. I have written a line to your brother addressed to the office, which I suppose will find him. I have written also to Cecilia. Your brother, no doubt, will hear the news first through the French newspapers." Then he said a little, but a very little, as to their future modes of life, just intimating to her, and no more, that her destiny might probably call upon her to be the mother of a future baronet.

The news had reached Clavering on a Saturday. On the following Sunday every one in the parish had no doubt heard of it, but nothing on the subject was said in church on that day. The rector remained at home during the morning, and the whole service was performed by Mr. Saul. But on the second Sunday Mr. Fielding had come over from Humbleton, and he preached a sermon on the loss which the parish had sustained in the sudden death of the two brothers. It is, perhaps, well that such sermons should be preached. The inhabitants of Clavering would have felt that their late lords had been treated like dogs, had no word been said of them in the house of God. The nature of their fate had forbidden even the common ceremony of a burial service. It is well that some respect should be maintained from the low in station towards those who are high, even when no respect has been deserved. And, for the widow's sake, it was well that some notice should be taken in Clavering of this death of the head of the Claverings. But I should not myself have liked the duty of preaching an eulogistic sermon on the lives and death of Hugh Clavering and his brother Archie. What had either of them ever done to merit a good word from any man, or to earn the love of any woman? That Sir Hugh had been loved by his wife had come from the nature of the woman, not at all from the qualities of the man. Both of the brothers had lived on the unexpressed theory of consuming, for the benefit of their own backs and their own bellies, the greatest possible amount of those good things which fortune might put in their way. I doubt whether either of them had ever contributed anything willingly to the comfort or happiness of any human being. Hugh, being powerful by nature and having a strong will, had tyrannized over all those who were subject to him. Archie, not gifted as was his brother, had been milder, softer, and less actively hateful; but his principle of action had been the same. Everything for himself! Was it not well that two such men should be consigned to the fishes, and that the world,—especially the Clavering world, and that poor widow, who now felt herself to be so inexpressibly wretched when her period of comfort was in truth only commencing,—was it not well that the world and Clavering should be well quit of them? That idea is the one which one would naturally have felt inclined to put into one's sermon on such an occasion; and then to sing some song of rejoicing;—either to do that, or to leave the matter alone.

But not so are such sermons preached; and not after that fashion did the young clergyman who had married the first-cousin of these Claverings buckle himself to the subject. He indeed had, I think, but little difficulty,

either inwardly with his conscience, or outwardly with his subject. He possessed the power of a pleasant, easy flow of words, and of producing tears, if not from other eyes, at any rate from his own. He drew a picture of the little ship amidst the storm, and of God's hand as it moved in its anger upon the waters; but of the cause of that divine wrath and its direction he said nothing. Then, of the suddenness of death and its awfulness he said much, not insisting as he did so on the necessity of repentance for salvation, as far as those two poor sinners were concerned. No, indeed;—how could any preacher have done that? But he improved the occasion by telling those around him that they should so live as to be ever ready for the hand of death. If that were possible, where then indeed would be the victory of the grave? And at last he came to the master and lord whom they had lost. Even here there was no difficulty for him. The heir had gone first, and then the father and his brother. Who among them would not pity the bereaved mother and the widow? Who among them would not remember with affection the babe whom they had seen at that font, and with respect the landlord under whose rule they had lived? How pleasant it must be to ask those questions which no one can rise to answer! Farmer Gubbins as he sat by, listening with what power of attention had been vouchsafed to him, felt himself to be somewhat moved, but soon released himself from the task, and allowed his mind to run away into other ideas. The rector was a kindly man and a generous. The rector would allow him to enclose that little bit of common land, that was to be taken in, without adding anything to his rent. The rector would be there on audit days, and things would be very pleasant. Farmer Gubbins, when the slight murmuring gurgle of the preacher's tears was heard, shook his own head by way of a responsive wail; but at that moment he was congratulating himself on the coming comfort of the new reign. Mr. Fielding, however, got great credit for his sermon; and it did, probably, more good than harm,—unless, indeed, we should take into our calculation, in giving our award on this subject, the permanent utility of all truth, and the permanent injury of all falsehood.

Mr. Fielding remained at the parsonage during the greater part of the following week, and then there took place a great deal of family conversation, respecting the future incumbent of the living. At these family conclaves, however, Fanny was not asked to be present. Mrs. Clavering, who knew well how to do such work, was gradually bringing her husband round to endure the name of Mr. Saul. Twenty times had he asserted that he could not understand it; but, whether or no such understanding might ever be possible, he was beginning to recognize it as true that the thing not understood was a fact. His daughter Fanny was positively in love with Mr. Saul, and that to such an extent that her mother believed her happiness to be involved in it. "I can't understand it;—upon my word I can't," said the rector for the last time, and then he gave way. There was now the means of giving an ample provision for the lovers, and that provision was to be given.

Mr. Fielding shook his head,—not in this instance as to Fanny's predilection for Mr. Saul; though in discussing that matter with his own wife he had shaken his head very often; but he shook it now with reference to the proposed change. He was very well where he was. And although Clavering was better than Humbleton, it was not so much better as to induce him to throw his own family over by proposing to send Mr. Saul among them. Mr. Saul was an excellent clergyman, but perhaps his uncle, who had given him his living, might not like Mr. Saul. Thus it was decided in these conclaves that Mr. Saul was to be the future rector of Clavering.

In the meantime poor Fanny moped,—wretched in her solitude, anticipating no such glorious joys as her mother was preparing for her; and Mr. Saul was preparing with energy for his departure into foreign parts.

CHAPTER XLV.

Is She Mad?

Lady Ongar was at Tenby when she received Mrs. Clavering's letter, and had not heard of the fate of her brother-in-law till the news reached her in that way. She had gone down to a lodging at Tenby with no attendant but one maid, and was preparing herself for the great surrender of her property which she meditated. Hitherto she had heard nothing from the Courtons or their lawyer as to the offer she had made about Ongar Park; but the time had been short, and lawyers' work, as she knew, was never done in a hurry. She had gone to Tenby, flying, in truth, from the loneliness of London to the loneliness of the sea-shore,—but expecting she knew not what comfort from the change. She would take with her no carriage, and there would, as she thought, be excitement even in that. She would take long walks by herself;—she would read;—nay, if possible, she would study and bring herself to some habits of industry. Hitherto she had failed in everything, but now she would try if some mode of success might not be open to her. She would ascertain, too, on what smallest sum she could live respectably and without penury, and would keep only so much out of Lord Ongar's wealth.

But hitherto her life at Tenby had not been successful. Solitary days were longer there even than they had been in London. People stared at her more; and, though she did not own it to herself, she missed greatly the comforts of her London house. As for reading, I doubt whether she did much better by the seaside than she had done in the town. Men and women say that they will read, and think so,—those, I mean, who have acquired no habit of reading,—believing the work to be, of all works, the easiest. It may be work, they think, but of all works it must be the easiest of achievement. Given the absolute faculty of reading, the task of

going through the pages of a book must be, of all tasks, the most certainly within the grasp of the man or woman who attempts it! Alas, no;—if the habit be not there, of all tasks it is the most difficult. If a man have not acquired the habit of reading till he be old, he shall sooner in his old age learn to make shoes than learn the adequate use of a book. And worse again;—under such circumstances the making of shoes shall be more pleasant to him than the reading of a book. Let those who are not old,—who are still young, ponder this well. Lady Ongar, indeed, was not old, by no means too old to clothe herself in new habits. But even she was old enough to find that the doing so was a matter of much difficulty. She had her books around her; but, in spite of her books, she was sadly in want of some excitement when the letter from Clavering came to her relief.

It was indeed a relief. Her brother-in-law dead, and he also who had so lately been her suitor! These two men whom she had so lately seen in lusty health,—proud with all the pride of outward life,—had both, by a stroke of the winds, been turned into nothing. A terrible retribution had fallen upon her enemy,—for as her enemy she had ever regarded Hugh Clavering since her husband's death. She took no joy in this retribution. There was no feeling of triumph at her heart in that he had perished. She did not tell herself that she was glad,—either for her own sake or for her sister's. But mingled with the awe she felt there was a something of unexpressed and inexpressible relief. Her present life was very grievous to her,—and now had occurred that which would open to her new hopes and a new mode of living. Her brother-in-law had oppressed her by his very existence, and now he was gone. Had she had no brother-in-law who ought to have welcomed her, her return to England would not have been terrible to her as it had been. Her sister would be now restored to her, and her solitude would probably be at an end. And then the very excitement occasioned by the news was salutary to her. She was, in truth, shocked. As she said to her maid, she felt it to be very dreadful. But, nevertheless, the day on which she received those tidings was less wearisome to her than any other of the days that she had passed at Tenby.

Poor Archie! Some feeling of a tear, some half-formed drop that was almost a tear, came to her eye as she thought of his fate. How foolish he had always been, how unintelligent, how deficient in all those qualities which recommend men to women! But the very memory of his deficiencies created something like a tenderness in his favour. Hugh was disagreeable, nay hateful, by reason of the power which he possessed; whereas Archie was not hateful at all, and was disagreeable simply because nature had been a niggard to him. And then he had professed himself to be her lover. There had not been much in this; for he had come, of course, for her money; but even when that is the case a woman will feel something for the man who has offered to link his lot with hers. Of all those to whom the fate of the two brothers had hitherto been matter of moment, I think that Lady Ongar felt more than any other for the fate of poor Archie.

And how would it affect Harry Clavering? She had desired to give Harry all the good things of the world, thinking that they would become him well,—thinking that they would become him very well as reaching him from her hand. Now he would have them all, but would not have them from her. Now he would have them all, and would share them with Florence Burton. Ah,—if she could have been true to him in those early days,—in those days when she had feared his poverty,—would it not have been well now with her also? The measure of her retribution was come full home to her at last! Sir Harry Clavering! She tried the name and found that it sounded very well. And she thought of the figure of the man and of his nature, and she knew that he would bear it with a becoming manliness. Sir Harry Clavering would be somebody in his county,—would be a husband of whom his wife would be proud as he went about among his tenants and his gamekeepers,—and perhaps on wider and better journeys, looking up the voters of his neighbourhood. Yes; happy would be the wife of Sir Harry Clavering. He was a man who would delight in sharing his house, his hopes, his schemes and councils with his wife. He would find a companion in his wife. He would do honour to his wife, and make much of her. He would like to see her go bravely. And then, if children came, how tender he would be to them! Whether Harry could ever have become a good head to a poor household might be doubtful, but no man had ever been born fitter for the position which he was now called upon to fill. It was thus that Lady Ongar thought of Harry Clavering as she owned to herself that the full measure of her just retribution had come home to her.

Of course she would go at once to Clavering Park. She wrote to her sister saying so, and the next day she started. She started so quickly on her journey that she reached the house not very many hours after her own letter. She was there when the rector started for London, and there when Mr. Fielding preached his sermon; but she did not see Mr. Clavering before he went, nor was she present to hear the eloquence of the younger clergyman. Till after that Sunday the only member of the family she had seen was Mrs. Clavering, who spent some period of every day up at the great house. Mrs. Clavering had not hitherto seen Lady Ongar since her return, and was greatly astonished at the change which so short a time had made. "She is handsomer than ever she was," Mrs. Clavering said to the rector; "but it is that beauty which some women carry into middle life, and not the loveliness of youth." Lady Ongar's manner was cold and stately when first she met Mrs. Clavering. It was on the morning of her marriage when they had last met,—when Julia Brabazon was resolving that she would look like a countess, and that to be a countess should be enough for her happiness. She could not but remember this now, and was unwilling at first to make confession of her failure by any meekness of conduct. It behoved her to be proud, at any rate till she should know how this new Lady Clavering would receive her. And then it was more than probable that this new Lady Clavering knew all that had

taken place between her and Harry. It behoved her, therefore, to hold her head on high.

But before the week was over, Mrs. Clavering,—for we will still call her so,—had broken Lady Ongar's spirit by her kindness; and the poor woman who had so much to bear had brought herself to speak of the weight of her burden. Julia had, on one occasion, called her Lady Clavering, and for the moment this had been allowed to pass without observation. The widowed lady was then present, and no notice of the name was possible. But soon afterwards Mrs. Clavering made her little request on the subject. "I do not quite know what the custom may be," she said, "but do not call me so just yet. It will only be reminding Hermy of her bereavement."

"She is thinking of it always," said Julia.

"No doubt she is; but still the new name would wound her. And, indeed, it perplexes me also. Let it come by-and-by, when we are more settled."

Lady Ongar had truly said that her sister was as yet always thinking of her bereavement. To her now it was as though the husband she had lost had been a paragon among men. She could only remember of him his manliness, his power,—a dignity of presence which he possessed,—and the fact that to her he had been everything. She thought of that last and vain caution which she had given him, when with her hardly permitted last embrace she had besought him to take care of himself. She did not remember now how coldly that embrace had been received, how completely those words had been taken as meaning nothing, how he had left her not only without a sign of affection, but without an attempt to repress the evidences of his indifference. But she did remember that she had had her arm upon his shoulder, and tried to think of that embrace as though it had been sweet to her. And she did remember how she had stood at the window, listening to the sounds of the wheels which took him off, and watching his form as long as her eye could rest upon it. Ah! what falsehoods she told herself now of her love to him, and of his goodness to her; pious falsehoods which would surely tend to bring some comfort to her wounded spirit.

But her sister could hardly bear to hear the praises of Sir Hugh. When she found how it was to be, she resolved that she would bear them,—bear them, and not contradict them; but her struggle in doing so was great, and was almost too much for her.

"He had judged me and condemned me," she said at last, "and therefore, as a matter of course, we were not such friends when we last met as we used to be before my marriage."

"But, Julia, there was much for which you owed him gratitude."

"We will say nothing about that now, Hermy."

"I do not know why your mouth should be closed on such a subject because he has gone. I should have thought that you would be glad to acknowledge his kindness to you. But you were always hard."

"Perhaps I am hard."

"And twice he asked you to come here since you returned,—but you would not come."

"I have come now, Hermy, when I have thought that I might be of use."

"He felt it when you would not come before. I know he did." Lady Ongar could not but think of the way in which he had manifested his feelings on the occasion of his visit to Bolton Street. "I never could understand why you were so bitter."

"I think, dear, we had better not discuss that. I also have had much to bear,—I, as well as you. What you have borne has come in no wise from your own fault."

"No, indeed; I did not want him to go. I would have given anything to keep him at home."

Her sister had not been thinking of the suffering which had come to her from the loss of her husband, but of her former miseries. This, however, she did not explain. "No," Lady Ongar continued to say. "You have nothing for which to blame yourself, whereas I have much,—indeed everything. If we are to remain together, as I hope we may, it will be better for us both that bygones should be bygones."

"Do you mean that I am never to speak of Hugh?"

"No;—I by no means intend that. But I would rather that you should not refer to his feelings towards me. I think he did not quite understand the sort of life that I led while my husband was alive, and that he judged me amiss. Therefore I would have bygones be bygones."

Three or four days after this, when the question of leaving Clavering Park was being mooted, the elder sister started a difficulty as to money matters. An offer had been made to her by Mrs. Clavering to remain at the great house, but this she had declined, alleging that the place would be distasteful to her after her husband's death. She, poor soul, did not allege that it had been made distasteful to her for ever by the solitude which she had endured there during her husband's lifetime! She would go away somewhere, and live as best she might upon her jointure. It was not very much, but it would be sufficient. She did not see, she said, how she could live with her sister, because she did not wish to be dependent. Julia, of course, would live in a style to which she could make no pretence.

Mrs. Clavering, who was present,—as was also Lady Ongar,—declared that she saw no such difficulty. "Sisters together," she said, "need hardly think of a difference in such matters."

Then it was that Lady Ongar first spoke to either of them of her half-formed resolution about her money, and then too, for the first time, did she come down altogether from that high horse on which she had been, as it were, compelled to mount herself while in Mrs. Clavering's presence. "I think I must explain," said she, "something of what I

mean to do,—about my money that is. I do not think that there will be much difference between me and Hermy in that respect."

"That is nonsense," said her sister, fretfully.

"There will be a difference in income certainly," said Mrs. Clavering, "but I do not see that that need create any uncomfortable feeling."

"Only one doesn't like to be dependent," said Hermione.

"You shall not be asked to give up any of your independence," said Julia, with a smile,—a melancholy smile, that gave but little sign of pleasantness within. Then on a sudden her face became stern and hard. "The fact is," she said, "I do not intend to keep Lord Ongar's money."

"Not to keep your income!" said Hermione.

"No;—I will give it back to them,—or at least the greater part of it. Why should I keep it?"

"It is your own," said Mrs. Clavering.

"Yes; legally it is my own. I know that. And when there was some question whether it should not be disputed I would have fought for it to the last shilling. Somebody,—I suppose it was the lawyer,—wanted to keep from me the place in Surrey. I told them then that I would not abandon my right to an inch of it. But they yielded,—and now I have given them back the house."

"You have given it back!" said her sister.

"Yes;—I have said they may have it. It is of no use to me. I hate the place."

"You have been very generous," said Mrs. Clavering.

"But that will not affect your income," said Hermione.

"No;—that would not affect my income." Then she paused, not knowing how to go on with the story of her purpose.

"If I may say so, Lady Ongar," said Mrs. Clavering, "I would not if I were you, take any steps in so important a matter without advice."

"Who is there that can advise me? Of course the lawyer tells me that I ought to keep it all. It is his business to give such advice as that. But what does he know of what I feel? How can he understand me? How, indeed, can I expect that any one shall understand me?"

"But it is possible that people should misunderstand you," said Mrs. Clavering.

"Exactly. That is just what he says. But, Mrs. Clavering, I care nothing for that. I care nothing for what anybody says or thinks. What is it to me what they say?"

"I should have thought it was everything," said her sister.

"No,—it is nothing;—nothing at all." Then she was again silent, and was unable to express herself. She could not bring herself to declare in words that self-condemnation of her own conduct which was now weighing so heavily upon her. It was not that she wished to keep back her own feelings, either from her sister or from Mrs. Clavering; but that the words in which to express them were wanting to her.

"And have they accepted the house?" Mrs. Clavering asked.

"They must accept it. What else can they do? They cannot make me call it mine if I do not choose. If I refuse to take the income which Mr. Courton's lawyer pays in to my bankers', they cannot compel me to have it."

"But you are not going to give that up too?" said her sister.

"I am. I will not have his money,—not more than enough to keep me from being a scandal to his family. I will not have it. It is a curse to me, and has been from the first. What right have I to all that money, because,—because,—because—" She could not finish her sentence, but turned away from them, and walked by herself to the window.

Lady Clavering looked at Mrs. Clavering as though she thought that her sister was mad. "Do you understand her?" said Lady Clavering in a whisper.

"I think I do," said the other. "I think I know what is passing in her mind." Then she followed Lady Ongar across the room, and taking her gently by the arm tried to comfort her,—to comfort her, and to argue with her as to the rashness of that which she proposed to do. She endeavoured to explain to the poor woman how it was that she should at this moment be wretched, and anxious to do that which, if done, would put it out of her power afterwards to make herself useful in the world. It shocked the prudence of Mrs. Clavering,—this idea of abandoning money, the possession of which was questioned by no one. "They do not want it, Lady Ongar," she said.

"That has nothing to do with it," answered the other.

"And nobody has any suspicion but what it is honourably and fairly your own."

"But does anybody ever think how I got it?" said Lady Ongar, turning sharply round upon Mrs. Clavering. "You,—you,—you,—do you dare to tell me what you think of the way in which it became mine? Could you bear it, if it had become yours after such a fashion? I cannot bear it, and I will not." She was now speaking with so much violence that her sister was awed into silence, and Mrs. Clavering herself found a difficulty in answering her.

"Whatever may have been the past," said she, "the question now is how to do the best for the future."

"I had hoped," continued Lady Ongar without noticing what was said to her, "I had hoped to make everything straight by giving his money to another. You know to whom I mean, and so does Hermy. I thought, when I returned, that bad as I had been I might still do some good in the world. But it is as they tell us in the sermons. One cannot make good come out of evil. I have done evil, and nothing but evil has come from the evil which I have done. Nothing but evil will come from it. As for being useful in the world,—I know of what use I am! When women hear how wretched I have been they will be unwilling to sell themselves as I did." Then she made her way to the door, and left the room, going out with quiet steps, and closing the lock behind her without a sound.

"I did not know that she was such as that," said Mrs. Clavering.

"Nor did I. She has never spoken in that way before."

"Poor soul! Hermione, you see there are those in the world whose sufferings are worse than yours."

"I don't know," said Lady Clavering. "She never lost what I have lost,—never."

"She has lost what I am sure you never will lose, her own self-esteem. But, Hermy, you should be good to her. We must all be good to her. Will it not be better that you should stay with us for a while,—both of you?"

"What, here at the park?"

"We will make room for you at the rectory, if you would like it."

"Oh, no; I will go away. I shall be better away. I suppose she will not be like that often; will she?"

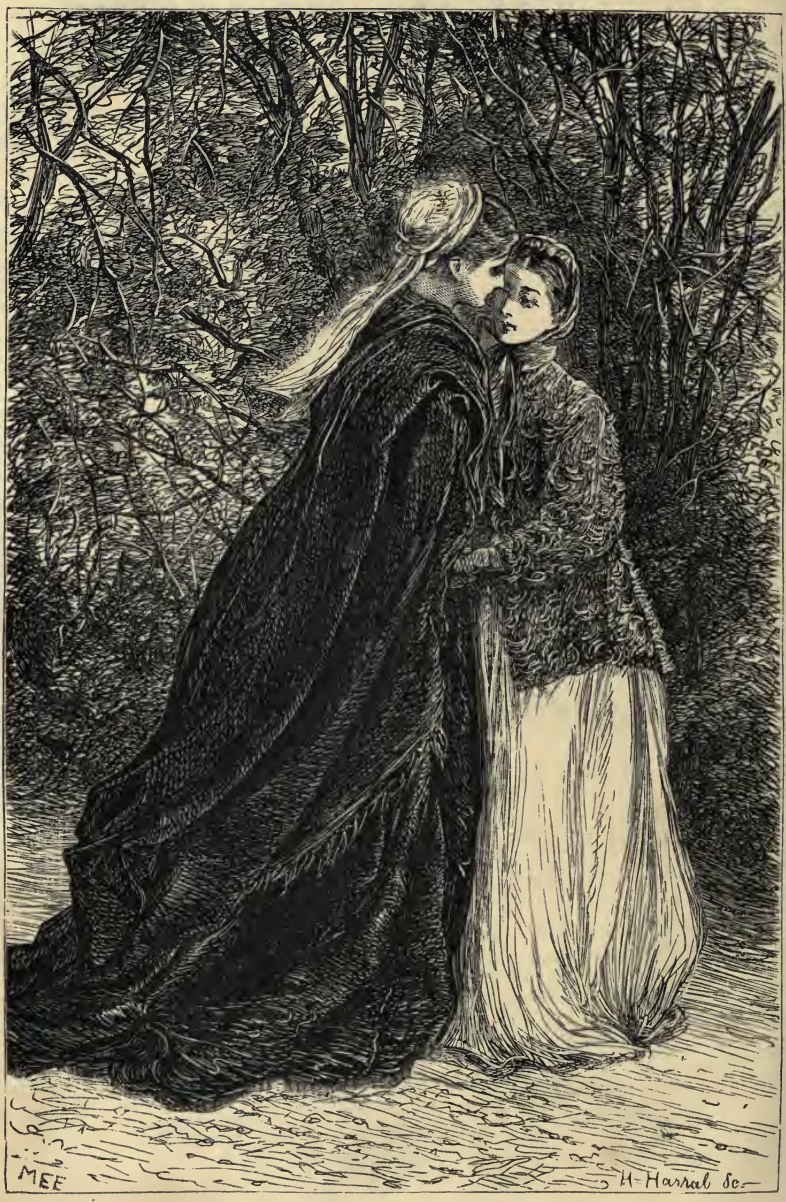
"She was much moved just now."

"And what does she mean about her income? She cannot be in earnest."

"She is in earnest now."

"And cannot it be prevented? Only think,—if after all she were to give up her jointure! Mrs. Clavering, you do not think she is mad; do you?"

Mrs. Clavering said what she could to comfort the elder and weaker sister on this subject, explaining to her that the Courtons would not be at all likely to take advantage of any wild generosity on the part of Lady Ongar, and then she walked home across the park, meditating on the character of the two sisters.



Lady Ongar and Florence.

THE

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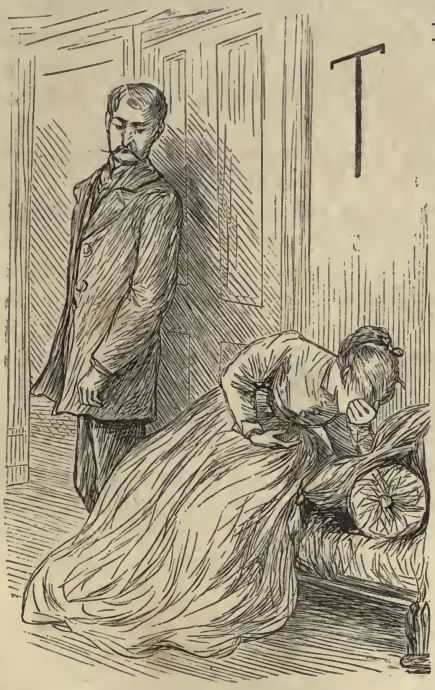
MAY, 1867.

The Claverings.

CHAPTER XLVI.

Madame Gordeloup Retires from British Diplomacy.



THE reader must be asked to accompany me once more to that room in Mount Street in which poor Archie practised diplomacy, and whither the courageous Doodles was carried prisoner in those moments in which he was last seen of us. The Spy was now sitting alone before her desk, scribbling with all her energy,—writing letters on foreign policy, no doubt, to all the courts of Europe, but especially to that Russian court to which her services were more especially due. She was hard at work, when there came the sound of a step upon the stairs. The practised ear of the Spy became erect, and she at once knew who was her visitor. It was not one with whom diplomacy would much avail, or who was likely to have money ready under his glove for her behoof. "Ah, Edouard,

is that you? I am glad you have come," she said, as Count Pateroff entered the room.

"Yes, it is I. I got your note yesterday."

"You are good,—very good. You are always good." Sophie as she said this went on very rapidly with her letter,—so rapidly that her hand seemed to run about the paper wildly. Then she flung down her pen, and folded the paper on which she had been writing with marvellous quickness. There was an activity about the woman, in all her movements, which was wonderful to watch. "There," she said, "that is done; now we can talk. Ah! I have nearly written off my fingers this morning." Her brother smiled, but said nothing about the letters. He never allowed himself to allude in any way to her professional duties.

"So you are going to St. Petersburg?" he said.

"Well,—yes, I think. Why should I remain here spending money with both hands and through the nose?" At this idea, the brother again smiled pleasantly. He had never seen his sister to be culpably extravagant as she now described herself. "Nothing to get and everything to lose," she went on saying.

"You know your own affairs best," he answered.

"Yes; I know my own affairs. If I remained here, I should be taken away to that black building there;" and she pointed in the direction of the workhouse, which fronts so gloomily upon Mount Street. "You would not come to take me out."

The count smiled again. "You are too clever for that, Sophie, I think."

"Ah, it is well for a woman to be clever, or she must starve,—yes, starve! Such a one as I must starve in this accursed country, if I were not what you call, clever." The brother and sister were talking in French, and she spoke now almost as rapidly as she had written. "They are beasts and fools, and as awkward as bulls,—yes, as bulls. I hate them. I hate them all. Men, women, children,—they are all alike. Look at the street out there. Though it is summer, I shiver when I look out at its blackness. It is the ugliest nation! And they understand nothing. Oh, how I hate them!"

"They are not without merit. They have got money."

"Money,—yes. They have got money; and they are so stupid, you may take it from under their eyes. They will not see you. But of their own hearts, they will give you nothing. You see that black building,—the workhouse. I call it Little England. It is just the same. The naked, hungry, poor wretches lie at the door, and the great fat beadles swell about like turkey-cocks inside."

"You have been here long enough to know, at any rate."

"Yes; I have been here long,—too long. I have made my life a wilderness, staying here in this country of barracks. And what have I got for it? I came back because of that woman, and she has thrown me over. That is your fault,—yours,—yours!"

"And you have sent for me to tell me that again?"

"No, Edouard. I sent for you that you might see your sister once more,—that I might once more see my brother." This she said leaning forward on the table, on which her arms rested, and looking steadfastly into his face with eyes moist,—just moist, with a tear in each. Whether Edouard was too unfeeling to be moved by this show of affection, or whether he gave more credit to his sister's histrionic powers than to those of her heart, I will not say; but he was altogether irresponsive to her appeal. "You will be back again before long," he said.

"Never! I shall come back to this accursed country never again. No; I am going once and for all. I will soil myself with the mud of its gutters no more. I came for the sake of Julie; and now,—how has she treated me?" Edouard shrugged his shoulders. "And you,—how has she treated you?"

"Never mind me."

"Ah, but I must mind you. Only that you would not let me manage, it might be yours now,—yes, all. Why did you come down to that accursed island?"

"It was my way to play my game. Leave that alone, Sophie." And there came a frown over the brother's brow.

"Your way to play your game! Yes; and what has become of mine? You have destroyed mine; but you think nothing of that. After all that I have gone through, to have nothing; and through you,—my brother! Ah, that is the hardest of all,—when I was putting all things in train for you!"

"You are always putting things in train. Leave your trains alone, where I am concerned."

"But why did you come to that place in the accursed island? I am ruined by that journey. Yes; I am ruined. You will not help me to get a shilling from her,—not even for my expenses."

"Certainly not. You are clever enough to do your own work without my aid."

"And is that all from a brother? Well! And now that they have drowned themselves,—the two Claverings,—the fool and the brute; and she can do what she pleases——"

"She could always do as she pleased since Lord Ongar died."

"Yes; but she is more lonely than ever now. That cousin who is the greatest fool of all, who might have had everything,—mon Dieu! yes, everything;—she would have given it all to him with a sweep of her hand, if he would have taken it. He is to marry himself to a little brown girl, who has not a shilling. No one but an Englishman could make follies so abominable as these. Ah, I am sick,—I am sick when I remember it!" And Sophie gave unmistakeable signs of a grief which could hardly have been self-interested. But in truth she suffered pain at seeing a good game spoilt. It was not that she had any wish for Harry Clavering's welfare. Had he gone to the bottom of the sea in the same boat with

his cousins, the tidings of his fate would have been pleasurable to her rather than otherwise. But when she saw such cards thrown away as he had held in his hand, she encountered that sort of suffering which a good player feels when he sits behind the chair of one who plays up to his adversary's trump, and makes no tricks of his own kings and aces.

"He may marry himself to the devil, if he please;—it is nothing to me," said the count.

"But she is there;—by herself,—at that place;—what is it called? Ten—bie. Will you not go now, when you can do no harm?"

"No; I will not go now."

"And in a year she will have taken some other one for her husband."

"What is that to me? But look here, Sophie, for you may as well understand me at once. If I were ever to think of Lady Ongar again as my wife, I should not tell you."

"And why not tell me,—your sister?"

"Because it would do me no good. If you had not been there she would have been my wife now."

"Edouard!"

"What I say is true. But I do not want to reproach you because of that. Each of us was playing his own game; and your game was not my game. You are going now, and if I play my game again I can play it alone."

Upon hearing this Sophie sat awhile in silence, looking at him. "You will play it alone?" she said at last. "You would rather do that?"

"Much rather, if I play any game at all."

"And you will give me something to go?"

"Not one sou."

"You will not;—not a sou?"

"Not half a sou,—for you to go or stay. Sophie, are you not a fool to ask me for money?"

"And you are a fool,—a fool who knows nothing. You need not look at me like that. I am not afraid. I shall remain here. I shall stay and do as the lawyer tells me. He says that if I bring my action she must pay me for my expenses. I will bring my action. I am not going to leave it all to you. No. Do you remember those days in Florence? I have not been paid yet, but I will be paid. One hundred and seventy-five thousand francs a year,—and after all I am to have none of it! Say;—should it become yours, will you do something for your sister?"

"Nothing at all;—nothing. Sophie, do you think I am fool enough to bargain in such a matter?"

"Then I will stay. Yes;—I will bring my action. All the world shall hear, and they shall know how you have destroyed me and yourself.

Ah;—you think I am afraid; that I will not spend my money. I will spend all,—all,—all; and I will be revenged."

"You may go or stay; it is the same thing to me. Now, if you please, I will take my leave." And he got up from his chair to leave her.

"It is the same thing to you?"

"Quite the same."

"Then I will stay, and she shall hear my name every day of her life; —every hour. She shall be so sick of me and of you, that,—that—that—— Oh, Edouard!" This last appeal was made to him because he was already at the door, and could not be stopped in any other way.

"What else have you to say, my sister?"

"Oh, Edouard, what would I not give to see all those riches yours? Has it not been my dearest wish? Edouard, you are ungrateful. All men are ungrateful." Now, having succeeded in stopping him, she buried her face in the corner of the sofa and wept plentifully. It must be presumed that her acting before her brother must have been altogether thrown away; but the acting was, nevertheless, very good.

"If you are in truth going to St. Petersburg," he said, "I will bid you adieu now. If not,—au revoir."

"I am going. Yes, Edouard, I am. I cannot bear this country longer. My heart is being torn to pieces. All my affections are outraged. Yes, I am going;—perhaps on Monday;—perhaps on Monday week. But I go in truth. My brother, adieu." Then she got up, and putting a hand on each of his shoulders, lifted up her face to be kissed. He embraced her in the manner proposed, and turned to leave her. But before he went she made to him one other petition, holding him by the arm as she did so. "Edouard, you can lend me twenty napoleons till I am at St. Petersburg?"

"No, Sophie; no."

"Not lend your sister twenty napoleons!"

"No, Sophie. I never lend money. It is a rule."

"Will you give me five? I am so poor. I have almost nothing."

"Things are not so bad with you as that, I hope?"

"Ah, yes; they are very bad. Since I have been in this accursed city,—now, this time, what have I got? Nothing,—nothing. She was to be all in all to me,—and she has given me nothing! It is very bad to be so poor. Say that you will give me five napoleons;—O my brother!" She was still hanging by his arm, and, as she did so, she looked up into his face with tears in her eyes. As he regarded her, bending down his face over hers, a slight smile came upon his countenance. Then he put his hand into his pocket, and taking out his purse, handed to her five sovereigns.

"Only five?" she said.

"Only five," he answered.

"A thousand thanks, O my brother." Then she kissed him again,

and after that he went. She accompanied him to the top of the stairs, and from thence showered blessings on his head, till she heard the lock of the door closed behind him. When he was altogether gone she unlocked an inner drawer in her desk, and, taking out an uncompleted rouleau of gold, added her brother's sovereigns thereto. The sum he had given her was exactly wanted to make up the required number of twenty-five. She counted them half-a-dozen times, to be quite sure, and then rolled them carefully in paper, and sealed the little packet at each end. "Ah," she said, speaking to herself, "they are very nice. Nothing else English is nice, but only these." There were many rolls of money there before her in the drawer of the desk;—some ten, perhaps, or twelve. These she took out one after another, passing them lovingly through her fingers, looking at the little seals at the ends of each, weighing them in her hand as though to make sure that no wrong had been done to them in her absence, standing them up one against another to see that they were of the same length. We may be quite sure that Sophie Gordeloup brought no sovereigns with her to England when she came over with Lady Ongar after the earl's death, and that the hoard before her contained simply the plunder which she had collected during this her latest visit to the "accursed" country which she was going to leave.

But before she started she was resolved to make one more attempt upon that mine of wealth which, but a few weeks ago, had seemed to lie open before her. She had learned from the servants in Bolton Street that Lady Ongar was with Lady Clavering, at Clavering Park, and she addressed a letter to her there. This letter she wrote in English, and she threw into her appeal all the pathos of which she was capable.—

Mount Street, October, 186—.

Dearest Julie,—I do not think you would wish me to go away from this country for ever,—for ever, without one word of farewell to her I love so fondly. Yes; I have loved you with all my heart,—and now I am going away,—for ever. Shall we not meet each other once, and have one embrace? No trouble will be too much to me for that. No journey will be too long. Only say, Sophie, come to your Julie.

I must go, because I am so poor. Yes; I cannot live longer here without having the means. I am not ashamed to say to my Julie, who is rich, that I am poor. No; nor would I be ashamed to wait on my Julie like a slave if she would let me. My Julie was angry with me, because of my brother! Was it my fault that he came upon us in our little retreat, where we was so happy? Oh, no. I told him not to come. I knew his coming was for nothing,—nothing at all. I knew where was the heart of my Julie!—my poor Julie! But he was not worth that heart, and the pearl was thrown before a pig. But my brother—! Ah, he has ruined me. Why am I separated from my Julie but for him? Well; I can go away, and in my own countries there are those who will not wish to be separated from Sophie Gordeloup.

May I now tell my Julie in what condition is her poor friend? She will remember how it was that my feet brought me to England,—to England, to which I had said farewell for ever,—to England, where people must be rich like my Julie before they can eat and drink. I thought nothing then but of my Julie. I stopped not on the road to make merchandise,—what you call a bargain,—about my coming. No; I came at once, leaving all things,—my little affairs,—in confusion, because my

Julie wanted me to come! It was in the winter. Oh, that winter! My poor bones shall never forget it. They are racked still with the pains which your savage winds have given them. And now it is autumn. Ten months have I been here, and I have eaten up my little substance. Oh, Julie, you, who are so rich, do not know what is the poverty of your Sophie!

A lawyer have told me,—not a French lawyer, but an English,—that somebody should pay me everything. He says the law would give it me. He have offered me the money himself,—just to let him make an action. But I have said,—No. No; Sophie will not have an action with her Julie. She would scorn that; and so the lawyer went away. But if my Julie will think of this, and will remember her Sophie,—how much she have expended, and now at last there is nothing left. She must go and beg among her friends. And why? Because she have loved her Julie too well. You, who are so rich, would miss it not at all. What would two,—three hundred pounds be to my Julie?

Shall I come to you? Say so; say so, and I will go at once, if I did crawl on my knees. Oh, what a joy to see my Julie! And do not think I will trouble you about money. No; your Sophie will be too proud for that. Not a word will I say, but to love you. Nothing will I do, but to print one kiss on my Julie's forehead, and then to retire for ever; asking God's blessing for her dear head.

Thine,—always thine,

SOPHIE.

Lady Ongar, when she received this letter, was a little perplexed by it, not feeling quite sure in what way she might best answer it. It was the special severity of her position that there was no one to whom, in such difficulties, she could apply for advice. Of one thing she was quite sure,—that, willingly, she would never again see her devoted Sophie. And she knew that the woman deserved no money from her; that she had deserved none, but had received much. Every assertion in her letter was false. No one had wished her to come, and the expense of her coming had been paid for her over and over again. Lady Ongar knew that she had money,—and knew also that she would have had immediate recourse to law, if any lawyer would have suggested to her with a probability of success that he could get more for her. No doubt she had been telling her story to some attorney, in the hope that money might thus be extracted, and had been dragging her Julie's name through the mud, telling all she knew of that wretched Florentine story. As to all that Lady Ongar had no doubt; and yet she wished to send the woman money!

There are services for which one is ready to give almost any amount of money payment,—if only one can be sure that that money payment will be taken as sufficient recompence for the service in question. Sophie Gordeloup had been useful. She had been very disagreeable,—but she had been useful. She had done things which nobody else could have done, and she had done her work well. That she had been paid for her work over and over again, there was no doubt; but Lady Ongar was willing to give her yet further payment, if only there might be an end of it. But she feared to do this, dreading the nature and cunning of the little woman,—lest she should take such payment as an acknowledgment of services for which secret compensation must be made,—and should then proceed to

further threats. Thinking much of all this, Julie at last wrote to her Sophie as follows:—

Lady Ongar presents her compliments to Madame Gordeloup, and must decline to see Madame Gordeloup again after what has passed. Lady Ongar is very sorry to hear that Madame Gordeloup is in want of funds. Whatever assistance Lady Ongar might have been willing to afford, she now feels that she is prohibited from giving any by the allusion which Madame Gordeloup has made to legal advice. If Madame Gordeloup has legal demands on Lady Ongar which are said by a lawyer to be valid, Lady Ongar would strongly recommend Madame Gordeloup to enforce them.

Clavering Park, October, 186—.

This she wrote, acting altogether on her own judgment, and sent off by return of post. She almost wept at her own cruelty after the letter was gone, and greatly doubted her own discretion. But of whom could she have asked advice? Could she have told all the story of Madame Gordeloup to the rector or to the rector's wife? The letter no doubt was a discreet letter; but she greatly doubted her own discretion, and when she received her Sophie's rejoinder, she hardly dared to break the envelope.

Poor Sophie! Her Julie's letter nearly broke her heart. For sincerity little credit was due to her;—but some little was perhaps due. That she should be called Madame Gordeloup, and have compliments presented to her by the woman,—by the countess with whom and with whose husband she had been on such closely familiar terms, did in truth wound some tender feelings within her bosom. Such love as she had been able to give, she had given to her Julie. That she had always been willing to rob her Julie, to make a milch-cow of her Julie, to sell her Julie, to threaten her Julie, to quarrel with her Julie if aught might be done in that way,—to expose her Julie; nay, to destroy her Julie if money was to be so made; —all this did not hinder her love. She loved her Julie, and was broken-hearted that her Julie should have written to her in such a strain.

But her feelings were much more acute when she came to perceive that she had damaged her own affairs by the hint of a menace which she had thrown out. Business is business, and must take precedence of all sentiment and romance in this hard world in which bread is so necessary. Of that Madame Gordeloup was well aware. And therefore, having given herself but two short minutes to weep over her Julie's hardness, she applied her mind at once to the rectification of the error she had made. Yes; she had been wrong about the lawyer, certainly wrong. But then these English people were so pig-headed! A slight suspicion of a hint, such as that she had made, would have been taken by a Frenchman, by a Russian, by a Pole, as meaning no more than it meant. "But these English are bulls; the men and the women are all like bulls,—bulls!"

She at once sat down and wrote another letter; another in such an ecstasy of eagerness to remove the evil impressions which she had made, that she wrote it almost with the natural effusion of her heart.—

Dear Friend,—Your coldness kills me,—kills me! But perhaps I have deserved it. If I said there were legal demands I did deserve it. No; there are none. Legal

demands! Oh, no. What can your poor friend demand legally? The lawyer—he knows nothing; he was a stranger. It was my brother spoke to him. What should I do with a lawyer? Oh, my friend, do not be angry with your poor servant. I write now not to ask for money,—but for a kind word; for one word of kindness and love to your Sophie before she have gone for ever! Yes; for ever. Oh, Julie, oh, my angel; I would lie at your feet and kiss them if you were here.

Yours till death, even though you should still be hard to me,

SOPHIE.

To this appeal Lady Ongar sent no direct answer, but she commissioned Mr. Turnbull, her lawyer, to call upon Madame Gordeloup and pay to that lady one hundred pounds, taking her receipt for the same. Lady Ongar, in her letter to the lawyer, explained that the woman in question had been useful in Florence; and explained also that she might pretend that she had further claims. "If so," said Lady Ongar, "I wish you to tell her that she can prosecute them at law if she pleases. The money I now give her is a gratuity made for certain services rendered in Florence during the illness of Lord Ongar." This commission Mr. Turnbull executed, and Sophie Gordeloup, when taking the money, made no demand for any further payment.

Four days after this a little woman, carrying a very big bandbox in her hands, might have been seen to scramble with difficulty out of a boat in the Thames up the side of a steamer bound from thence for Boulogne. And after her there climbed up an active little man, who, with peremptory voice, repulsed the boatman's demand for further payment. He also had a bandbox on his arm,—belonging, no doubt, to the little woman. And it might have been seen that the active little man, making his way to the table at which the clerk of the boat was sitting, out of his own purse paid the passage-money for two passengers,—through to Paris. And the head and legs and neck of that little man were like to the head and legs and neck of — our friend Doodles, alias Captain Boodle, of Warwickshire.

CHAPTER XLVII.

SHOWING HOW THINGS SETTLED THEMSELVES AT THE RECTORY.

WHEN Harry's letter, with the tidings of the fate of his cousins, reached Florence at Stratton, the whole family was, not unnaturally, thrown into great excitement. Being slow people, the elder Burtons had hardly as yet realized the fact that Harry was again to be accepted among the Burton Penates as a pure divinity. Mrs. Burton, for some weeks past, had grown to be almost sublime in her wrath against him. That a man should live and treat her daughter as Florence was about to be treated! Had not her husband forbidden such a journey, as being useless in regard to the expenditure, she would have gone up to London that she might have told Harry what she thought of him. Then came the news that

Harry was again a divinity,—an Apollo, whom the Burton Penates ought only to be too proud to welcome to a seat among them!

And now came this other news that this Apollo was to be an Apollo indeed! When the god first became a god again, there was still a cloud upon the minds of the elder Burtons as to the means by which the divinity was to be sustained. A god in truth, but a god with so very moderate an annual income;—unless indeed those old Burtons made it up to an extent which seemed to them to be quite unnatural! There was joy among the Burtons, of course, but the joy was somewhat dimmed by these reflections as to the slight means of their Apollo. A lover who was not an Apollo might wait; but, as they had learned already, there was danger in keeping such a god as this suspended on the tenter-hooks of expectation.

But now there came the further news! This Apollo of theirs had really a place of his own among the gods of Olympus. He was the eldest son of a man of large fortune, and would be a baronet! He had already declared that he would marry at once;—that his father wished him to do so, and that an abundant income would be forthcoming. As to his eagerness for an immediate marriage, no divinity in or out of the heavens could behave better. Old Mrs. Burton, as she went through the process of taking him again to her heart, remembered that that virtue had been his, even before the days of his backsliding had come. A warm-hearted, eager, affectionate divinity,—with only this against him, that he wanted some careful looking after in these, his unsettled days. "I really do think that he'll be as fond of his own fireside as any other man, when he has once settled down," said Mrs. Burton.

It will not, I hope, be taken as a blot on the character of this mother that she was much elated at the prospect of the good things which were to fall to her daughter's lot. For herself she desired nothing. For her daughters she had coveted only good, substantial, painstaking husbands, who would fear God and mind their business. When Harry Clavering had come across her path and had demanded a daughter from her, after the manner of the other young men who had learned the secrets of their profession at Stratton, she had desired nothing more than that he and Florence should walk in the path which had been followed by her sisters and their husbands. But then had come that terrible fear; and now had come these golden prospects. That her daughter should be Lady Clavering, of Clavering Park! She could not but be elated at the thought of it. She would not live to see it, but the consciousness that it would be so was pleasant to her in her old age. Florence had ever been regarded as the flower of the flock, and now she would be taken up into high places,—according to her deserts.

First had come the letter from Harry, and then, after an interval of a week, another letter from Mrs. Clavering, pressing her dear Florence to go to the parsonage. "We think that at present we all ought to be together," said Mrs. Clavering, "and therefore we want you to be with

us." It was very flattering, "I suppose I ought to go, mamma?" said Florence. Mrs. Burton was of opinion that she certainly ought to go. "You should write to her ladyship at once," said Mrs. Burton, mindful of the change which had taken place. Florence, however, addressed her letter, as heretofore, to Mrs. Clavering, thinking that a mistake on that side would be better than a mistake on the other. It was not for her to be over-mindful of the rank with which she was about to be connected. "You won't forget your old mother now that you are going to be so grand?" said Mrs. Burton, as Florence was leaving her.

"You only say that to laugh at me," said Florence. "I expect no grandness, and I am sure you expect no forgetfulness."

The solemnity consequent upon the first news of the accident had worn itself off, and Florence found the family at the parsonage happy and comfortable. Mrs. Fielding was still there, and Mr. Fielding was expected again after the next Sunday. Fanny also was there, and Florence could see during the first half-hour that she was very radiant. Mr. Saul, however, was not there, and it may as well be said at once that Mr. Saul as yet knew nothing of his coming fortune. Florence was received with open arms by them all, and by Harry with arms which were almost too open. "I suppose it may be in about three weeks from now?" he said at the first moment in which he could have her to himself.

"Oh, Harry,—no," said Florence.

"No;—why no? That's what my mother proposes."

"In three weeks!—She could not have said that. Nobody has begun to think of such a thing yet at Stratton."

"They are so very slow at Stratton!"

"And you are so very fast at Clavering! But, Harry, we don't know where we are going to live."

"We should go abroad at first, I suppose."

"And what then? That would only be for a month or so."

"Only for a month? I mean for all the winter,—and the spring. Why not? One can see nothing in a month. If we are back for the shooting next year that would do,—and then of course we should come here. I should say next winter,—that is the winter after the next,—we might as well stay with them at the big house, and then we could look about us, you know. I should like a place near to this, because of the hunting!"

Florence, when she heard all this, became aware that in talking about a month she had forgotten herself. She had been accustomed to holidays of a month's duration,—and to honeymoon trips fitted to such vacations. A month was the longest holiday ever heard of in the Chambers in the Adelphi,—or at the house in Onslow Crescent. She had forgotten herself. It was not to be the lot of her husband to earn his bread, and fit himself to such periods as business might require. Then Harry went on describing the tour which he had arranged;—which as he said he only suggested. But it was quite apparent that in this matter he intended to be paramount.

Florence indeed made no objection. To spend a fortnight in Paris;—to hurry over the Alps before the cold weather came; to spend a month in Florence, and then go on to Rome;—it would all be very nice. But she declared that it would suit the next year better than this.

"Suit ten thousand fiddlesticks," said Harry.

"But it is October now."

"And therefore there is no time to lose."

"I haven't a dress in the world but the one I have on, and a few others like it. Oh, Harry, how can you talk in that way?"

"Well, say four weeks then from now. That will make it the seventh of November, and we'll only stay a day or two in Paris. We can do Paris next year,—in May. If you'll agree to that, I'll agree."

But Florence's breath was taken away from her, and she could agree to nothing. She did agree to nothing till she had been talked into doing so by Mrs. Clavering.

"My dear," said her future mother-in-law, "what you say is undoubtedly true. There is no absolute necessity for hurrying. It is not an affair of life and death. But you and Harry have been engaged quite long enough now, and I really don't see why you should put it off. If you do as he asks you, you will just have time to make yourselves comfortable before the cold weather begins."

"But mamma will be so surprised."

"I'm sure she will wish it, my dear. You see Harry is a young man of that sort,—so impetuous I mean, you know, and so eager,—and so—you know what I mean,—that the sooner he is married the better. You can't but take it as a compliment, Florence, that he is so eager."

"Of course I do."

"And you should reward him. Believe me it will be best that it should not be delayed." Whether or no Mrs. Clavering had present in her imagination the possibility of any further danger that might result from Lady Ongar, I will not say, but if so, she altogether failed in communicating her idea to Florence.

"Then I must go home at once," said Florence, driven almost to bewail the terrors of her position.

"You can write home at once and tell your mother. You can tell her all that I say, and I am sure she will agree with me. If you wish it, I will write a line to Mrs. Burton myself." Florence said that she would wish it. "And we can begin, you know, to get your things ready here. People don't take so long about all that now-a-days as they used to do." When Mrs. Clavering had turned against her, Florence knew that she had no hope, and surrendered, subject to the approval of the higher authorities at Stratton. The higher authorities at Stratton approved also, of course, and Florence found herself fixed to a day with a suddenness that bewildered her. Immediately,—almost as soon as the consent had been extorted from her,—she began to be surrounded with incipient preparation for the

event, as to which, about three weeks since, she had made up her mind that it would never come to pass.

On the second day of her arrival, in the privacy of her bedroom, Fanny communicated to her the decision of her family in regard to Mr. Saul. But she told the story at first as though this decision referred to the living only,—as though the rectory were to be conferred on Mr. Saul without any burden attached to it. "He has been here so long, dear," said Fanny, "and understands the people so well."

"I am so delighted," said Florence.

"I am sure it is the best thing papa could do;—that is if he quite makes up his mind to give up the parish himself."

This troubled Florence, who did not know that a baronet could hold a living.

"I thought he must give up being a clergyman now that Sir Hugh is dead?"

"O dear, no." And then Fanny, who was great on ecclesiastical subjects, explained it all. "Even though he were to be a peer, he could hold a living if he pleased. A great many baronets are clergymen, and some of them do hold preferments. As to papa, the doubt has been with him whether he would wish to give up the work. But he will preach sometimes, you know; though of course he will not be able to do that unless Mr. Saul lets him. No one but the rector has a right to his own pulpit except the bishop; and he can preach three times a year if he likes it."

"And suppose the bishop wanted to preach four times?"

"He couldn't do it; at least, I believe not. But you see he never wants to preach at all,—not in such a place as this,—so that does not signify."

"And will Mr. Saul come and live here, in this house?"

"Some day I suppose he will," said Fanny, blushing.

"And you, dear?"

"I don't know how that may be."

"Come, Fanny."

"Indeed I don't, Florence, or I would tell you. Of course Mr. Saul has asked me. I never had any secret with you about that; have I?"

"No; you were very good."

"Then he asked me again; twice again. And then there came,—oh, such a quarrel between him and papa. It was so terrible. Do you know, I believe they wouldn't speak in the vestry! Not but what each of them has the highest possible opinion of the other. But of course Mr. Saul couldn't marry on a curacy. When I think of it it really seems that he must have been mad."

"But you don't think him so mad now, dear?"

"He doesn't know a word about it yet; not a word. He hasn't been in the house since, and papa and he didn't speak,—not in a friendly way,

—till the news came of poor Hugh's being drowned. Then he came up to papa, and, of course, papa took his hand. But he still thinks he is going away."

"And when is he to be told that he needn't go?"

"That is the difficulty. Mamma will have to do it, I believe. But what she will say, I'm sure I for one can't think."

"Mrs. Clavering will have no difficulty."

"You mustn't call her Mrs. Clavering."

"Lady Clavering then."

"That's a great deal worse. She's your mamma now,—not quite so much as she is mine, but the next thing to it."

"She'll know what to say to Mr. Saul."

"But what is she to say?"

"Well, Fanny,—you ought to know that. I suppose you do—love him?"

"I have never told him so."

"But you will?"

"It seems so odd. Mamma will have to —— Suppose he were to turn round and say he didn't want me?"

"That would be awkward."

"He would in a minute if that was what he felt. The idea of having the living would not weigh with him a bit."

"But when he was so much in love before, it won't make him out of love;—will it?"

"I don't know," said Fanny. "At any rate, mamma is to see him to-morrow, and after that I suppose;—I'm sure I don't know,—but I suppose he'll come to the rectory as he used to do."

"How happy you must be," said Florence, kissing her. To this Fanny made some unintelligible demur. It was undoubtedly possible that, under the altered circumstances of the case, so strange a being as Mr. Saul might have changed his mind.

There was a great trial awaiting Florence Burton. She had to be taken up to call on the ladies at the great house,—on the two widowed ladies who were still remaining there when she came to Clavering. It was only on the day before her arrival that Harry had seen Lady Ongar. He had thought much of the matter before he went across to the house, doubting whether it would not be better to let Julia go without troubling her with a further interview. But he had not then seen even Lady Clavering since the tidings of her bereavement had come, and he felt that it would not be well that he should let his cousin's widow leave Clavering without offering her his sympathy. And it might be better, also, that he should see Julia once again, if only that he might show himself capable of meeting her without the exhibition of any peculiar emotion. He went, therefore, to the house, and having asked for Lady Clavering, saw both the sisters together. He soon found that the presence of the younger one was a relief to him. Lady Clavering was so sad, and so peevish in her

sadness,—so broken-spirited, so far as yet from recognizing the great enfranchisement that had come to her, that with her alone he would have found himself almost unable to express the sympathy which he felt. But with Lady Ongar he had no difficulty. Lady Ongar, her sister being with them in the room, talked to him easily, as though there had never been anything between them two to make conversation difficult. That all words between them should, on such an occasion as this, be sad, was a matter of course; but it seemed to Harry that Julia had freed herself from all the effects of that feeling which had existed between them, and that it would become him to do this as effectually as she had done it. Such an idea, at least, was in his mind for a moment; but when he left her she spoke one word which dispelled it. "Harry," she said, "you must ask Miss Burton to come across and see me. I hear that she is to be at the rectory to-morrow." Harry of course said that he would send her. "She will understand why I cannot go to her, as I should do,—but for poor Hermy's position. You will explain this, Harry." Harry, blushing up to his forehead, declared that Florence would require no explanation, and that she would certainly make the visit as proposed. "I wish to see her, Harry,—so much. And if I do not see her now, I may never have another chance."

It was nearly a week after this that Florence went across to the great house with Mrs. Clavering and Fanny. I think that she understood the nature of the visit she was called upon to make, and no doubt she trembled much at the coming ordeal. She was going to see her great rival,—her rival, who had almost been preferred to her,—nay, who had been preferred to her for some short space of time, and whose claims as to beauty and wealth were so greatly superior to her own. And this woman whom she was to see had been the first love of the man whom she now regarded as her own,—and would have been about to be his wife at this moment had it not been for her own treachery to him. Was she so beautiful as people said? Florence, in the bottom of her heart, wished that she might have been saved from this interview.

The three ladies from the rectory found the two ladies at the great house sitting together in the small drawing-room. Florence was so confused that she could hardly bring herself to speak to Lady Clavering, or so much as to look at Lady Ongar. She shook hands with the elder sister, and knew that her hand was then taken by the other. Julia at first spoke a very few words to Mrs. Clavering, and Fanny sat herself down beside Hermione. Florence took a chair at a little distance, and was left there for a few minutes without notice. For this she was very thankful, and by degrees was able to fix her eyes on the face of the woman whom she so feared to see, and yet on whom she so desired to look. Lady Clavering was a mass of ill-arranged widow's weeds. She had assumed in all its grotesque ugliness those paraphernalia of outward woe which women have been condemned to wear, in order that for a time they may be shorn of all the charms of their sex. Nothing could be more proper or unbecoming

than the heavy, drooping, shapeless blackness in which Lady Clavering had enveloped herself. But Lady Ongar, though also a widow, though as yet a widow of not twelve months' standing, was dressed,—in weeds, no doubt,—but in weeds which had been so cultivated that they were as good as flowers. She was very beautiful. Florence owned to herself as she sat there in silence, that Lady Ongar was the most beautiful woman that she had ever seen. But hers was not the beauty by which, as she would have thought, Harry Clavering would have been attached. Lady Ongar's form, bust, and face were, at this period of her life, almost majestic; whereas the softness and grace of womanhood were the charms which Harry loved. He had sometimes said to Florence that, to his taste, Cecilia Burton was almost perfect as a woman. And there could be no contrast greater than that between Cecilia Burton and Lady Ongar. But Florence did not remember that the Julia Brabazon of three years' since had not been the same as the Lady Ongar whom now she saw.

When they had been there some minutes Lady Ongar came and sat beside Florence, moving her seat as though she were doing the most natural thing in the world. Florence's heart came to her mouth, but she made a resolution that she would, if possible, bear herself well. "You have been at Clavering before, I think?" said Lady Ongar. Florence said that she had been at the parsonage during the last Easter. "Yes,—I heard that you dined here with my brother-in-law." This she said in a low voice, having seen that Lady Clavering was engaged with Fanny and Mrs. Clavering. "Was it not terribly sudden?"

"Terribly sudden," said Florence.

"The two brothers! Had you not met Captain Clavering?"

"Yes,—he was here when I dined with your sister."

"Poor fellow! Is it not odd that they should have gone, and that their friend, whose yacht it was, should have been saved? They say, however, that Mr. Stuart behaved admirably, begging his friends to get into the boat first. He stayed by the vessel when the boat was carried away, and he was saved in that way. But he meant to do the best he could for them. There's no doubt of that."

"But how dreadful his feelings must be!"

"Men do not think so much of these things as we do. They have so much more to employ their minds. Don't you think so?" Florence did not at the moment quite know what she thought about men's feelings, but said that she supposed that such was the case. "But I think that after all they are juster than we are," continued Lady Ongar,—"juster and truer, though not so tender-hearted. Mr. Stuart, no doubt, would have been willing to drown himself to save his friends, because the fault was in some degree his. I don't know that I should have been able to do so much."

"In such a moment it must have been so difficult to think of what ought to be done."

"Yes, indeed; and there is but little good in speculating upon it

now. You know this place, do you not;—the house, I mean, and the gardens?"

"Not very well." Florence, as she answered this question, began again to tremble. "Take a turn with me, and I will show you the garden. My hat and cloak are in the hall." Then Florence got up to accompany her, trembling very much inwardly. "Miss Burton and I are going out for a few minutes," said Lady Ongar, addressing herself to Mrs. Clavering. "We will not keep you waiting very long."

"We are in no hurry," said Mrs. Clavering. Then Florence was carried off, and found herself alone with her conquered rival.

"Not that there is much to show you," said Lady Ongar; "indeed nothing; but the place must be of more interest to you than to any one else; and if you are fond of that sort of thing, no doubt you will make it all that is charming."

"I am very fond of a garden," said Florence.

"I don't know whether I am. Alone, by myself, I think I should care nothing for the prettiest Eden in all England. I don't think I would care for a walk through the Elysian fields by myself. I am a chamelion, and take the colour of those with whom I live. My future colours will not be very bright as I take it. It's a gloomy place enough; is it not? But there are fine trees, you see, which are the only things which one cannot by any possibility command. Given good trees, taste and money may do anything very quickly; as I have no doubt you'll find."

"I don't suppose I shall have much to do with it—at present."

"I should think that you will have everything to do with it. There, Miss Burton; I brought you here to show you this very spot, and to make to you my confession here,—and to get from you, here, one word of confidence, if you will give it me." Florence was trembling now outwardly as well as inwardly. "You know my story; as far, I mean, as I had a story once, in conjunction with Harry Clavering?"

"I think I do," said Florence.

"I am sure you do," said Lady Ongar. "He has told me that you do; and what he says is always true. It was here, on this spot, that I gave him back his troth to me, and told him that I would have none of his love, because he was poor. That is barely two years ago. Now he is poor no longer. Now, had I been true to him, a marriage with him would have been, in a prudential point of view, all that any woman could desire. I gave up the dearest heart, the sweetest temper, ay, and the truest man that, that—— Well, you have won him instead, and he has been the gainer. I doubt whether I ever should have made him happy; but I know that you will do so. It was just here that I parted from him."

"He has told me of that parting," said Florence.

"I am sure he has. And, Miss Burton, if you will allow me to say one word further,—do not be made to think any ill of him because of what happened the other day."

"I think no ill of him," said Florence proudly.

"That is well. But I am sure you do not. You are not one to think evil, as I take it, of anybody; much less of him whom you love. When he saw me again, free as I am, and when I saw him, thinking him also to be free, was it strange that some memory of old days should come back upon us? But the fault, if fault there has been, was mine."

"I have never said that there was any fault."

"No, Miss Burton; but others have said so. No doubt I am foolish to talk to you in this way; and I have not yet said that which I desired to say. It is simply this;—that I do not begrudge you your happiness. I wished the same happiness to be mine; but it is not mine. It might have been, but I forfeited it. It is past; and I will pray that you may enjoy it long. You will not refuse to receive my congratulations?"

"Indeed, I will not."

"Or to think of me as a friend of your husband's?"

"Oh, no."

"That is all then. I have shown you the gardens, and now we may go in. Some day, perhaps, when you are Lady Paramount here, and your children are running about the place, I may come again to see them; —if you and he will have me."

"I hope you will, Lady Ongar. In truth, I hope so."

"It is odd enough that I said to him once that I would never go to Clavering Park again till I went there to see his wife. That was long before those two poor brothers perished,—before I had ever heard of Florence Burton. And yet, indeed, it was not very long ago. It was since my husband died. But that was not quite true, for here I am, and he has not yet got a wife. But it was odd; was it not?"

"I cannot think what should have made you say that."

"A spirit of prophecy comes on one sometimes, I suppose. Well; shall we go in? I have shown you all the wonders of the garden, and told you all the wonders connected with it of which I know aught. No doubt there would be other wonders, more wonderful, if one could ransack the private history of all the Claverings for the last hundred years. I hope, Miss Burton, that any marvels which may attend your career here may be happy marvels." She then took Florence by the hand, and drawing close to her, stooped over and kissed her. "You will think me a fool, of course," said she; "but I do not care for that." Florence now was in tears, and could make no answer in words; but she pressed the hand which she still held, and then followed her companion back into the house. After that, the visit was soon brought to an end, and the three ladies from the rectory returned across the park to their house.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

Conclusion.

Florence Burton had taken upon herself to say that Mrs. Clavering would have no difficulty in making to Mr. Saul the communication which was now needed before he could be received at the rectory, as the rector's successor and future son-in-law; but Mrs. Clavering was by no means so confident of her own powers. To her it seemed as though the undertaking which she had in hand, was one surrounded with difficulties. Her husband, when the matter was being discussed, at once made her understand that he would not relieve her by an offer to perform the task. He had been made to break the bad news to Lady Clavering, and, having been submissive in that matter, felt himself able to stand aloof altogether as to this more difficult embassy. "I suppose it would hardly do to ask Harry to see him again," Mrs. Clavering had said. "You would do it much better, my dear," the rector had replied. Then Mrs. Clavering had submitted in her turn; and when the scheme was fully matured, and the time had come in which the making of the proposition could no longer be delayed with prudence, Mr. Saul was summoned by a short note. "Dear Mr. Saul,—If you are disengaged would you come to me at the rectory at eleven to-morrow?—Yours ever, M. C." Mr. Saul of course said that he would come. When the to-morrow had arrived and breakfast was over, the rector and Harry took themselves off, somewhere about the grounds of the great house,—counting up their treasures of proprietorship, as we can fancy that men so circumstanced would do,—while Mary Fielding with Fanny and Florence retired upstairs, so that they might be well out of the way. They knew, all of them, what was about to be done, and Fanny behaved herself like a white lamb decked with bright ribbons for the sacrificial altar. To her it was a sacrificial morning,—very sacred, very solemn, and very trying to the nerves. "I don't think that any girl was ever in such a position before," she said to her sister. "A great many girls would be glad to be in the same position," Mrs. Fielding replied. "Do you think so? To me there is something almost humiliating in the idea that he should be asked to take me." "Fiddlestick, my dear," replied Mrs. Fielding.

Mr. Saul came, punctual as the church clock,—of which he had the regulating himself,—and was shown into the rectory dining-room, where Mrs. Clavering was sitting alone. He looked, as he ever did, serious, composed, ill-dressed, and like a gentleman. Of course he must have supposed that the present rector would make some change in his mode of living, and could not be surprised that he should have been summoned to the rectory;—but he was surprised that the summons should have come from Mrs. Clavering, and not from the rector himself. It appeared to him that the old enmity must be very enduring, if, even now, Mr.

Clavering could not bring himself to see his curate on a matter of business.

"It seems a long time since we have seen you here, Mr. Saul," said Mrs. Clavering.

"Yes;—when I have remembered how often I used to be here, my absence has seemed long and strange."

"It has been a source of great grief to me."

"And to me, Mrs. Clavering."

"But, as circumstances then were, in truth it could not be avoided. Common prudence made it necessary. Don't you think so, Mr. Saul?"

"If you ask me I must answer, according to my own ideas. Common prudence should not have made it necessary,—at least not according to my view of things. Common prudence, with different people, means such different things! But I am not going to quarrel with your ideas of common prudence, Mrs. Clavering."

Mrs. Clavering had begun badly, and was aware of it. She should have said nothing about the past. She had foreseen, from the first, the danger of doing so; but had been unable to rush at once into the golden future. "I hope we shall have no more quarrelling at any rate," she said.

"There shall be none on my part. Only, Mrs. Clavering, you must not suppose from my saying so that I intend to give up my pretensions. A word from your daughter would make me do so, but no words from any one else."

"She ought to be very proud of such constancy on your part, Mr. Saul, and I have no doubt she will be." Mr. Saul did not understand this, and made no reply to it. "I don't know whether you have heard that Mr. Clavering intends to—give up the living."

"I have not heard it. I have thought it probable that he would do so."

"He has made up his mind that he will. The fact is, that if he held it, he must neglect either that or the property." We will not stop at this moment to examine what Mr. Saul's ideas must have been as to the exigencies of the property, which would leave no time for the performance of such clerical duties as had fallen for some years past to the share of the rector himself. "He hopes that he may be allowed to take some part in the services,—but he means to resign the living."

"I suppose that will not much affect me for the little time that I have to remain?"

"We think it will affect you,—and hope that it may. Mr. Clavering wishes you to accept the living."

"To accept the living?" And for a moment even Mr. Saul looked as though he were surprised.

"Yes, Mr. Saul."

"To be rector of Clavering?"

"If you see no objection to such an arrangement."

"It is a most munificent offer,—but as strange as it is munificent.

Unless indeed——" And then some glimpse of the truth made its way into the chinks of Mr. Saul's mind.

"Mr. Clavering would, no doubt, have made the offer to you himself, had it not been that I can, perhaps, speak to you about dear Fanny better than he could do. Though our prudence has not been quite to your mind, you can at any rate understand that we might very much object to her marrying you when there was nothing for you to live on, even though we had no objection to yourself personally."

"But Mr. Clavering did object on both grounds."

"I was not aware that he had done so; but, if so, no such objection is now made by him,—or by me. My idea is that a child should be allowed to consult her own heart, and to indulge her own choice,—provided that in doing so she does not prepare for herself a life of indigence, which must be a life of misery; and of course providing also that there be no strong personal objection."

"A life of indigence need not be a life of misery," said Mr. Saul, with that obstinacy which formed so great a part of his character.

"Well, well."

"I am very indigent, but I am not at all miserable. If we are to be made miserable by that, what is the use of all our teaching?"

"But, at any rate, a competence is comfortable."

"Too comfortable!" As Mr. Saul made this exclamation, Mrs. Clavering could not but wonder at her daughter's taste. But the matter had gone too far now for any possibility of receding.

"You will not refuse it, I hope, as it will be accompanied by what you say you still desire."

"No; I will not refuse it. And may God give her and me grace so to use the riches of this world that they become not a stumbling-block to us, and a rock of offence. It is possible that the camel should be made to go through the needle's eye. It is possible."

"The position, you know, is not one of great wealth."

"It is to me, who have barely hitherto had the means of support. Will you tell your husband from me that I will accept, and endeavour not to betray the double trust he proposes to confer on me. It is much that he should give to me his daughter. She shall be to me bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh. If God will give me his grace thereto, I will watch over her, so that no harm shall come nigh her. I love her as the apple of my eye; and I am thankful,—very thankful that the rich gift should be made to me."

"I am sure that you love her, Mr. Saul."

"But," continued he, not marking her interruption, "that other trust is one still greater, and requiring a more tender care and even a closer sympathy. I shall feel that the souls of these people will be, as it were, in my hand, and that I shall be called upon to give an account of their welfare. I will strive,—I will strive. And she, also, will be with me, to help me."

When Mrs. Clavering described this scene to her husband, he shook his head; and there came over his face a smile, in which there was much of melancholy, as he said, "Ah, yes,—that is all very well now. He will settle down as other men do, I suppose, when he has four or five children around him." Such were the ideas which the experience of the outgoing and elder clergyman taught him to entertain as to the ecstatic piety of his younger brother.

It was Mrs. Clavering who suggested to Mr. Saul that perhaps he would like to see Fanny. This she did when her story had been told, and he was preparing to leave her. "Certainly, if she will come to me."

"I will make no promise," said Mrs. Clavering, "but I will see." Then she went upstairs to the room where the girls were sitting, and the sacrificial lamb was sent down into the drawing-room. "I suppose if you say so, mamma——"

"I think, my dear, that you had better see him. You will meet then more comfortably afterwards." So Fanny went into the drawing-room, and Mr. Saul was sent to her there. What passed between them all readers of these pages will understand. Few young ladies, I fear, will envy Fanny Clavering her lover; but they will remember that Love will still be lord of all; and they will acknowledge that he had done much to deserve the success in life which had come in his way.

It was long before the old rector could reconcile himself either to the new rector or his new son-in-law. Mrs. Clavering had now so warmly taken up Fanny's part, and had so completely assumed a mother's interest in her coming marriage, that Mr. Clavering, or Sir Henry, as we may now call him, had found himself obliged to abstain from repeating to her the wonder with which he still regarded his daughter's choice. But to Harry he could still be eloquent on the subject. "Of course it's all right now," he said. "He's a very good young man, and nobody would work harder in the parish. I always thought I was very lucky to have such an assistant. But upon my word I cannot understand Fanny; I cannot indeed."

"She has been taken by the religious side of her character," said Harry.

"Yes, of course. And no doubt it is very gratifying to me to see that she thinks so much of religion. It should be the first consideration with all of us at all times. But she has never been used to men like Mr. Saul."

"Nobody can deny that he is a gentleman."

"Yes; he is a gentleman. God forbid that I should say he was not; especially now that he is going to marry your sister. But—— I don't know whether you quite understand what I mean?"

"I think I do. He isn't quite one of our sort."

"How on earth she can ever have brought herself to look at him in that light!"

"There's no accounting for tastes, sir. And, after all, as he's to have the living, there will be nothing to regret."

"No; nothing to regret. I suppose he'll be up at the other house occasionally. I never could make anything of him when he dined at the rectory; perhaps he'll be better there. Perhaps, when he's married, he'll get into the way of drinking a glass of wine like anybody else. Dear Fanny; I hope she'll be happy. That's everything." In answer to this Harry took upon himself to assure his father that Fanny would be happy; and then they changed the conversation, and discussed the alterations which they would make in reference to the preservation of pheasants.

Mr. Saul and Fanny remained long together on that occasion, and when they parted he went off about his work, not saying a word to any other person in the house, and she betook herself as fast as her feet could carry her to her own room. She said not a word either to her mother, or to her sister, or to Florence as to what had passed at that interview; but, when she was first seen by any of them, she was very grave in her demeanour, and very silent. When her father congratulated her, which he did with as much cordiality as he was able to assume, she kissed him and thanked him for his care and kindness; but even this she did almost solemnly. "Ah, I see how it is to be," said the old rector to his wife. "There are to be no more cakes and ale in the parish." Then his wife reminded him of what he himself had said of the change which would take place in Mr. Saul's ways when he should have a lot of children running about his feet. "Then I can only hope that they'll begin to run about very soon," said the old rector.

To her sister, Mary Fielding, Fanny said little or nothing of her coming marriage, but to Florence, who, as regarded that event, was in the same position as herself, she frequently did express her feelings,—declaring how awful to her was the responsibility of the thing she was about to do. "Of course that's quite true," said Florence, "but it doesn't make one doubt that one is right to marry."

"I don't know," said Fanny. "When I think of it, it does almost make me doubt."

"Then if I were Mr. Saul I would not let you think of it at all."

"Ah;—that shows that you do not understand him. He would be the first to advise me to hesitate if he thought that,—that—that;—I don't know that I can quite express what I mean."

"Under those circumstances Mr. Saul won't think that,—that—that —that——"

"Oh, Florence, it is too serious for laughing. It is indeed." Then Florence also hoped that a time might come, and that shortly, in which Mr. Saul might moderate his views,—though she did not express herself exactly as the rector had done.

Immediately after this Florence went back to Stratton, in order that she might pass what remained to her of her freedom with her mother and father, and that she might prepare herself for her wedding. The affair with her was so much hurried that she had hardly time to give her mind

to those considerations which were weighing so heavily on Fanny's mind. It was felt by all the Burtons,—especially by Cecilia,—that there was need for extension of their views in regard to millinery, seeing that Florence was to marry the eldest son and heir of a baronet. And old Mrs. Burton was awed almost into quiescence by the reflections which came upon her when she thought of the breakfast, and of the presence of Sir Henry Clavering. She at once summoned her daughter-in-law from Ramsgate to her assistance, and felt that all her experience, gathered from the wedding breakfasts of so many elder daughters, would hardly carry her through the difficulties of the present occasion.

The two widowed sisters were still at the great house when Sir Henry Clavering with Harry and Fanny went to Stratton, but they left it on the following day. The father and son went up together to bid them farewell, on the eve of their departure, and to press upon them, over and over again, the fact that they were still to regard the Claverings of Clavering Park as their nearest relations and friends. The elder sister simply cried when this was said to her,—cried easily with plenteous tears, till the weeds which enveloped her seemed to be damp from the ever-running fountain. Hitherto, to weep had been her only refuge; but I think that even this had already become preferable to her former life. Lady Ongar assured Sir Henry, or Mr. Clavering, as he was still called till after their departure,—that she would always remember and accept his kindness. "And you will come to us?" said he. "Certainly; when I can make Hermy come. She will be better when the summer is here. And then, after that, we will think about it." On this occasion she seemed to be quite cheerful herself, and bade Harry farewell with all the frank affection of an old friend.

"I have given up the house in Bolton Street," she said to him.

"And where do you mean to live?"

"Anywhere; just as it may suit Hermy. What difference does it make? We are going to Tenby now, and though Tenby seems to me to have as few attractions as any place I ever knew, I daresay we shall stay there, simply because we shall be there. That is the consideration which weighs most with such old women as we are. Good-by, Harry."

"Good-by, Julia. I hope that I may yet see you,—you and Hermy, happy before long."

"I don't know much about happiness, Harry. There comes a dream of it sometimes,—such as you have got now. But I will answer for this: you shall never hear of my being down-hearted. At least not on my own account," she added in a whisper. "Poor Hermy may sometimes drag me down. But I will do my best. And, Harry, tell your wife that I shall write to her occasionally,—once a year, or something like that; so that she need not be afraid. Good-by, Harry."

"Good-by, Julia." And so they parted.

Immediately on her arrival at Tenby, Lady Ongar communicated to Mr. Turnbull her intention of giving back to the Courton family, not only

the place called Ongar Park, but also the whole of her income with the exception of eight hundred a year, so that in that respect she might be equal to her sister. This brought Mr. Turnbull down to Tenby, and there was interview after interview between the countess and the lawyer. The proposition, however, was made to the Courtons, and was absolutely refused by them. Ongar Park was accepted on behalf of the mother of the present earl; but as regarded the money, the widow of the late earl was assured by the elder surviving brother that no one doubted her right to it, or would be a party to accepting it from her. "Then," said Lady Ongar, "it will accumulate in my hands, and I can leave it as I please in my will."

"As to that, no one can control you," said her brother-in-law—who went to Tenby to see her; "but you must not be angry, if I advise you not to make any such resolution. Such hoards never have good results." This good result, however, did come from the effort which the poor broken-spirited woman was making,—that an intimacy, and at last a close friendship, was formed between her and the relatives of her deceased lord.

And now my story is done. My readers will easily understand what would be the future life of Harry Clavering and his wife after the completion of that tour in Italy, and the birth of the heir,—the preparations for which made the tour somewhat shorter than Harry had intended. His father, of course, gave up to him the shooting, and the farming of the home farm,—and after a while, the management of the property. Sir Henry preached occasionally,—believing himself to preach much oftener than he did,—and usually performed some portion of the morning service.

"Oh, yes," said Theodore Burton, in answer to some comfortable remark from his wife; "Providence has done very well for Florence. And Providence has done very well for him also;—but Providence was making a great mistake when she expected him to earn his bread."