THE FRERES.

A Novel.

BY

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THE FRERES.

CHAPTER I.

IT was a few days before Easter, and a solemn dinner had been celebrated in the new residence of Richard Frere, Esq., H—— Square, Hyde Park.

Only two of the various carriages which had awaited their owners remained. The red-waist-coated, red-nosed veteran who stood by the strip of carpet leading from the entrance to the kerb, to convey the orders of 'Jeames' and the auxiliary forces to the coachmen, was counting the amount of small silver already received by the bright gas in the fan-light over the door.

Within, the festivity (if so inappropriate a word may be used) was virtually over. The last remnant of dessert had been cleared away, and divided by the 'cook and housekeeper,' impartially (according

to her standard) between the ladies and gentlemen of the second table and the 'supers.' The butler had conscientiously locked away all unopened bottles, and with the assistance of his *confrères*, finished most of those already tasted, only reserving a decanter or two of the choicer sorts for his private cellar. The white-capped 'purveyor's men' had gathered up their ice machinery and departed; still a small, well-appointed brougham, drawn by a steady, handsome horse, and a more showy carriage, with a big, restless, fiery chestnut, lingered.

Upstairs in one of the handsomely furnished drawing-rooms, four persons were gathered round a fire, seldom unacceptable before Easter in London.

A tall, good-looking elderly man, not thin, not portly, well set up, dressed, and preserved, with pale clear cold eyes, a straight nose, and thin lips. Next him, nearest the fire, screening her face with a beautifully-painted 'rococo' fan, and resting a small black satin-booted foot on the fender, was a lady, past middle age, whose well-arranged draperies of black velvet showed her full but still graceful figure to the greatest advantage. A downy feather or two, a lappet of fairy-like lace, a couple of sparkling, quivering diamond butterflies, made sufficient apology for a matronly head-dress, which her abundant, nearly black hair might have dispensed with.

One foot was, as I have said, resting on the fender, and one hand touched the low, modern mantel-shelf, while her eyes—very full light brown

eyes—gazed at the fire. The face was not handsome, only the mouth was beautiful, and that not in repose.

On her right stood two young men. One tall, slight, very dark, with large, deep-set, handsome eyes, and well-cut chin, the blue-black of a closely-shaven beard and moustache showing through his pale, clear skin. A sort of indefinable resemblance to his fair neighbour might have struck a stranger, especially about the mouth, which, though refined, was somewhat full.

The fourth of the party was a short, stout, broad-shouldered man of perhaps thirty, with jewelled studs and a diamond ring. Florid, good-humoured-looking, and very accurately dressed, yet not quite so easy as the rest, he was speaking:

'It is,' he said, 'it is perfectly amazing where the money has come from to pay off such an enormous sum! They say the fellows have brought old stockings and boots, by Jove! full of five-franc pieces and Napoleons, forty and fifty years old, ready to give all to Thiers. It is more than our people would do, I can tell you!'

He spoke a little thickly—not with a lisp, but as if he brought every word to the tip of his tongue, tasted it, and liked the flavour.

'I should think not,' replied the lady, still gazing at the fire, and in soft, sweet, but very clear tones. 'Why should our people give their money to Monsieur Thiers?'

'Now—now, Lady Elton! you are too sharp upon a fellow; you know what I mean!'

'How should I?' she returned, with a smile that lit up her face, and lent it a wonderful charm.

'Thiers is all very well for the present,' remarked the master of the house, 'but the French are far too restless and impractical to remain under his guidance. They will be electing a king or an emperor, and cutting each other's throats before eighteen months are over.'

'It is possible,' said Lady Elton, as if to the fire; 'but they never had such an opportunity of trying constitutionalism before.'

'First catch your constitution,' observed the tall, dark young man, who had been calmly and openly surveying himself in the vast looking-glass over the mantelpiece.

'Suppose you and I run over to Paris,' said the first speaker, 'and see how it looks, just for the Easter holidays; I have not been there since the siege.'

'I am sure it would give me great pleasure, Darnell,' returned the other, civilly, 'but I have already arranged to go there with Mr. and Mrs. Everard, her sister and Bertie Leigh.'

'Oh, indeed! quite a swell party. Well, we may meet there. But I am keeping you up, Mr. Frere, and I am due at the Countess of Rothbury's "small and early;" so good-evening. Good-evening, Lady Elton; good-bye, Max.'

'I wish you a very good-evening, Mr. Darnell,' said the master of the house, with formal politeness.

'Mr. Darnell's carriage,' said Max to the butler,

who appeared to answer the bell, and the son of the house accompanied the parting guest politely to the door, shaking hands with him there.

'When do you start for Paris?' asked Lady Elton, as the young man returned, and threw himself somewhat wearily into a deep luxurious easy-chair.

'To-morrow evening, by the tidal train.'

There was a silence of a few minutes, and Lady Elton, turning from the fire, looked approvingly round the room, walked slowly to the folding-doors, and inspected the smaller sitting-room, and returned to the fireplace.

'Really, Mr. Frere,' she said, 'you have done your furnishing very well. May I ask if it is all Jackson and Graham, or did you exercise a right of choice?'

Mr. Frere smiled.

'I am not responsible. Maxwell here exercised a considerable right of choice, which added considerably to the sum total.'

'Ah,' said the lady, 'that accounts for the portraits. Jackson and Graham, or any other highly civilised upholsterer and decorator would have banished your mother and uncle to the portrait gallery, which no customer of theirs *should* be without. Eh, Max?'

'I suppose so. But in the smaller drawing-room they are inoffensive, and they are really good pictures.'

'They are,' returned Lady Elton; 'and what a capital likeness of poor Joscelyn! Just as he looked

at your wedding, Mr. Frere. I thought him the most charming of men, especially as he would *not* fall in love with me.'

'How could he resist?' said Maxwell, with a tinge of mockery.

'Do not quiz your aunt, you disrespectful boy; especially as she has played hostess for you and your father's benefit. Pray do not give another dinner-party (a ladies' dinner-party I mean) for a couple of months, Mr. Frere. I think these solemn affairs are very awful. Come and dine with *me* and my Bohemian set on Wednesday, and see how pleasant we can be for half the cost. Am I not a wretch to talk in such a strain?'

'You are very good,' said Mr. Frere, stiffly, 'but you must make allowance for the deficiencies of a widower's establishment.'

'Deficiencies!' cried Lady Elton, again strolling into the other room to look at the portrait of an officer in hussar uniform, with a soft, sweet face, and laughing eyes. 'Your *ménage* is only too perfect. How unlike you and your brother were, Mr. Frere. I never could call *you* by your Christian name, though you are my brother-in-law. While he —he is always "Joscelyn" to me. It was too disobliging of him not to fall in love with me.'

'I wish he had!' exclaimed Mr. Frere, with more of animation than he had yet shown; 'I wish he had, and then I should not be bored by a modest application to forward the fortunes of his daughters, and find a career for his son.'

'His son and daughters,' repeated Lady Elton,

'I thought they were provided for by their fine old Irish gentleman of a grandfather.'

'Provided for!' said the host, with a sneer; 'when did an Irishman provide for anything?'

'I suppose it is their improvidence that makes them such pleasant people,' said Lady Elton, reflectively. 'How many children did poor Joscelyn leave?'

'Two daughters and a son; but Maxwell can tell you more about them than I can,' replied Mr. Frere, taking some letters which had come by the last post from a salver presented by the distinguished-looking butler with almost religious reverence.

'Yes, I remember you went over to Ireland for grouse-shooting the last two seasons,' said Lady Elton, turning to her nephew; 'so I suppose you found pleasant quarters?'

'Wonderfully pleasant!' he exclaimed, warmly. 'Such ease and comfort, and a hearty welcome; Dungar was no Castle Rackrent, I assure you; everything was well ordered. Occasionally oddities and incongruities cropped up, but only enough to be amusing and original; and the grandfather, Mr. de Burgh, was a typical high-bred gentleman of the old school—like Lever's "Knight of Gwynne," but quite incompetent to manage his own affairs. My aunt and cousins, however, had to turn out, because the property is entailed, and goes to a distant relative. Old Mr. de Burgh had no sons.'

'It must be very hard for them,' said Lady

Elton, musingly; 'are they left quite unprovided for?'

'Not quite,' returned Max; then, addressing his father: 'I called to-day at Steenson and Gregg's, as you desired, to ascertain what they knew about Mrs. Joscelyn Frere's resources, and they referred me to a queer little fellow who manages their Irish business. He told me there is something like seven or eight thousand pounds left of her younger child's portion, and that remains a first charge on the estate. It seems the firm raised money for old De Burgh, and this man knows all about the De Burgh affairs, for he is the son of a Dungar tenant, and was recommended to the firm by my uncle two or three and twenty years ago.'

'Seven or eight thousand pounds on land!—that means scarce three hundred and fifty a year. Why don't you take it and trade with it, Mr. Frere, and give your sister-in-law six per cent.?' suggested Lady Elton, ringing the bell with the freedom of an *habituée*. 'Here is another sister-in-law ready to lend you on the same terms.'

'Thank you,' replied Mr. Frere, coldly, 'the firm is not in need of funds; but if you really want a safe investment, consult Steenson. He is a very cautious, prudent adviser. I must say I have often wondered why you withdrew your affairs from his management.'

'I dare say you have,' said Lady Elton, with her sweetest smile and just a little nod; 'but I dare say Max will find out one day that I have not mismanaged them myself. My cloak and fur, if you

please' (this to the butler). 'After Southern Italy, I assure you furs are very acceptable, though we are on the borders of April.'

There was a short silence, during which Mr. Frere frowned over a letter, and Max hummed the 'Last Rose of Summer.'

It was broken by the entrance of a stout, supremely respectable woman, in a lace cap and a black silk dress, who carried over one arm a large red Indian cashmere cloak, richly embroidered with silvery white silk and a sable boa.

'Oh, thank you, Gardner,' said Lady Elton, civilly, and turning to allow the housekeeper to envelop her in her wraps. 'I think everything went very well to-day, Gardner; quite creditably.'

'I am glad your ladyship is satisfied,' replied the sedate Gardner. 'Are you warm enough, my lady? it is cold to-night.'

'Quite warm enough, thank you. Good-night, Mr. Frere. Good-night, Max; come and see me when you return from Paris, and tell me how the dear delightful city looks after all her troubles. I suspect those Versaillists did quite as much mischief as the poor Communards.'

'Let me see you to your carriage,' said Max, offering his arm. 'Perhaps Mrs. Joscelyn Frere will come to London,' said he, as they descended the stairs; 'though how she is to exist here I cannot imagine. But if she comes, do you feel disposed to call upon her? She is a nice creature, though highly impractical, and your advice——'

'Max,' interrupted Lady Elton, turning to look at him, 'you are interested in these Irish relatives?'

'Yes, very much interested, and grateful too for some very pleasant days.'

'Interested and grateful!' repeated Lady Elton, with strongly marked emphasis. 'What remarkable people they must be!'

Max laughed good-humouredly, as he handed his aunt into the brougham that had waited so long.

'Good-night, and *au revoir*.'

'Good-night,' returned Lady Elton. 'Why, Max, it is striking eleven!'

Max slowly ascended the stairs, and met his father coming from the drawing-room, evidently bound for bed.

'You are not going out again, Maxwell?'

'No, sir; I want to write a letter or two before I sleep, as I shall have no time to-morrow.'

'Ah, talking of letters, here is one I had to-day from, I suppose, the eldest of those cousins of yours. It is signed "Grace Frere." It seems they are coming to London to seek their fortune. Preposterous! Read it, and see if you cannot put them off such a project.'

'From Grace!' exclaimed Max, quickly, a slight frown contracting his brow for an instant. 'Give it to me!' and he waited with visible impatience till his father selected a square, thin letter from a large collection.

Taking it, he bid his father a careless good-night, and sprang upstairs to his own room, a large, luxuriously furnished chamber, with a smaller sleeping

apartment beyond. Hastily turning up the gas, Max Frere threw off his coat and waistcoat, and put on a dressing-gown. Then, drawing an easy-chair to the table, and lighting a cigar, he opened the letter.

'DEAR UNCLE,' began the girlish, yet not spidery, writing—'My mother desires me to say that we intend leaving for London next week, as there is no opening here for a young man of such abilities as my brother's, as she is sure you will think when you know him. Perhaps you could find lodgings for us somewhere near you—three bedrooms and a sitting-room, or we might do with two bedrooms—and mamma thinks we must not give more than two pounds a week. We will travel without any servant, for poor dear nurse's only daughter died a month ago, and she must stay to take care of the little children. My mother and sister join me in kindest regards to you and to Max.

'I am your attached niece,

'GRACE FRERE.

'P.S.—I am quite vexed! for I gave this letter to Randal more than a week ago to post, as he was going out, and I have just found it still in his overcoat pocket! I thought that you were perhaps out of town, as you did not answer. So I wrote to Jimmy Byrne, at Messrs. Steenson and Gregg's, and he will take rooms, and meet us. I hope you don't mind!—G. F.'

After reading this with attention, Max laid it

down, and burst into a low laugh of intense amusement. The idea of Richard Frere, the dignified head of the great firm of Frere and Co., the probable M.P. for Finsbury at the next election, spending his precious moments in hunting up scrubby lodgings, at two pounds a week, for a tribe of obscure, moneyless relatives, was too comic. But the reverse of the picture forced itself upon him—the pathos of this utter, simple trust in the claim and right of kinship.

'What will they all do in London?' he thought. 'What a terrible schooling is before them! Poor Grace!' A short, quick sigh. 'But when was this precious letter written? The only date is Friday. It could not have been last Friday. This is Wednesday. I should not be surprised if they were already in town. That curious little beggar at Steenson's said they were coming immediately. How deeply disgusted my father will be! And they—they, no doubt, set it down to our shopkeeping miserliness that the Frere mansion is not thrown open for their reception. God help them! that mediæval style is long gone by. I believe Grace thought I stood behind a counter and sold sugar by the pound. After all, the difference is less in kind than in degree. But Randal's abilities! What a delusion! He will be the real millstone round their necks. Still, we must give him a chance.'

And, leaning back in his chair, watching the blue curls of smoke, Max thought hard for the next ten or fifteen minutes; and then, muttering:

'It is a tremendous break up, and hard lines for Grace—deuced hard lines'—he opened his blotting-book, and began to write rapidly and steadily.

CHAPTER II.

THE same evening, while the gorgeous guests at Mr. Frere's feast were beginning to disperse, a note of preparation was distinctly perceptible in one of the small houses of a semi-genteel crescent in the Camden Hill district.

The mistress of the house had looked twice from the front-door down the street, and each time had said to the 'little captive maid,' who under strict discipline accomplished herculean labours of cleaning and polishing:

'I don't see no sign of them, Sarah; yet the gentleman said as the train would be at Euston about nine, now it's just twenty—or just seven minutes to ten.'

And each time Sarah had replied: 'Trains ain't always punctual, mum! and then there's the luggage to see to.'

'I will look to the parlour fire, Sarah; the gentleman said I was to be sure and have one, and he

seemed a fair-speaking genteel sort of a gentleman, and his reference quite correct; they will be good lodgers I am thinking, Sarah.'

But Sarah had descended to her own regions, whence arose a severe hissing suggestive of the kettle having boiled over. So the mistress turned into a small parlour scarce fifteen feet square, tenderly stirred a small but bright fire, and added a pinch of coal to it, twitched one or two netted antimacassars into more accurate rectangularity, and then stood gazing with extreme satisfaction at the section of her property immediately under her eyes.

Miss Timbs was a maiden lady, as she would have described herself, on the further side of five-and-forty, rather tall and exceedingly narrow. Her respectable afternoon dress of thick dark brown stuff being of corresponding dimensions, she looked a little like a mediæval saint as she stood contemplating her belongings, only there was no folding of hands for Miss Timbs; neither, to use her own words, could she abide caps, so her 'pepper-and-salt' tinted locks were arranged on either side of her somewhat stony face in short corkscrew ringlets painfully like small mattress springs. While she thus stood—an unusual interval of repose for her — the sound of approaching vehicles caught her ear.

'Sarah!' she called, 'they are coming,' and she turned on the gas which had hitherto shown only a pin's point of flame; another moment, and the sound of a cab stopping drew her and her little handmaid to the door. They discerned by the light

of an opposite lamp a hansom, drawn up before the garden-gate, and a large dark object behind it, which they shrewdly judged to be a 'four-wheeler,' piled with luggage.

The driver of the hansom had descended, and was in the act of shouldering a portmanteau which had impeded the egress of two gentlemen, who now sprang quickly out and went to assist the occupants of the second vehicle to alight.

From the four-wheeler emerged two ladies and a little girl, all in mourning, and then were handed out a multitude of small parcels, bags, boxes, books, a birdcage, a roll of wraps, until little Sarah quite disappeared under the pile raised upon her outstretched arms.

'Now don't stand out here, dear madam, troubling yourself about the baggage; Mr. Randal and me will see to it all. Pray go indoors with the young ladies,' said the shorter of the two men in an indescribable voice, the London twang superimposed on a western sing-song of wonderful flatness.

'Thank you very much! you are really too good,' replied the elder lady gently; and taking the arm offered her by her companion, she ascended the steps at the top of which stood Miss Timbs, whose notions of dignity would not permit her to descend into the *mêlée* of unloading, but as a token of assistance and welcome, held a lighted best composite candle (eight to the pound) at the utmost stretch of her arm out into the darkness. The little girl had already made her way through the garden, and stood gazing with all her might at the landlady, as

if the whole object of the journey had been to study this new specimen of humanity.

'Go in, Mab; don't stare so,' said the young lady, in a low voice. Whereupon Mab made an evanescent but distinctly contemptuous grimace, and walked in.

'Glad to see you, 'm,' said Miss Timbs, with a sort of cast-iron civility. 'Will you please have tea, or a glass of beer? I have some new-laid eggs and a piece of breakfast bacon in the house, as I did not know what you might like to take.'

'Oh, nothing for me—I could not eat,' exclaimed the lady in a kind of despairing tone. 'Grace, my dear, you had better order something for yourself.'

'I am *so* hungry!' exclaimed Mab, desisting from a close examination of the ornaments on a tiny console between the fireplace and the end wall. 'I shall eat two eggs, please.'

'Hush, Mab! You must eat, mother,' said the young lady, with tender authority. 'Pray let us have a good dish of bacon and eggs, and tea—a cup of tea will revive you, dear mother.'

'Perhaps so—and, Grace,' in a doubtful tone, 'I suppose we had better ask little Mr. Byrne to sup with us?'

'Yes, of course; Randal will see to that.' To Miss Timbs: 'Will you be so good as to show us our rooms?'

'Certainly, 'm—here,' throwing open half of the folding-door, by which the front and back parlours might on great occasions be made into one, and displaying a minute chamber where, with a little

stretching, an ordinary sized man might reach all the means of making his toilette without moving out of bed. 'I thought this might do for the gentleman, 'm,' went on Miss Timbs, with much volubility; 'it's all fresh and clean'—ruffling up sheets, blankets, and mattress with one dexterous, powerful turn of her hand. 'And then if you'll come upstairs (I must trouble you two flights, for I can't part my drawing-room suite)—but you'll find my house the same top and bottom—what you do, do thorough, I say—and so, 'm, the gentleman thought the big top front room and the back bedroom would do for the young ladies and yourself. Of course, if so be as you would like my drawing-rooms, I wouldn't mind letting the 'ole house moderate, on a permanency, with plate and table-linning.'

As she spoke, Miss Timbs, still holding the candle, led the way up the steep, narrow stairs with a quick step, while the poor weary travellers toiled after her breathless, till the whole party were ushered into a tolerably sized, but low bed-chamber, with one large bed; the usual pink and white muslin-draped dressing-table; no curtains; sundry pieces of faded, many-patterned carpet, and a large painted deal press, with one short foot, and a door, which stuck hopelessly—peculiarities threatening destruction to those adventurers who attempted to use it. This dangerous piece of furniture was proudly termed a wardrobe by its owner.

'This is my best two pair front; and here, 'm,'

opening a small, meanly-furnished closet, 'is the back bedroom—not large, as you see, but neat and comfortable.'

'Thank you—very nice indeed,' said mamma, helplessly.

'You and Mab had better have the larger room, mother,' said Grace, 'and Mab can come in and dress every morning with me. Would you send us some warm water?' (this to Miss Timbs), 'and we shall be ready for tea as soon as you can get it.'

'Yes, 'm; I must look to it myself, for I never yet see a gurl I could trust with a hegg.'

'What's a hegg, Grace?' asked Mabel, who was pursuing her researches with much diligence.

'Hush, Mabel! she hears you! it is only her way of saying egg;' and then, as Miss Timbs disappeared, she added:

'Come, dear mamma, here is your cap. Let me help you to take off your things. When you have a cup of tea you will feel refreshed, and be able to sleep, I hope.' So saying, the young lady quickly took off her hat and waterproof cloak, and laying them on the bed, proceeded to unfasten her mother's mantle. Mrs. Joscelyn Frere had evidently been a beauty; her complexion was still wonderfully fair and fresh, her full blue eyes soft and bright, her hair only slightly touched with grey, and middle-aged stoutness could not quite conceal a once fine figure. Her expression was both sad and nervous. She accepted her daughter's aid mechanically, looking round the larger room, to which they had returned, with evident discontent.

'What a wretched garret!' she exclaimed, her mouth quivering like a disappointed child; 'surely that Mr. Byrne, of whom you all think so much, ought to have known better than to thrust us into such a hole as this. *He* knows that we have been accustomed to better than anyone else; but now your dear grandfather is gone we have nothing, and are no—no—thing,' and the poor lady's sweet, soft voice was broken by sobs.

'Dear, dear mother, this will never do!' cried her daughter, tenderly; 'you are over-fatigued, but you must not give way now when we have accomplished the plan on which you had set your heart. Think how you will vex Randal. Come, bathe your eyes, while I smooth Mabel's hair, and then we will go downstairs and have our tea. Depend upon it Jimmy Byrne has done the best he could. London is a costly place, and——'

'Pray do not say Jimmy Byrne,' implored Mrs. Frere, from the dressing-table.

'Very well, dear; but I have been accustomed to hear him spoken of as Jimmy—stand still, Mabel! Mabel, I can*not* comb your hair if you fidget so, and you will be more comfortable when it is done.'

'You are hurting me—and I want to kiss mammy. Don't cry, mammy.'

'You shall kiss her in a minute——'

'Do not prevent the poor child from showing her love for me, Grace.'

'In one moment, mother—I *will* finish your hair, Mabel.'

'Ah! you are hurting—ah!'

'There, now you are ready.'

A hasty washing of hands, and smoothing of her own locks, and Grace declared herself ready to descend.

Downstairs in the little parlour, things looked considerably more cheerful. Randal Frere, a tall, slender youth of nineteen or twenty, with his mother's light-blue eyes, and soft, sweet expression, less an indescribable something of candour and guilelessness, was helping the giggling Sarah to lay the cloth, and Mr. James Byrne, who had diligently assisted to carry the smaller parcels into the back room, where they formed a pyramid, was unlocking a very professional-looking black bag, which seemed crammed to bursting. He desisted from this occupation as the ladies entered, Mrs. Frere leading, Mabel and Grace following.

'I hope, Mrs. Frere, ma'am' (madam contracted readily when Mr. Byrne was in a hurry, or agitated), 'that you find things pretty tidy upstairs. It's not what I could wish by any means, but Londoners are a trifle extortionate, and you wouldn't believe what sums of money—sums, no less—I was asked for the sort of rooms I'd have chosen for you; and as Miss Grace wrote decided about price——'

'I am sure you are very good,' interrupted Mrs. Frere, subsiding into a chair placed for her by her son. 'We are well aware how limited our means are, and I am quite content.'

'Indeed, you have done wonders for us,' cried Grace, who had at once fallen on the loaf, and

begun more energetically than deftly to cut bread-and-butter; 'and we are more obliged than I can say. Do you know I was the first to recognise you at the station this evening, Mr. Byrne, and it is quite five years since you were at Dungar?'

'Well, I am sure I could not say I would have known *you*, Miss Grace,' cried Mr. Byrne, 'you were just a slip of girleen then, and now you are an elegant young lady.'

'Ah, Mr. Byrne! you have not lost your pleasant Irish *tourneur de phrase* during your expatriation.'

'Now that's too severe!' exclaimed Jimmy, utterly ignorant of what *tourneur de phrase* meant.

'I hoped you would have come last night,' said Byrne to Mrs. Frere. 'I thought you would——'

'Well, my son thought it a good opportunity to see Chester Cathedral, and the town itself. I believe he is about to write a short poem on Chester Fair in the fifteenth—or is it the fourteenth century, Randal? And we thought it wiser to see the town *en passant*, than that he should make a separate journey for the purpose. You see we are rapidly becoming strict economists.'

'Yes, ma'am, exactly so,' stammered Byrne, as if stunned. 'Oh, a poem—really now—I didn't know——'

'That we had a poet among us,' put in Grace, as the little man hesitated. 'Indeed we have, and a poet of no mean order—eh, Randal?'

'Come, Grace, that is not your real opinion,' said the young man, good-humouredly.

'Never mind, Randal; my opinion is not worth much: and here is something more important,' as Sarah entered, carrying a tray loaded with plates, and a dish of fair dimensions and appetising contents.

The next quarter of an hour was devoted to recruiting exhausted nature. Even the desponding mother revived wonderfully, and consented to taste a second morsel of the delicately browned bacon and just half a cup more tea, although it might have been stronger; while the *bleu de nacre* tint of the milk excited much wonderment and apparently profound reflection on the part of Mabel, a diminutive imp of ten, with a small, pale face, big eyes, and strangely mingled ways, at once babyish and old-fashioned.

'I think, Mrs. Frere, ma'am,' said Mr. Byrne, with a certain amount of hesitation, 'that you want something better than a cup of milk and water (and this ain't no better) after your journey, and I made so bold (which I hope you'll excuse) to put a bottle of sherry and a little seed-cake for the young ladies in me bag.' So saying, he jumped off his chair as if shot from beneath, and pounced upon the black bag, from which, with some struggling and tugging, he produced first a black bottle, and then a large parcel considerably squeezed in, both of which he placed triumphantly on the table. 'Stop a bit! I'm like a great operator—I never travel without me instruments' (Jimmy Byrne said 'nivir' and 'thravel,' but they do not look pretty written so), and he drew from his left trousers-pocket

a treasury of a knife, the handle of which contained a variety of implements, among them a cork-screw, which he selected. A sharp, sudden, cheerful chuck and pop ensued. 'Is there a glass to be found anywhere?' he said, looking round.

'Yes,' cried Mabel, slipping from her chair; 'there are six on the little marble shelf behind you.'

'That's right,' returned Jimmy Byrne, delicately wiping the mouth of the bottle with a corner of the table-cloth, and then proceeding to dust a couple of glasses by the same means. Seizing a small, battered tray left by Sarah on the invariable chiffonier at one side of the fireplace, he put the glasses thereon, filled them to the brim, and with much elegance handed them to Mrs. Frere. 'I am so overjoyed and overwhelmed to see you and the dear young ladies—to say nothing of Mr. Randal—that the bag and the bottle went clean out of my head. Just put it to your lips, Mrs. Frere, ma'am. I wish I had thought of it before you began on that wishy-washy stuff. A couple more glasses, Miss Mabel—now don't turn away, madam. Here Mr. Randal—Miss Grace—here's welcome to London, and may it bring you luck.'

'You are very kind and thoughtful,' said Mrs. Frere, now quite thawed, 'but I seldom take wine; I——'

'Mother,' whispered Grace, 'you must not refuse.'

'But I cannot say "no" to you,' concluded the mother, amending her phrase.

'I am sure, ma'am, you make me proud,' exclaimed their humble friend. 'Miss Grace dear—I beg your pardon, the word jumped just straight from my heart to my lips—but you'll take a drop?'

'Indeed I will,' cried Grace, sweetly and heartily. 'What good sherry, Mr. Byrne! it reminds me of poor grandpapa's,' she added, with the instinctive tact which is the wealth of fine spirits.

'Do you think so now? Well, indeed, it's the best I could get. What but the best would I offer to the lady and children—ay, and grandchildren—of the men I owe everything to?' (Jimmy Byrne would not have used so vulgar and common a word as wife for the world.) 'Take another glass, Mr. Randal; and try the cake,' unrolling a huge round mass with the utmost despatch. 'I remember how the poor dear master always eat seed-cake with his wine. Sure, when I was a bit of a boy, I used to see Mrs. Lynch, the housekeeper (and a mighty proud woman she was), beatening up eggs and powdherin' sugar whenever I went up to the big house.'

'Pray don't, Mr. Byrne!' exclaimed Mrs. Frere, pressing her handkerchief to her eyes. 'I cannot bear these memories.'

'God forgive me!' exclaimed Mr. Byrne, piously and penitently.

An awkward pause ensued, broken by Mabel, who observed, in an injured voice:

'I have not had a drop of wine yet! and why don't you cut the cake?'

'Mabel! I fear wine is not good for you after tea, my dear,' said her mother.

'Do wine and tea turn, Grace?' asked Mabel, bent on getting to the root of the matter.

'She is thinking of a milk posset, I believe,' said Randal, laughing. 'Here, Mab—here, take a sip out of my glass.'

'Thank you; I want one for my own self,' said Mab.

'I think the least taste would not hurt her, madam,' suggested Byrne, nearly filling a glass, and cutting an enormous wedge of cake.

'Well, Byrne,' said Randal, sipping his wine, 'have you seen my uncle lately?'

'Your uncle, Mr. Randal!' said Byrne, as if surprised. 'I never saw him but once in my life; but I did see his son, Mr. Maxwell Frere, this very morning; and an elegant young man he is—quite a swell. I did not know who it could be when they sent me in to speak to him.'

'What did he want with you?' asked Randal, with a slight frown, while Grace, who had been putting the tea things on the tray with unconscious orderliness, stopped, and listened intently, her large eyes fixed on the speaker, as Byrne replied:

'Oh, just to ask one or two little things for his father. He wished to know how you and your mamma were situated; and, as I have no doubt Mr. Frere can and will be a good friend to you, Mr. Randal, I just told him all I knew.'

'I should not mind my uncle,' said young Frere,

with a frown, 'but I do not want anything to do with his son. A more sneering, cynical chap than Maxwell Frere never existed. I hated the sight of him at Dungar.'

'Well, well, Randal,' observed his mother, 'I must say I thought him agreeable, and remarkably well-bred for a commercial man; though you know, Mr. Byrne, the Freres are of very good family, at least on the mother's side.'

'No doubt of it,' returned Jimmy, readily. 'Anyhow, Richard Frere, of Corbett Chambers, is a very influential man. They say he will get in for Finsbury next election.'

'Is it possible?' exclaimed Grace. '*That* is something worth a man's ambition!'

'I am sorry, Randal, you forgot to post Grace's letter to your uncle. He may take it ill, our asking anyone else to look out apartments for us. But I wonder Max did not come to meet us.'

'I do not think he knew when you were coming. He asked when you were to arrive, and then some one came in and interrupted us. So I had no opportunity of telling him. I think he said he was going to Paris for Easter.'

'To Paris!' cried Randal, enviously. 'What luck that fellow is in!'

'Of course he can do what he likes,' said Mrs. Frere.

'Why did he not like to come and meet us?' asked Mabel, yawning fearfully.

Grace said nothing, but a quick sigh, like a deep breath, parted her lips.

'You are a very tired little girl, are you not? Mother dear, I will put Mab to bed. Will you come up soon?' she said, smoothing her sister's head. 'I am sure Mr. Byrne will excuse us. We are all tired.'

'Certainly, Miss Grace; and this little lady looks just dead beat.'

'One moment, Grace,' said Mrs. Frere. 'I think it very desirable that no time should be lost in letting Mr. Frere know that his brother's family have arrived in town.'

'Hem!—true,' replied Mr. Byrne.

'He will have had my letter by this time,' said Grace.

'But you could give no address, so how could he call?' rejoined her mother.

'Suppose Mr. Randal were to call upon him in the city,' suggested the peace-loving Jimmy.

'I shall do no such thing,' cried Randal, hastily; 'he shall never say *I* ran after him.'

'Well, then, Grace and I will call at his house in H—— Square,' said Mrs. Frere, 'and if he is out I will leave my card. It is quite necessary some step should be taken.'

'Can we not settle all that to-morrow?' said Grace, wearily; 'this child is going to sleep.'

Mab had laid her head on her sister's lap.

'Come now, Mr. Randal,' remonstrated Jimmy Byrne, insinuatingly; 'I don't know much of company manners, but as a matter of business, I think you ought to call on your uncle! Just go to-morrow or next day, send in your card, have a few

minutes' talk, and then it will be all over. You'll excuse me, sir, speaking so free.'

'Of course, of course,' returned Randal, with princely condescension; 'well, I will see about it, but you will come to-morrow—eh, Byrne?'

'If I might make so bold, Mrs. Frere, ma'am, to come up in the evening, just to see if I can be of any use; for I can seldom leave the office till after six, don't you know!'

'We shall be delighted to see you, Mr. Byrne, at any time,' returned Mrs. Frere, holding out her hand as she rose to leave the room. Mr. Byrne took it with infinite respect, and held open the door for her to pass out.

'Good-night,' said Grace, warmly; 'you have been the only bit of comfort in the desolation of our arrival;' and half-leading, half-carrying Mab, she followed her mother upstairs, while Randal and the family friend exchanged adieux in the hall.

Arrived in their exalted sleeping quarters, Grace had much to do; she had to undress the sleepy little sister, who, with the perversity of an over-wearied child, resisted the removal of every garment. She had to unpack every article of her own and her mother's *toilette de nuit.* She had to re-arrange the bedclothes, and soothe her mother out of one or two fits of gentle impatience (if one may use such an expression) and hysterical despondency. And when all this had been accomplished, and she had retired into her own miserable little room, she was several times recalled to be told her mother had quite forgotten to warn her about her candle, to know where

the matches were, and if it would not be well to ask the landlady for a night-light. At last, she was finally dismissed with a tender 'God bless you, my child! what should we do without you?'

And then she was alone! alone, with very strained and wearied nerves. She had not dared the whole long day to relax the tension by which she had managed to keep a brave front. But instead of beginning to undress, she set her candlestick on the wretched little painted deal dressing-table, and stood by it profoundly still; one hand dropped listlessly by her side, the other resting on the table, her large eyes dilated, gazing far away to the pleasant past or the threatening future. At last, rousing herself, she knelt by her bedside, and burying her face in the clothes, burst into bitter though suppressed weeping; the quick sobs shook her whole frame; the tears would not stop till fatigue and emotion combined to overpower her, and she found herself falling asleep as she knelt. With an effort she roused herself and hastily undressed, eager to find oblivion and repose.

CHAPTER III.

RICHARD and Joscelyn Frere were sons of a successful, hard-headed, Westmoreland man, who had conquered fortune, and established a flourishing business. He had also married into a good squirearchal family, and given his sons the best education he could. The elder was a boy after his own heart, formed by nature for a business man. Joscelyn, the younger closely resembled a 'ne'er-do-well' uncle of his mother's, a handsome, fascinating scamp, and was consequently the mother's darling. Old Richard Frere, though hard-headed, was by no means hard-hearted—at least, to his pretty, well-bred wife, and yielded to her wish that her favourite—the boy who in face and figure resembled her people—should enter the army, which in due time he did.

A cavalry regiment, distinguished in more ways than one, was selected by Mrs. Frere, because the colonel was a relative, and in it young Frere soon became a great favourite. After a few years' ex-

perience of various quarters, and sundry applications to his father to set him straight—to which the long-suffering parent, with much growling, assented —the —— Hussars were ordered to Ireland.

About the same time Richard Frere senior died rather suddenly, and Richard his son reigned in his stead. The widowed mother did not long survive a husband whom she missed more than she expected to do; and Captain Joscelyn Frere, receiving the portion of property which fell to his share, rejoined his regiment, now quartered in the south-west of Ireland. He was almost immediately told off for detachment duty in a wild, beautiful, lonely district, where the only gentleman's residence, for miles around, was Dungar Castle, the seat of Ullick de Burgh, Esquire.

Here the pleasant, good-looking hussar was well received, and soon became the spoiled child of the house, especially by the two young ladies, Mr. de Burgh's remaining children. To the blue eyes and sweet smile of the second daughter Captain Frere fell a victim, and after a short successful wooing, carried away the beauty of Dungar.

A few pleasant years of regimental life succeeded, varied by frequent leave of absence, running over to Paris, taking peeps at Homburg, spending just a few weeks in London in the height of the season, where the dullest thing they encountered was a solemn dinner at the house of the elder brother, who had married early into the good old Border family of Maxwell. Then came the Crimean war, where Captain Frere was wounded, but obtained

two steps. Finding both health and means considerably weakened, he retired as lieutenant-colonel, and, with his wife and family, led a wandering, continental life, exceedingly agreeable, but always costing a little more than it ought; till a sharp attack of fever, while the family were in the south of France, cut him off.

His indulged, helpless wife was left with a son, the survivor of three; Grace, then about ten years old, and little Mab—a baby, beginning to walk. They lingered for another year in the pleasant sunny land where they had been so happy, and then, finding that in some inexplicable way she appeared to have no more money, she gladly accepted her father's loving invitation to make her home with him, as his other daughter was married and away in a distant rectory.

Thus Dungar became the home of the little party we have seen arrive in the great metropolis, and nearly eight years had slipped away before the kindly, high-bred, improvident grandfather died.

Here Grace grew in health, and the beauty of health, like a wild rose.

Nobody ever troubled about anything at Dungar. There were horses in the stable, a good dinner every day, and grand wood and turf fires; there was fruit in the gardens, grapes in the hot-houses, servants and gamekeepers—who got paid somehow—but there was very little ready money.

At first Randal was sent to a high-class English preparatory school; then Mr. de Burgh, finding quarterly payments inconvenient, thought the boy

might be prepared for college just as well at home by reading with the parson, and studying French and Italian with his sisters' governess.

The young ladies had a governess always; but, for the last two or three years, a French girl of a very cheap order, who had never enjoyed herself so much in her life as at Dungar. If she spoke French with grace and taught Grace and Mabel the rudiments of music, they, in return, taught her to sit square on horseback, and pull an even stroke across the bay.

Education, like everything else, was desultory and intermittent at Dungar. A fine morning for a gallop across a wide stretch of heathy, grassy plain to the little market town of Rawcrawn was a good and sufficient cause for closing books and shutting up desks; and the utmost determination on the part of mademoiselle that Mab *should* practise an additional quarter of an hour, to make up for the defalcations of yesterday, was never proof against an inroad from Randal, and the announcement that 'Denis' or 'Rory' had just come up to say there was a shoal of mackerel or herring in the bay, and the ladies must come down to see the nets dragged.

Oh, the healthy delight of free life by flood and fell! The sweet, briny air, the sense at once of mastery and sympathy—for the De Burghs were adored by the simple but shrewd peasantry round about—the enjoyment of to-day, the utter unconsciousness that such a period as to-morrow existed! Why could it not go on for ever? Why does this careless, natural enjoyment entail a return to poverty and savagery?

No such questions vexed Grace and Randal Frere. They grew and bloomed alike; the difference being that the latter, by some inner process, came to call his idleness and want of application genius, and Grace, by some equally occult process, came to be ashamed of hers, and to endeavour to remedy it by intervals of strenuous application.

Between sixteen and seventeen, strong strained ideas of duty and perfection began to suggest themselves to her mind—duty so exacting that she never could keep up to the mark for quite three days together; and then came relapses, when she could do nothing but ride, or row, or walk and climb. Innocent dissipations enough, yet sufficiently subversive of her high ideal.

Mabel liked her best when she was less strenuously good, and her grandfather loved and admired her in every mood. She was the only one of his grandchildren born at Dungar, and she had been called, by his wish, after an ancestress of the old Costello race, from whom, on the grandmother's side, she was descended. But, besides her aspirations after goodness and perfection, Grace had a deep thirst for knowledge. Dungar was possessed of an unusually good collection of books. It could hardly be dignified with the appellation of a library; but there was to be found Scott and Washington Irving, Prescott and Motley, Gibbon, and Alison, and Bulwer, Thackeray, Dickens and Mrs. Gaskell, Byron and Tennyson, beside the older poets, and their mighty king, Shakespeare.

Here, at times, especially on wet days, did Grace and Randal revel. Here was the girl's real schoolroom, and these her masters. Moreover, she dearly loved to read the newspapers to grandpapa, and listen to his shrewd remarks, for Mr. de Burgh was a keen politician.

At the earlier stage of Mrs. Frere's residence at Dungar, gay guests from Dublin, and even from England, came to enjoy the beauty and sport of this wild retreat; but, latterly, Mr. de Burgh declared himself unequal to the presence of comparative strangers, and the only companions outside the family circle available to Grace and Randal were the old parson, a contemporary of grandpapa's, and his Scotch grandson, Maurice Balfour, an orphan, who generally spent his holidays at the Dungar rectory.

A shy, silent boy, some few years older than the young Freres, and passionately devoted to fishing, boating, and shooting.

His father had been the factor of a Highland laird, whom one of the rector's daughters had married against her father's will.

Both parents died while Maurice was still a child, leaving the boy to battle with the world as best he could, with the feeble help of his aged, and far from wealthy, grandfather.

His upbringing was therefore neither refined nor tender; nevertheless, though Grace used openly to laugh at his Scotch accent, and generally divert herself with his shy fits, there was an innate gentleness, an indefinable something about him—the germ of

chivalrous feeling, perhaps—that always made her sure of him, secure of his forbearance and readiness to help her out of any scrape.

So time rolled on till about a year and a half before the opening of this story.

One day at the end of August, a letter arrived from Jimmy Byrne to grandpapa, on business—for after his advancement to the position of clerk in the great London establishment of Steenson and Gregg, Jimmy was always employed as a sort of commission agent for Dungar—in which he mentioned that Mr. Frere's only son had lately returned from Germany, and was going to visit Ireland. Upon which, Mr. de Burgh ordered his daughter to invite her nephew to Dungar that he might enjoy some shooting, and make his cousins' acquaintance.

The invitation was at once frankly accepted, and the advent of the London cousin was expected with some excitement.

Brought up, or rather growing up, as the young people were with ideas more akin to those of feudal times than of the nineteenth century, their notion of a London merchant was incredibly wide of the mark. Their mother had always spoken of her husband's relations in a tone of approbation, which somehow conveyed to her children the impression that she was too generous and high-minded to mention their shortcomings, and she always dwelt on the educational advantages which young Maxwell Frere enjoyed. Randal and Grace therefore pictured him as something between a shop boy and a schoolmaster. Both promised themselves much

amusement from the task of instructing him in the mysteries of field sports and the delights of sea-fishing.

'I daresay he will be a conceited cad,' said Randal, 'but we will take the conceit out of him.'

'Yes, *if* he is conceited,' returned Grace, musingly; 'but we must not be rude or unkind. After all, he is papa's nephew, and if he is anything like papa I shall love him, Randal.'

'Oh! he will not be like papa,' replied Randal, with much decision; 'he will be like his father, who must be a pompous old duffer from what mamma says. How old is he, Grace?'

'Four or five and twenty: he will look on you as a mere boy.'

'And on you as a mere schoolgirl!' retorted Randal; 'why, you will not be seventeen till January.'

'Pooh! what matter?' said Grace, with much disdain.

'Grace—Randal!' called Mrs. Frere from the window of a morning-room which looked on the flower-beds and shaven sweep of grass before and beside the old grey house, 'I wish you would come in and dress in good time for once, before grandpapa returns with your cousin.'

This conversation took place on the steps leading to the entrance of the Castle—as the rambling edifice was called—one splendid September evening. Mr. de Burgh had himself driven over early to Ballinagar, the nearest railway station, about ten miles off, to receive his guest with proper courtesy.

Grace thought with some exultation of the impression the stately old man must make upon their cockney relative. 'Dear grandpapa,' she said to herself, as she slowly ascended the steps in obedience to her mother's mandate, 'I am sure no king or emperor could have more of the "air noble" than he has; no money can buy that.' For Grace had always been accustomed to hear of 'ready money' as a sort of almost unattainable good which somehow nice people never had, but which, in an equally mysterious way, low-minded and unrefined individuals contrived to command. Meditating on the contradictions about her which had often occupied her thoughts of late, Grace went away upstairs to her own room, and proceeded to change her dress with the help of mademoiselle, without attending much to that lady's voluble communications, while she asked herself why it was that, with an estate stretching all round, this said ready money was so scarce? nay, growing steadily scarcer ever since she could notice anything. Why was it that grandpapa sometimes looked so fretted and weary when those large blue letters came from Dublin? and when Aunt d'Arcy asked her (Grace) to go and stay with her in that city, last spring, when she was there with *her* daughters for masters, why had mamma shaken her head, murmured something about 'really unable to afford it,' and wept and read the Bible for half an hour after?

The meditation on these problems kept Grace's countenance grave and her eyes dreamy, while mademoiselle and 'nurse,' who belonged properly

to Mabel, quarrelled as usual over her very simple toilette: white muslin, with a blue sash and a tucker, as became a schoolgirl.

'Could you not make my dresses any other way, nurse?' she asked, with a very discontented look in the glass at the *corsage à l'enfant*, frilled round the throat, and drawn into folds at the waist over her already developed figure; 'I look such a complete schoolgirl.

'Ah! what else are ye, me honey?' asked nurse; 'and an illigant slip of a girl into the bargain. Sure you don't want to be ould before your time?'

'The robes of mademoiselle might be a little advanced,' observed the French governess. 'You must remember "our dear one" is nearly seventeen.'

'Faith, you may make them yourself, then,' quoth nurse, in a huff, 'if I can't plaise the pair of ye!'

'Don't be cross, nurse. You are a dear old darling, and I am an ungrateful girl; but just make my next frock—dress, I mean—cut square, with lace,' and she bestowed a penitent kiss on the old woman's still smooth cheek.

'Ah, thin, you'd wheedle the birds off the threes, Miss Grace,' said nurse, mollified; 'you are a real De Burgh.'

'Yes, and a Frere too,' returned Grace, who had a wonderful love for her dimly-remembered father.

'An' small blame to you,' said nurse, her Irish nature sympathising with the filial instinct, and giving a final twitch to the sash, which ma'mselle had already tied. 'Whist,' she continued, 'I hear

the carriage. There, now, you go down an' show your cousin the sort of girls we *rare* in Ireland.'

When Grace entered the drawing-room, she could hardly believe her eyes. Could it be possible that the tall, slight, elegant-looking young man, who seemed to be one of Bulwer Lytton's heroes stepped out of the 'Disowned,' or 'Devereux,' was really her commercial cousin from London?

Tall and slight, as I have said, and of a clear brown complexion, his dark, rather deep-set eyes more thoughtful than bright. He was attired in an admirably-cut knickerbocker suit, and held in one hand a soft, dark-green felt hat. He was standing beside Mrs. Frere, and had evidently been just presented to her, as she had not returned to the easy-chair from which she had risen to receive him. Mr. de Burgh, dignified and courtly in his usual black velveteen shooting suit, his aquiline features and silvery-grey hair coming out well against the crimson curtains of the large bay window in which they were grouped, stood beside his daughter; while Mab, well sheltered behind her mother's black silk skirts, peeped cautiously and critically at the new-comer.

'Here, Grace,' called Mr. de Burgh, 'come and shake hands with your cousin.'

Grace, with the first feeling of shyness that had ever rippled over the fair surface of her inner life, came forward with unaccountably glowing cheeks, and downcast eyes, to receive an easy yet deferential bow, and a lingering, surprised glance from her strange kinsman.

'I had no idea my cousin was so much of a "young lady,"' said Maxwell Frere, in what sounded to Grace the most refined high-bred voice she had ever heard, and with a passing smile which displayed white teeth, and gave a sudden sweetness to his dark, keen face. 'I fancied' (to Mrs. Frere) 'that both your daughters were in the "little girl period."'

'Ah! you see Grace is such a rebellious subject,' said Mr. de Burgh, fondly drawing her towards him, 'there is no keeping her back.'

'Quite natural that she should claim and take a front-rank place,' returned the young stranger, in a tone of careless compliment.

'What a splendid view!' he continued, stepping nearer the window, and gazing with genuine admiration at the fine stretch of woodland, rich with autumnal tints, which spread away in a gentle slope on the left, up to where it was bounded by a jagged peaked line of blue hills, rising in places to mountain heights, and the wide, sheltered bay, a large rocky islet guarding its entrance, which lay immediately below, all golden red in the sunset light. 'You have a charming residence, Mr. de Burgh, and quite a different character of scenery from that of the north, where I have been staying.'

'Yes,' said Mr. de Burgh, still stroking Grace's head, but absently, and with a slight sigh. 'There is beauty enough—and from this window I am "monarch of all I survey!" Looking away west over the bay, our nearest neighbours are in America.'

'Who were you staying with in the north, Maxwell?' asked Mrs. Frere, subsiding into her chair, and permitting Mab to lean against her knee.

'I was moving about principally, but I spent three or four days with an old schoolfellow of mine, Kilrea. I daresay you know his people, sir' (to Mr. de Burgh); 'his father was one of your representative peers, and——'

'I knew him,' interrupted Mr. de Burgh. 'Kilrea—the father I mean—and I were in Vienna together in '47.'

Then the conversation turned on continental life, on the political changes since Mr. de Burgh's last visit to Austria, and other topics, in which Grace could take no part, until the entrance and introduction of Randal made a break, and then it was time to dress for dinner.

The dinner was very pleasant. Max Frere's company seemed to animate the kindly host, who had resigned the world in which his young guest seemed already so well versed.

To Grace the effect of this ready-flowing conversation, in which she could not join, was depressing. Yet the new cousin never for a moment neglected the small politenesses due to her and to her mother, and rendered them, too, in a frank, unstudied fashion.

Randal alone seemed quite thrown out. He made one or two attempts to join in the conversation, but was palpably overlooked.

After Mrs. Frere, her daughter, and mademoiselle had retired, the gentlemen sat long over their wine

—at least, Mr. de Burgh and his guest—for Randal who could not bear to be in any degree slighted, had slipped away, and asked Grace to come out and look at the bay by moonlight, when he took the opportunity of denouncing their English cousin as a conceited, supercilious jackanapes; an opinion from which Grace entirely differed, though she was far from satisfied with him herself. With his wonderful knowledge of people and things, his seemingly boundless experience, he appeared more suited for companionship with grandpapa than a half playfellow for herself, as Maurice Balfour was.

The next day, however, things looked brighter. After a long morning's shooting with the hale, active old squire, who seemed wonderfully revived by this sudden infusion of fresh ideas, Max Frere proposed to ride with his cousins after luncheon—a suggestion readily accepted—and the young recluses found that the London cousin sat his horse well, and rode as straight ''cross country' as if he had been born and bred in Clare.

On the whole, Maxwell Frere's visit was a great success. On grandpapa he made the best impression; Mrs. Frere declared him a charming companion; nurse and the servants' hall pronounced him 'a rale gintleman.' Grace was not so sure that he was charming, for he managed with perfect courtesy to make her feel herself a rather ignorant country girl, with a ridiculous amount of enthusiasm on various out-of-the-way subjects, concerning which the well-informed world did not trouble itself. As for Randal, he had no doubts at all; to

him Maxwell Frere was simply odious. Max laughed at his poetry and pretensions to genius; advised him to study book-keeping by double entry, and openly deplored to Grace and Mrs. Frere that he had been so early removed from an English school. This roused Grace's wrath; she was all the more disposed to stand up for her brother because of an undercurrent of unacknowledged conviction that Max Frere was right. During this visit she had many sharp encounters with her cousin, in which he did not always get the best of it, as he laughingly acknowledged. Yet, on the whole, they were good friends; and when he left, Grace missed the excitement of his society more than she cared to acknowledge.

A year elapsed, during which Maxwell wrote three or four times to Mr. de Burgh and his aunt, and then he came again for the grouse-shooting.

In the interim, Grace had matured much in mind. The contact with her cousin, the contrast of his modes of thought to her own, and those of her companions hitherto, had been a great enlightenment—almost an education to her. She had developed in every way, and when he came again, Max treated her as a young lady-friend and equal. They were more together, too. Mr. de Burgh had changed a good deal during the previous winter and spring. He was weaker, less cheerful, and more disposed to keep in his easy-chair; while Randal was less inclined to put up with his cousin's good-humoured quizzing than ever.

This companionship enabled Grace to overcome

the half-resentful fear of her cousin's superior knowledge and attainments which she had formerly felt. Maxwell was so much kinder and softer too—even complimentary, in a frank cousinly fashion, and they became the closest friends.

What long delightful rambles on foot and horseback! What fishing expeditions and nutting scrambles! What a free open-air life they shared! The new delight of such companionship gave a light to Grace's eyes, a smile of heart's joy to her lips, that clothed her with positive beauty; only one faint tinge of disappointment rippled the smooth surface of her entire content. When she tried to talk seriously to Max of her efforts at self-improvement, of her doubts on many subjects, of her deep desire to know the truth of this or that doctrine, he would never meet her in the same spirit. Sometimes she feared he was bored by such questioning, sometimes that he did not think her worth a reply; often that he did not bestow serious thought on matters that at times filled her heart to overflowing. And then she never felt that Max confided in her. To be sure, he was much older and wiser, but a momentary conviction would occasionally flash across her, that of her cousin's inner self she was utterly ignorant. Of course these were but momentary gleams. The insight of seventeen is but instinctive and fleeting. Maxwell Frere seemed, and to a certain depth was, remarkably frank. His reserve was no solid plate armour, to chill and repel the touch; rather a coat of chain-mail, flexible enough to show form and movement, but close

enough to prevent sword or lance-point piercing through.

And with all their companionship, Grace could never tell him her vague dreamy fancies; she feared his subtle, well-bred mockery, and dared not display her half belief in the superstitions which peopled lake and hill, and rocky cavern, ay, and red-golden cornfield, with fairies, 'good people' and 'leprechauns,' to say nothing of the special De Burgh banshee, who always wailed and mourned before any misfortune befell the family, as she could to Maurice Balfour, who would smile too, but in a different fashion. Then he was only four years older than herself, and Maxwell was nearly eight.

Still it was a very delightful time, that autumn visit which Max passed with them, and Grace felt herself advanced in dignity in some mysterious way, in consequence of her cousin's manner to her. A vague, sweet, unacknowledged consciousness that she was a woman—possibly a charming one—grew upon her, and gave a wonderful tender patience to her manner with Mabel and her mother, the former being often a trial. But the day of Maxwell's departure came too quickly, and it took all Grace's strength and innate pride to hide the anguish with which she dreaded it. Max himself openly declared his regret at the approaching separation, and painted vividly the contrast of his life in London to the delights of Dungar.

'Why do you go away then? I suppose you can do very much what you like?' said Grace, on his reiterating this declaration.

'No one can do just what they like,' returned Max; 'and even if I could, I should not stay at Dungar. I could not fancy passing the rest of my life as an Irish country gentleman—or a country gentleman anywhere. The charm of this place is chiefly that I can*not* stay.'

Grace sighed. They were riding together, having made a long excursion to visit a distant point of view greatly admired by Max Frere, and were now walking their horses leisurely, as there was plenty of time before dinner.

'Come, Grace,' he continued, for she did not speak, and his ear was curiously greedy for the sound of her rich, soft voice, with its faint, musically Irish intonation; 'come, you have a little curiosity and ambition yourself. You would not be content always to dwell in the happy valley, or rather on the happy hill?'

'You are right!' cried Grace, rousing herself; 'I always understood why Eve took the apple. I would not rest in contented conscious ignorance even in Paradise, though I might like to come back to it after trying other places.'

'I thought so,' returned her cousin, with a slight mocking smile; 'but when people want to come back to their paradise there are obstacles in the way. Angels with flaming swords, etcetera.'

'Yes,' said she, thoughtfully; 'how curious the whole story is. But don't fancy I am faithless to Dungar. I believe it would break my heart if I thought I was never to see it again. Yet, I have sometimes longed to go away. Is it not lovely?

and she pointed with her whip to the scene that stretched before them.

The road had wound round from behind one of the hills that sheltered the bay, and began to descend towards the level fields and open waste-land which bordered the sea. Opposite were three peaked mountains and a bold, bluff head-land, on the slope of which, looking south-west, lay the castle and woods of Dungar. On their left a soft swelling upland, thickly covered with pines, interspersed with birch, and maple, and oak, now glowing in the rich beauty of mid-autumn dyes, led up to a blue mountain range; while below, the sea lay still and glassy, except for the white foam-fringe that chafed against the beach. It had been a soft, grey day, with somewhat lowering clouds, and full of quiet tenderness, as if nature knew a leave-taking was at hand; but as evening approached, the clouds broke up, and gathered away in downy ash-coloured masses to the south, whereon the sinking sun cast unspeakable glories of gold, and purple, and crimson upon them. The air was laden with the perfume of the pine woods, and every inch of roadway bordered by the beauty of dark rocks, and bright-green mosses, and long, waving, many-tinted ferns, and graceful, trailing tangles of bramble and briar, and endless, varied leafage.

'Is it not lovely?' repeated Grace, checking her horse; 'I love every hill, and tree, and rock, yet—yet I too would leave it.'

'And yet,' added her companion, looking intently at the speaker, not the scene, 'you are not

unfaithful; nor am I, though I would not stay here.'

'I should like to see London,' said Grace, abruptly, and still gazing away out to sea; 'I remember Paris quite well, but I scarcely saw London. All the novels I have read speak of London—to be sure, there are no French novels in the house.'

'So much the better!' rejoined Max, laughing. 'As it is, you have read all sorts of books generally forbidden to other young ladies.'

'Have I?' exclaimed Grace, colouring, and slightly knitting a pair of distinctly but delicately marked brows. 'I am glad I am not as other young ladies, Max. I do not think any book I have read has hurt me;' and she touched her horse, who was pawing impatiently.

'Hurt you! no!' said Max, pressing his steed to her side, and, leaning towards her, laid his hand on her horse's neck. 'There are some natures that cannot be hurt.'

Grace laughed frankly.

'Not mine, I am afraid. I am not one bit an angel.'

'You are infinitely nicer!' exclaimed her cousin. 'Tell me, are you sorry I am going to-morrow? Shall you miss me?'

'Miss you! Yes, indeed I shall! There is no one here like you. I shall miss you till you come back. You *will* come back next autumn, Max?'

'I will,' said Max, looking fixedly into the fair, sweet face, glowing with a wonderful, transparent,

rosy beauty, after their ride in the fresh, humid air, and into the candid, fearless grey eyes, so shaded with long black lashes that they might be taken for blue, or black, or brown, or any other darksome loveliness, and thrilling with a mixed triumph and delight to see them droop under his, while the bright colour faded and flamed up again on his companion's cheek, as he added emphatically, 'if *you* wish it!'

'Ah, Maxwell, that is your English conceit!' cried Grace, instinctively resisting her own emotion. 'You know I wish you to come back, but you like to hear me say it.'

'Exactly! precisely so! But—who knows?—you may leave Dungar. We may meet in London.'

'Hush!' said Grace, lifting her hand. 'I have such a strange, miserable foreboding sometimes that we shall leave this dear, dear home before long, and be very unhappy—that it will be a sort of judgment on me for wishing to go——'

'What!' interrupted Max. 'Has the unpleasant female appendage to the house of De Burgh been howling lately?'

'Max, you are too bad! I will not answer! You mock at everything. After all, are you so much wiser than your neighbours?'

'When my neighbours are, say, in Mincing Lane, certainly not; and when my neighbour is a certain wild Irish girl, I fear the wisdom is also nil.'

'Ah!' cried Grace, putting on a touch of the brogue, 'do you mean to say I make a fool of you?'

'Nearly; not quite, if I can help it.'

'Come, Max! Here is a beautiful stretch of stubble field. Let us have a gallop. We can go home by the stone bridge, and not be very late.'

She shook her bridle, and darted off, sitting well down in her saddle, and settling to her horse's stride in a business-like manner. Max was obliged to touch his steed with the spur to overtake her, as her sudden action had won her a momentary advantage; and then away they went, neck and neck. Away in the wild, exhilarating contest of speed, their horses at full stretch, the fresh, still, humid air stirred almost to a breeze against their faces by the rapid motion, the delicious sensation of having 'wings as a bird;' of power, courage, daring to clear any obstacle that came in the way; of nameless, indescribable, headlong joy, that thrills the veins and braces the nerves, as a good rider feels beneath him the free stride of a horse he can trust devouring space, making their pulses throb with a strange delight.

When Grace at last drew rein, she was about half a length in advance, and looked back in gay triumph at her cousin.

'I might have passed you, had you not stopped,' he said, in answer to the look. 'But I must say you are splendidly mounted. That black mare would bring a long price at Tatts'; and both of you might create a sensation in the Park—especially your habit.'

'Now, Max, I know you are laughing at me! But I enjoy riding just as much as if my habit was

of the latest fashion, and grandpapa *has* promised me a new one for a Christmas present.'

'He had better commission me to send you one from London. There is a house where they forward directions for self-measurement.'

'I am afraid I should stand a bad chance of getting a new habit, if I depended on you, Max,' she returned, with a brilliant smile, yet with a certain wistfulness in her glance. 'Randal says you are not gifted with a good memory for those you leave behind.'

'Randal's vast experience, sound judgment, and deep insight into human nature, no doubt enable him to decide on my transparent character,' returned Max, with a touch of more than his usual calm contempt. 'How have I incurred the poet's distrust?'

'And how *can* you be so bitter?' cried Grace. 'There is something absolutely cruel in your voice.'

'Pooh, nonsense!' said Max, with an irrepressible tinge of annoyance in his tone. 'I am cruel in telling your brother the truth. If he goes on in the delusions which at present possess him, he will come to grief. I am sorry Mr. de Burgh did not send him to an English public school—that would have taken the nonsense out of him. Why, how old is Randal?'

'He will be nineteen in March.'

'He ought not to be mooning here, then; better for him to have a desk in a merchant's office than nothing.'

'Max!'

'Forgive me!' and he smiled tenderly. 'I do not like Randal to abuse me to *you*. Of course we miserable *negociants* are far beneath the notice of a daughter of the great house of De Burgh. Yet it is pleasant to remember that there is the same blood in my pretty cousin's veins as in my own. Pretty,' he repeated, thoughtfully; 'no, you are not pretty, Grace.'

'Dare you deny it!' she exclaimed, laughing and raising her whip.

'Strike, but hear me,' returned Max, again laying his hand on her horse's neck, and looking intently into her face. 'I wish—I wish you were *only* pretty.'

'Ah, Max, you have got cleverly out of that corner,' she said, still laughing, but with a heightened colour and a gleam of exultation in her eyes, for there was unmistakable sincerity in his tone. 'Can you follow?' she added, significantly touching her horse's flank with the whip, and rushing him at a ditch of tolerable width, which divided the long stretch of wheat-land from the waste. She turned to watch her companion's performance, as she landed on the other side. Max took it gallantly, sitting his horse like a man accustomed to ride straight.

'Well done, "commerce"!' cried his cousin, as he resumed his place at her side; then, holding out her hand with a frank, kindly grace, she added: 'I shall never turn my back on the Freres, Max; I am proud of them too. They have been men enough to build their own fortunes, and I loved my father dearly.'

A curious expression, not untinged with amusement, passed over Max's face as he gripped her hand hard.

'If it were not gloved, I should kiss this little hand in gratitude for your gracious words, mademoiselle la princesse.'

'Ah, Max, I wish I knew if you are ever in earnest. Try not to mock this last day, just this once.'

'Grace! cannot you see I am horribly in earnest in my dislike to say good-bye? Don't you know people sometimes laugh to save their tears?'

'Tears!—your tears! Ah, Max, that is something unheard of! Come, let us try once more if my "Colleen Dhu" cannot beat your bay in a trotting match.'

Not many more words passed between them till they reached the gates of Dungar, and slackened their pace to a walk, as the approach to the house was all uphill; even then both were unusually silent—Grace gazing away into space, lost in thought; Maxwell's eyes dwelling, with a dark intense expression and slight knitting of the brow, upon his companion.

Arrived at the house, Max assisted his companicn to dismount, and followed her into the house.

'Is Mrs. Frere out still?' he asked the butler, who had come forward to receive them.

'Yes, sir; she and the masther and Miss Mabel —they are all gone down to the glebe-house.'

Grace went on while the man spoke, and turned into a small, comfortable morning-room, much used

by her mother. She walked over to a work-table in the oriel window, which looked out on a splendid stretch of hills and sea.

'Look, Max! How careless Mab is! here is a whole heap of flowers, gathered and left to die! Will you ask Connell to bring me water, and the two——'

'Never mind them!' interrupted Max, closing the door behind him, and crossing the room to where Grace had just laid aside her hat, and was now drawing off her gloves. She looked up in surprise as he came to her side.

'Let the flowers lie there,' he continued. 'I want you to say good-bye to me *now*, when we are alone. To-morrow I must say it in a crowd, in sight of the whole family.'

He took her hand in both of his.

'But, Max——' began Grace, with a startled, awakening look in her large eyes:

'Good-bye, sweetest cousin! I have to thank you for all the pleasure of my visit here,' he continued, drawing her nearer to him, 'and I shall find nothing like you till we meet again! Give me a farewell kiss, as a proof that you forgive all my heresies and misdemeanours.'

To kiss so near a relation seemed quite natural to Grace. What surprised her was, that she should feel a strange fear of doing so. Still she never thought of resisting, although she trembled from head to foot as Max passed his arm gently round her, and held her to him with a clasp that grew closer and closer as he spoke.

'Do not forget me, Grace! Will you promise to welcome me as kindly as ever when I come back?' And he pressed a long clinging kiss on the sweet dewy virgin lips, so frankly yielded to him. 'You promise,' he repeated, still holding her soft, pliant figure to his breast, and almost startled to feel how wildly her heart beat, how she trembled in every limb.

'Yes, Max,' she replied, in a very low, but steady tone; 'I will always remember and welcome you!'

'Thanks, sweetest! I will hold you to it. No flirtations with the parson's grandson if he comes back! No *tête-à-tête* rides!'

'Max!' with inexpressible scorn and indignation.

'Forgive me; and now one more kiss, and I will let you go!'

'Max, I dare not! You must not hold me, dear Max!'

There was such reality in her effort to escape from his embrace, that Max felt compelled to release her; and as she hastily gathered up her riding-habit, he kissed the hand he still held.

'I, at least, can never forget the most charming cousin man ever had!' he exclaimed, as Grace, drawing her hand away, ran quickly out of the room, without one backward glance.

Max stood looking after her, and twisting one of the gloves she had dropped, in his hands:

'I am a greater idiot than I thought I was,' he muttered to himself; 'but that girl might set older and slower pulses than mine throbbing. God!

what sweet lips! and how she trembled! Pooh! what a blockhead I am!'

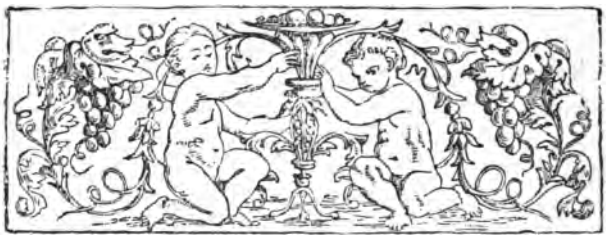
Catching sight of his aunt and Mr. de Burgh walking slowly across the gravel sweep, Max went forth to meet them, mentioning with admirable coolness that Grace and himself had only just come in, and that Grace had gone to dress for dinner. He proceeded to engage Mr. de Burgh in a discussion on the possibility of reclaiming the tract of waste that lay between the wheat-land and the sea, as if no such things as sweet lips and pliant trembling forms existed.

Meantime Grace flew to her own room, and was thankful to find it for once free from the presence of nurse or mademoiselle.

She was almost frightened at her own emotion. What was there in a cousin's kiss and request to be remembered, to make her heart beat till she could hear it, and her limbs tremble till she could scarce stand? But her cousin's voice and look and touch could not be mistaken. Nature, independent of a varied course of novel-reading, told her this was love. She felt wafted into sudden womanhood—felt it with a kind of awe. Now, of course, Max meant only to sound *her* feeling for him; but later, when she had studied and improved, and made herself more worthy of such a hero, he would come and, as he said, hold her to her promise. At any rate, young and uncouth and recluse as she thought herself, Max, accomplished, travelled, experienced man of the world though he was, loved her with a love passing that of a brother.

The thought filled her with exultation and courage; she bid him good-bye publicly, with a composure that considerably surprised the parting guest; she settled to the routine of her life after his departure, with contentment and diligence radiating from the centre of hope and joy and pride in her heart, much to Randal's surprise. He had hoped that a mood of melancholy moping would have offered a target to the arrows of his wit. Grace had faintly expected that Max would write to her, but she was by no means discontented that his occasional letters (enough for politeness) should be addressed to her mother; he always sent her a kind message, and at first some new books and music.

So the winter wore pleasantly away. Then came the great and sudden blow of grandpapa's death—the terrible break up of the dear old home; but through all, the vague sweet hope of meeting Max in London streaked every phase of sorrow with a pale tinge of gold. And now, when they were fairly landed in the great wondrous fearful city of Grace's day-dreams, within reach of the anchor to which she had clung—Max had gone to Paris.



CHAPTER IV.

THE tired travellers slept long on the morning after their arrival, and Grace was delighted to feel that a brighter frame of mind had displaced the gloom and depression of the previous night.

She was the first up and dressed of the party, and on going into her mother's room, found her awake, but still in bed. She held up a warning finger as her daughter entered, for Mabel was still in deepest sleep.

'Well, mother dear! are you pretty well and rested?' asked Grace in a whisper, stooping to kiss her.

'Quite well, but not rested. I feel as if I should never be at rest again. It is past eight, and they have not brought me hot water yet.'

'I suppose we must ring for it,' said Grace, whose awakening common-sense suggested that she could not expect the personal attendance of home in a London lodging. 'The bell is broken,' she con-

tinued, after a vain effort to pull the handle which hung loosely from the wall; 'I will go down and ask for some warm water for you, and see if Randal is stirring.'

'Is that Grace?' asked Mabel, sleepily, as she slowly opened her eyes; 'I was dreaming we were at Dungar again, and had broiled salmon for breakfast.'

'Keep quiet, Mab, until I come back, and then you shall come into my room and dress.'

'It is exceedingly awkward having no bell,' said Mrs. Frere, with much seriousness; 'suppose any of us were ill in the night?'

'Oh! we must not think of being ill,' exclaimed Grace, as she left the room and ran quickly downstairs to summon Sarah and knock at Randal's door.

Miss Timbs herself answered what she termed 'the dining-room' bell; and having called to Sarah to take the required hot water upstairs, proceeded to ask:

'What'll you please to want for breakfast, mum?'

Grace hesitated; all her life she had seen excellent food appear at proper periods, but of the producing process she was profoundly ignorant.

'Oh, anything will do for the first day. Some fish and cold meat, or eggs and tea, and preserves if you have any—Mabel always likes preserve—and that will do.'

'Very well, mum,' returned Miss Timbs, a little startled at such demands upon her resources, but making a rapid mental calculation as to the probable profit of such lavish lodgers. 'How soon shall you

be ready? for I must send out for fish and preserves. As to cold meat, it's not likely I should have any in the house.'

'It is no matter,' returned Grace, good-humouredly, 'do what you can. My mother will be dressed in about an hour.'

'I say, Grace,' called Randal through his closed door, 'are you up and about? What o'clock is it? I forgot to wind my watch.'

'Quarter-past eight. Get up like a good boy;' to which Randal made some unintelligible reply, and his sister mounted the stairs, and proceeded to coax Mabel to get up and permit herself to be dressed. For though quite capable of performing that operation, her exceedingly erratic nature disposed her to so many breaks and divergences that it was never ending. On this occasion, after various appeals, she put on her shoes, and was immediately attracted by a large darn in the piece of carpet opposite the dressing-table.

'Why do they put such an old piece of carpet on our room, Grace?'

'Oh, because there was nothing better. Do come away and let mamma dress.'

'Yes, there is something better, much better—a new carpet with big roses on it, in the room downstairs. I peeped in as we were going down to tea last night.'

'Never mind, Mab; come with me.'

'Mother ought to have it; oughtn't you, mammy?'

'Go with Grace, dear; your poor mother will have no more pretty things.'

'Stay, there is a bright pin under the big press,' whereupon she darted across the room, and striving to squeeze herself under the 'wardrobe' formerly described, nearly brought the whole concern on her back.

'Mabel!' screamed her mother, 'you will kill yourself! *Do* take her away, Grace.'

'You *must* come!' cried the much-suffering sister, and almost carried her into the next room, Mab protesting vehemently that she hurt her.

Once in a fresh scene, Mab insisted on a tour of rigid inspection before attempting to replace her nightgown with her ordinary clothes. Then the tops of the houses, as seen from Grace's window, had to be viewed and commented on; the proceedings of a cat creeping along one of the roofs created the deepest interest; and immense difficulties ensued in the matter of brushing and plaiting the patient's hair, calling forth many reproachful and contemptuous observations in reply to the elder sister's remonstrances, who, her forbearance at last exhausted, administered a sharp slap on the offender's shoulder, the same being instantly repaid by a hearty kick.

After this exchange of civilities, the toilette proceeded with greater rapidity, and having grumbled at being obliged to put on a crumpled lace frill and a pair of cuffs no longer in their pristine freshness, Mabel declared herself ready, and descended in search of breakfast and further novelties.

Randal had already emerged from his chamber when Mrs. Frere and Grace made their appearance,

and Sarah was busy setting forth the morning meal with much haste and clatter; while Mabel stood in the window, conspicuously holding her nose—for in truth the impromptu 'haddock' provided by Miss Timbs was powerful in odour, and the pot of strawberry jam was of the mashiest, stickiest description, while the eggs, not having been subjected to the process of 'selection' by being broken for frying, called from Randal the remark that 'They must have been laid by the hen that Noah took into the ark.'

'The tea has rather a peculiar flavour! don't you think so, Grace?' said mamma.

'Yes, it is not nice; we must try and find better to-morrow. Mabel, do eat some bread and butter if you cannot manage your fish!'

'Try and eat, my love,' urged Mrs. Frere. 'And now, Randal—now that we are at last in London, what *are* you going to do?'

'Well!' returned Randal, easily, tilting back his chair in order to put a rejected supply of haddock on the chiffonier, 'in the first place, I think we are not in London, but out of town; why the place is as quiet and silent as Dungar, except for the shouting of "Milk oh!" that roused me this morning. I wonder what induced Jimmy Byrne to get us such remote quarters?'

'I suppose he could not find what we wanted cheap enough anywhere else,' remarked Grace, sadly.

'But I consider these rooms dear,' said Randal, in a tone of strong common-sense; 'the accommodation is miserable, and the furniture disgraceful!

I cannot bear to see my mother in such a place. Grace, you and I will have a ramble in search of something better.'

'Dear boy!' murmured Mrs. Frere, looking at him with moist eyes, 'you always think of me.'

'Well, Randal!' persisted Grace, pouring out another cup of washy tea for Mab, 'now we are here, what *do* you think of doing? I wish you would call on Uncle Frere, as Jimmy Byrne advised you.'

'I must think about it,' returned Randal, looking curiously into the milk jug; 'let us see if he will make the first advance! In a week or so Max will have returned, and then he will be there to introduce me—it would be pleasanter than going alone.'

'Why, Randal,' cried Grace, surprised—for self-distrust was not her brother's ordinary failing—'you don't mean to say you are afraid of your own uncle?'

'Afraid!' repeated Randal, with lofty scorn, 'it is not likely that I should quail before any man; but—the fact is—a—I wish to have some work actually in hand before I present myself in the temple of Mammon.'

'Is Randal afraid Uncle Frere would turn him out?' asked Mabel, who was listening attentively.

'Then what do you think of doing?' asked the mother.

'Do you remember Halkett whom we met at Aunt d'Arcy's, in Dublin?' was the somewhat irrelevant answer.

'Yes, rather a noisy overpowering man.'

'A very clever fellow though, I can tell you! He looked at some of my MSS. and thought them most promising, particularly my "Legends and Tales of Dungar." He has given me an introduction to a brother of his who writes for lots of papers and magazines, and I am going to present the letter to-day at the *Girdle* office. He is editor of the *Girdle*.'

'The *Girdle!*' repeated Grace; 'what an extraordinary name!'

'Why, Grace,' exclaimed Mabel, with contempt, 'it is the thing they bake cakes on!'

'It is an abbreviation of the name,' returned Randal, with careless superiority. '*Earth Girdle* means their information encircles the globe—Shakespeare, you know. The staff call it the *Girdle* and *E. G.*'

'I never heard of it before,' said Grace.

'Very likely, my dear; but if I could be taken on before I interview Uncle Frere, it would be a grand go, and show that conceited puppy Max that I am not such a noodle after all.'

'Taken on the staff of a newspaper! Why, Randal, you must be dreaming! Just think of all the memoirs and biographies we have read, and remember how dreadfully hard the best men have found it to get on at first.'

'That *you* have read, Grace. *I* have never cared to risk losing my own originality by steeping myself in the records of other people's blunders. Why should I not be taken on the staff of a paper?'

'Why not?' echoed Mrs. Frere. 'Really, I must say Randal is exceedingly clever, and the quantity

he has written already is amazing. I hope I am not partial, but I do think Randal quite equal to the staff of any paper.' She spoke in a tone of severe criticism.

Grace sighed, and seeing that no one was eating, rang for the servant to clear away, while Randal continued, cheerfully:

'So I am going to the office to-day; it is in W—— Street, off the Strand—and I shall take my papers with me. I suppose I had better take a cab, mother, as I ought to be at the place early, and I don't know the way.'

'Certainly, dear boy, certainly. Have you any money, Randal?'

Randal examined a very pretty *porte-monnaie*, and replied:

'You had better give me five shillings. I shall only want cab and omnibus fares to-day, for I shall return to dine. By the way, you had better say seven o'clock for dinner; Byrne said he was coming up this evening, and he cannot get away before six.

'Very well; and, Randal, if you pass anywhere near H—— Square, you might leave a card——'

'I will see about it, mother.'

He rose, and retired to his own room. Grace looked wistfully after him, but prudently resisted pressing the distasteful visit upon her brother, till backed by the counsels of the redoubtable 'Jimmy.'

Sarah had not yet removed the breakfast things when Randal returned, equipped in his new morning suit of black, and looking as bright and

distingué a youngster as a mother's eye would wish to rest upon.'

'Good-bye, dear; God bless you!'

'Good luck to you, Randal!'

'Be sure you bring back some gridle cakes,' were the parting salutations of the trio he left behind; and pausing to ask Miss Timbs, whom he met in the hall, or rather passage, the way to the nearest cab-stand, he walked briskly through the little garden-gate, and away out of sight.

'Dear me!' sighed Mrs. Frere, returning to her chair, it is wonderful the sensation of loneliness I feel when Randal is out of my sight. He is so brave and cheerful, and has so much self-reliance, which is always the mark of a strong character. Not that I undervalue *you*, my darling,' holding out her hand to Grace; 'I am sure I do not know what we should have done without you.'

Grace did not reply, but took the still fair soft hand and stroked it tenderly; she felt too sad for words, an inexpressible, awful sense of isolation and responsibility pressed down her young heart. What was to become of them in this strange, mighty city, where their only friend was a humble lawyers' clerk, and where no welcome had awaited them from the kinsmen on whose friendship they had naturally reckoned? But this mood did not last; Grace felt she must throw it off or die. She hastily reminded herself that they were not yet twenty-four hours in London; that Max had probably not known when they were to arrive; that she could not tell what urgent reasons he might

have to visit Paris; that a week—a few days might change the aspect of affairs; above all, that she must not, dare not despond. Let her mother talk of Randal's courage and cheerfulness as she would, they were but broken reeds to rely on.

She had succeeded in rousing herself when Miss Timbs, much impressed by the general aspect of her new inmates, made her appearance with a spasmodic curtsey, and a request to know Mrs. Frere's orders.

'I am sure I scarcely know what to say,' returned that lady, graciously. 'Our tastes are extremely simple, and I do not care to incur unnecessary expense. What do you think, Grace, of a pair of fried soles, and boiled fowls with tongue —a ham would be rather large—and potatoes, and a dish of seakale and cheese? It is rather early for cucumber. We will not mind sweets or dessert —eh, Grace?'

'Yes, mother,' returned Grace, with a dim, painful sense that this was all too costly, yet not knowing how to remedy it or what to suggest.

'Very well, mum,' said Miss Timbs, with increasing deference. 'And the young gentleman will be back to dinner?'

'Oh yes; and I forgot to mention that as Mr. Byrne will dine with us to-day, you need not give us dinner till seven; generally we dine at six.'

'Hoh,' said Miss Timbs, and paused. 'Ahem! Then, mum, I must charge additional for kitchen fire—two-and-six a week is regular with a one o'clock dinner; but for late dinner I must say

three-and-six, and sixpence a scuttle for the sitting-room fire.'

'Ah, yes, I suppose so,' returned Mrs. Frere, vaguely. 'You had better speak to Mr. Byrne about it when he comes, for I do not understand London prices, or the arrangements of a lodging-house.'

'Ahem!' said Miss Timbs, with a visible vibration of every curl, and smoothing down her apron nervously; 'but, begging your pardon, I don't keep a lodging-'ouse, though I lets my apartments to parties as requires accommodation; and if I'm 'umble, I trust I am respectable.'

'Certainly,' replied Mrs. Frere, greatly astonished at the wrath she seemed to have evoked. 'If I have said anything to offend you, I am very sorry; but I cannot see that I have.'

The gentle voice and guileless face of the speaker were not without their effect on Miss Timbs.

'Well, mum, I see you are a stranger, and not up to our ways, and I am a bit hasty. I am sure you are too much the lady to make aggravating remarks; so, as you say, I had better speak to the gentleman as took the rooms. But of course I shall want butter and lard for cooking, and would you like to buy everything yourself, mum, or shall I bring you my book every week?'

'Pray do so! I should not know where to go for anything; and for to-day we will dine at seven.'

'Very well, mum.' And, to Mabel's profound admiration, she caught up, and piled together, all the plates, huddled the knives and forks on the

tray, seized the butter, the cream-jug, and sundry other articles, in a twinkling, as if she had suddenly developed three or four additional pairs of hands, calling loudly for Sarah to clear away, and marched off with her load.

'Grace, did you see what a lot of things she took hold of?' said Mabel. 'I wonder if she will let them fall?' And no doubt anxious to witness the anticipated catastrophe, she ran lightly to the kitchen stairs, and leaning over the top rail, strained her eyes into the cavernous depths below.

'Our landlady seems a little hot-tempered,' said Mrs. Frere, as soon as they were alone. She spoke in a tone of apprehension, as if a little scared at the idea of having given offence.'

'It seems it is not polite to say "lodging-house,"' returned Grace, smiling. 'But she evidently forgave you. We must try and find our way about as soon as possible, for we had better do all we can for ourselves. You know nurse told us we ought not to leave too much to our landlady.'

'Nurse, like all women of her class, is extremely suspicious,' said Mrs. Frere, leaning back in her chair.

'Dear nurse! She is a very clever woman, mother. I wish she were here.'

'Yes; we miss her dreadfully. I do not know how that poor child will do without her!'

'She must, poor little soul!' returned Grace, thoughtfully. 'It will be hard for her to be shut up here all day. Suppose I take her out, and we might try and find our way to Hyde Park.'

'But, Grace dear, ladies do not walk alone in London! I could not let you. Imagine meeting anyone you know! Wait till Randal comes home.'

'Is it really such an uncivilised place, that two girls cannot venture out together; that we must be prisoners, unless we can get an escort! I cannot believe it! It seems to me that we must not play at being fine ladies any longer, but learn to take care of ourselves. I will not go if it vexes you, mother dear; yet I do so long to see the Park. And you know Mabel will be fearfully troublesome in the house all day.'

'I cannot stay in the house all day!' cried Mabel, returning disappointed from the kitchen stairs. 'And Sarah says it is not a mile and a half to the ride in Hyde Park; do let us go, mammy! All the ladies will be riding there at twelve.'

'At twelve!' echoed Mrs. Frere. 'They used to ride from five to seven in my time. Well, children, I do not half like it! Perhaps our landlady could spare her servant to go with you?'

'Oh, I am sure she could not!' cried Mabel, for I heard Miss Timbs tell her she must make haste and do the rooms, and be ready to stay downstairs, because Miss Timbs is going out to buy things for us.'

'Still, my dear, I never heard of young ladies walking alone in Hyde Park.'

'Come with us yourself then,' said Grace, coaxingly; 'it will do you good, and we are sure to be right with you.'

'Impossible, dearest!' cried the mother; 'I am

not equal to such a walk—besides, I must write to your aunt D'Arcy.'

'Well! ask Miss Timbs what she thinks.'

Miss Timbs was of opinion that any two young ladies might walk 'anywheres at that time;' it was just the hour when ladies and nurses and governesses and children were about. Later, indeed, it might not be so well—but even then!

So Mrs. Frere, with many injunctions to be quiet and careful, especially at the crossings, permitted her daughters to set forth, Grace having first insisted—much to Mabel's disgust—on writing a few lines to her faithful friend nurse.

Holding Mabel's hand closely, Grace sallied forth with some degree of eager excitement to catch a glimpse of the famous metropolis of which she had read and dreamed, till the names of its streets and squares and historical places were as familiar to her as her own, and to which her quick imagination lent a shape and reality widely different from the actual.

'If you should happen to miss your way,' said Miss Timbs, 'just you ask for "Albert Crescent, Grove Road, near the Water-works, Camden Hill;" every p'liceman knows that. Go on straight till you come to the third turning on your left, then first to the right will take you into Kensington High Street, and anyone will show you the Park.'

Fortified by these directions, and thankful to be in the air and in motion, Grace and her little companion walked swiftly away with the free light step accustomed to tread the springy grass and heather of their seaside home. After one or two wrong

turnings and a few inquiries, the young strangers found themselves in the Park, and for the first time felt they were in London.

They were soon absorbed in contemplating the horses and their riders which seemed to them so numerous, though in truth the near approach of Easter had considerably thinned their ranks. The children too, so exquisitely dressed and cared for, attracted their attention; the fresh air, the first faint flush of delicate green on the trees, the newness of everything, cheered and amused Grace. Still the crowd of strangers, the perpetual roar as of a mighty swelling tide, were somewhat appalling, and never in after years did she forget the impression of her first walk in London.

How long they wandered and admired and wondered, they could not tell; at last Mab complained she was dying of hunger, and Grace found, to her dismay, her purse was empty. They had walked on and on till near Albert Gate, and it was weary work to retrace their steps, Mab declaring that she was tired to death, that she could not walk another step, etc. At this juncture a gentleman, followed by a large handsome deer-hound, crossed from the Knightsbridge direction, and paused a moment as he reached the footway to look at the tall slight girl in mourning, who was so evidently dragging a weary child after her.

He was a stout, broad-shouldered, florid man of perhaps thirty, very well dressed, with a good-humoured, animal face, and reddish hair. After a minute of hesitation, he whistled to his dog, and

walked after the young lady and her companion, passed them, then paused, leant against the rails, and let them go by, taking a long look as they passed. This manœuvre he executed twice; the second time, seeing that he was quite unnoticed, he walked smartly on ahead, then turning sharply, met the quarry face to face.

Raising his hat, with an assured smile, he addressed Grace.

'I beg your pardon! But would you be so good as to direct me to—to—the National Gallery?'

'I am sorry I cannot,' she returned, without the slightest hesitation or embarrassment, looking straight into his light grey eyes. 'I am a stranger myself.' Something in her voice and manner seemed to strike her interlocutor, for it was with a decided increase of respect he rejoined:

'Indeed! Can I be of any service to you? I know this part of London very well.'

'Thank you; I want no help,' said Grace. Then suddenly bethinking herself of the task which lay before her in conveying Mab home, she added: 'Unless, indeed, you could direct me to the nearest cab-stand.'

'Certainly! If you cross the ride, and take the path opposite, it will lead you to Rutland Gate, and there you will be pretty sure to find a cab. Perhaps you will allow me to accompany you?'

'No, thank you,' returned Grace, suddenly remembering, with a quick blush, that her mother would not like her to walk with a stranger; 'it would be better not.'

The stranger raised his hat, and made no attempt to follow as she passed on, but muttered to himself:

'A deuced fine girl—a lady, too—and what eyes!'

But no cab was to be found; so poor Mabel, more and more fatigued, and quarrelsome in proportion, stumbled on.

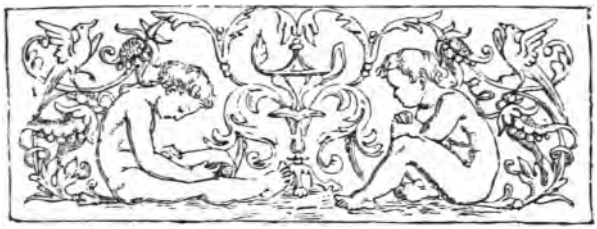
After many pauses to rest on the various benches which they passed, many remonstrances, coaxings, urgings, and encouragements, with a few inquiries—for Grace's organ of locality was well developed—they reached Albert Terrace, thoroughly worn out, to find Mrs. Frere in a fit of hysterical weeping, the effect of loneliness and fright, as she had quite made up her mind that the prolonged absence of her children was due to some terrible accident.

'I am very sorry we stayed out so long; but I had no idea it was so late. We will not leave you alone again. But oh! mother, the Park *is* lovely! and such beautiful horses, though there were a great many screws among them; and then the children—such little darlings! were they not, Mab?'

'I don't know; I only know that I am dying of hunger.'

'My dear child! *do* ring the bell, Grace! pray get her something to eat!' etc., etc.

And Mab was quickly provided with the sticky jam and bread-and-butter, of which she and Grace between them devoured an extraordinary quantity.



CHAPTER V.

RANDAL, like his sisters, found so much to interest and amuse in his first experience of 'famous London town,' that he did not make his appearance till past six, and then he dashed in breathless to ask for three shillings to pay the hansom in which he had returned, as he did not feel sure of finding his way. 'And you may think what an out-of-the-way hole this is, when the cab-drivers do not know it! We have been driving hither and thither for the last hour trying to find it!' And he rushed out again to dismiss the cab.

'Dear me!' said Mrs. Frere, looking into her purse a little dismayed. 'There are eight shillings quite gone. I am afraid, Grace, this is a very expensive place!'

'I am afraid it is, dear mother.'

'I hope Byrne will not keep us waiting,' said Randal, returning; 'I am as hungry as a hawk!'

'You ought to have had luncheon, Randal; it is not good to fast too long.'

'Oh! I had luncheon, of course; I could not hold out all day after such a miserable breakfast.'

'But I will tell you everything at dinner; I really must wash my hands, the dirt of this town is frightful!' and he left the room, running against Sarah with a heavily laden tray as he did so.

'How bright and well he looks,' remarked Mrs. Frere, sighing slightly; 'I am sure he has met with a pleasant reception from—from the staff of that paper he was going to see, or whatever it is.'

'He has left his parcel of papers behind him,' said Mab, who, washed, brushed, and plaited into comparative freshness, was curled up on the shiny slippery horse-hair sofa.

'Yes, he has,' returned Grace, who had risen to assist in laying the cloth—for inactivity was punishment to her; 'I hope it is a good omen.'

'We must not be too sanguine,' said Mrs. Frere, in her most sensible tone, 'though I must say that I think *all* Randal wants is an opening.'

Here, a modest ring and a careful brushing of feet in the passage announced the arrival of Jimmy Byrne, to Grace's great satisfaction. She felt in some instinctive and indescribable way, that in his experience—in his knowledge of mean minutiæ, and above all, in his respectful kindly sympathy, lay her one hope of help and guidance in the difficulties of which she was as yet but half conscious.

'Good-evenin', ladies!' said Mr. Byrne, putting in his rather shaggy black head as he half-opened

the door, and then drawing back modestly: 'I beg your pardon; I see dinner is ready. I am sure I wouldn't have——'

'Oh! come in, Mr. Byrne—pray come in!' cried Grace, going up to him with outstretched hand and drawing him into the room, 'we expected you to dinner.'

'Yes, Mr. Byrne,' said Mrs. Frere, courteously, and rising to receive him, 'we quite expected you to dinner!' Thus encouraged, Jimmy Byrne, after looking carefully about for some peg or hatstand whereon to hang his head-covering, brought it in with many apologies, and carefully deposited it in the darkest and most inaccessible corner he could find; he also carried the indispensable black bag, which he placed under his chair, as if less ashamed of that than of his hat.

'I hope, Mrs. Frere, ma'am, I see you pretty well, after your fatigues—and the young ladies?'

'Quite well, thank you; but of course, not feeling very bright; the change is so very great.'

'Ay! to be sure, so it is; and the place is dull! But it is not easy to find apartments, especially at this time, when everyone is coming to town for the season.'

'For the season!' cried Randal, catching the last words as he entered; 'you don't mean to say that the season affects such solitude as this!' then shaking his hand cordially—'though I am quite sure you have done the best you could for us; but it *is* rather remote, eh?'

'It is indeed, master—I mean Mr. Randal—but——'

'Here is dinner!' exclaimed Mabel, joyously, 'and it smells very nice.'

A welcome interruption ensued, and a pleasant slight confusion in taking their places, and squeezing in chairs for Mab and Mr. Byrne between the sofa and large table, which reduced the available space to a narrow passage between it and the walls.

'What have we got?' cried Randal, gaily lifting the cover; 'soles! Why, mother, you might have ordered a couple more when you were about it.'

'You forget we are not at Dungar,' said Grace, in a low tone.

'Faith, I am not likely to forget it!' returned Randal, emphatically. 'What, Byrne! no fish?'

'Thank you, no, sir. I am obliged to eat fish too often to care for it: once a week is enough for a good papist—and what's more, I dined about two.'

'I think they know how to charge for dinner and luncheon too in this London of yours, Byrne!'

'Well, I don't know, Mr. Randal! I get a very good dinner every day for a trifle, in a manner of speaking.'

'You must tell me where,' said Randal. 'What is it?' he continued, catching a look from his mother, to whom the slavey, Sarah, had been whispering mysteriously.

'She wants to know how much beer she shall bring,' said Mrs. Frere, in her usual quiet, well-bred tone.

'Beer!' repeated Randal. 'There is something hopelessly vulgar about beer! Is this all the wine you have, mother?'

'Yes,' said Grace, 'all that is left of Mr. Byrne's excellent sherry.' And she smiled on him—that quick, sweet smile of hers, showing all her white, well-shaped teeth, and flashing over eyes and lips like a gleam of heart's sunshine.

'Beer is an uncommon wholesome drink, Mr. Randal,' replied Byrne; 'and wine, specially in the suburbs, is not to be depended on.'

'Well, how much beer then?' reiterated mamma, looking to Byrne for his decision.

'Two pots will be lashin's and lavin's,' cried Jimmy, promptly.

Sarah disappeared, and dinner progressed without anything worth recording, save that Mr. Byrne assisted to carve, and gravely observed that it was an elegant tongue, while Mrs. Frere declared the fowls were only fit to make broth; and Grace, who had eaten too late and too heartily to care for dinner, remarked—or thought she remarked—a watchful uneasiness in Jimmy Byrne's wistful little black eyes.

'She did not bring it in black pots,' said Mabel, who had been very quiet and silent, as Sarah placed a foaming jug of beer beside Mrs. Frere.

'Ah! me jewil!' exclaimed Jimmy, who ventured to let his affectionate nature overflow towards this juvenile member of the 'great family;' 'sure a pot isn't a pot here at all! Faith, it's a jug!'

While Mabel in deep thought pondered this metaphysical contradiction, the others laughed heartily, and as soon as the remnants of the despised fowls were removed, conversation flowed freely.

'Tell us your adventures, Randal,' asked Grace, whose interest in her brother was all the deeper for her unspoken doubt of his abilities.

'Oh! I had a capital "rowl" into W—— Street—these hansoms are a splendid invention—and I found Halkett hard at work in one of the dirtiest dens you can imagine. He was very civil, and seems a monstrous clever fellow. He was good enough to say his brother had mentioned me in his letter as a promising boy; and he was quite ready to look at my MS., and give me the best advice he could. He seems quite at the top of the tree, and is on the staff of I don't know how many papers and mags. In short, the *Saturday* wanted him to write for them, but he was pledged to the *Earth Girdle*.'

'Very honourable of him,' remarked Mrs. Frere.

'Quite so,' said Jimmy Byrne.

'Then it was luncheon-time, so he asked me if I was going to lunch anywhere near; and I said I didn't know exactly where to go, so he suggested the "London"—a very swell place, I can tell you! I thought the least I could do was to invite him to luncheon with me. We had an *entrée*—some very good roast-duck and peas, and a couple of glasses of sherry a-piece; and do you know, the fellow charged me eight-and-sixpence, and two shillings for the wine. Then I could not offer the waiter less than a shilling—he was a very respectable well-mannered man. If I had been the Prince of Wales, he could not have been more deferential.'

'I'll go bail he doesn't get a shilling tip every day,' said Byrne.

'Then,' continued Randal, 'Halkett was engaged for the remainder of the day; but he offered to get me orders for any theatre I liked, and said he would call on you, mother, if you had no objection; then he recommended me to visit the British Museum—that there was much there to engage an inquiring mind—jumped into a cab and departed. I tried to walk to the British Museum, but I lost my way so often that it was past four when I got there, and found it was not an open day; so I inquired my way to Oxford Street, and walked all down it. I knew my way there, for I stayed with a schoolfellow somewhere near the Marble Arch a long time ago; then I got into a cab and drove home. It has been rather an expensive day, but I think Halkett will be very useful to me. He is evidently quite a great gun in the literary world.'

'Pray do not bring him to call on me,' said Mrs. Frere, languidly, 'particularly if he is like his brother; besides, I could not bear anyone to come here! How could I receive in such a room!'

To this terrible question there was no reply, and to change the subject Grace began to recount her adventures.

'Mabel and I ventured to walk in Hyde Park to-day; we were charmed with the horses and the children. What a delightful place it is, Mr. Byrne! do you ever go there?'

'Never, Miss Grace—that is, scarcely ever. You see, I am always at the office till half-past five or

six; but it is a grand place, and it will be twice as grand after Easter. I daresay your cousin, Mr. Maxwell Frere, will take you there when he comes back.'

'It seemed grand and full enough to me to-day,' returned Grace, not appearing to notice the latter part of the speech, though it set her heart beating with anticipation, pleasure and dread; 'but I suppose it always seems so to a stranger.'

'There were more strangers than us there to-day,' said Mab, watching Mr. Byrne, who was opening the black bag, and drawing from it a brown paper parcel, which he declared contained a 'thrifle of cocoa-nut biscuits for Miss Mabel,' as he placed the treasure before her.

'Oh, thank you! What pretty biscuits!' cried Mab, who, utterly tired, yet struggled to see and hear to the last. 'Do you know, Randal, a man asked Grace to show him the way to somewhere. Where was it, Grace?'

'To the National Gallery,' said Grace, carelessly.

'Faith!' cried Jimmy Byrne, 'that was quare! Might I be so bold as to ask what sort of man it was that spoke?'

'Oh, he seemed a gentleman; not very *distingué*, still well dressed and polite. He came up to me about half-way down the ride, and asked if I could direct him to the National Gallery.'

'The impident bla'guard!' said Jimmy, wrathfully.

'Why?' asked Grace, opening her eyes.

'He had no call to speak to you,' returned Byrne. 'He knew right well where the National Gallery

was; he wanted to get into talk with an elegant young lady like you—set him up! Miss Grace dear, you'll excuse me, but never answer anyone in the street, except indeed a female.'

'Never answer a civil question?' cried Grace; 'how could I be so rude?'

'No matter; you take my advice.'

'I knew it!' exclaimed Mrs. Frere, with heightened voice and colour. 'I warned you, Grace, that it was highly improper for young ladies of your rank to go wandering about parks and places alone, and you see the consequences! I daresay this insolent fellow took you for a shop girl or a dressmaker, and dared to speak to you; but you never take my advice!' and she pushed back her chair with an air of great annoyance.

'Really, Grace,' said Randal, in a tone of severe reprobation, 'you ought to mind what the mother says; she knows the world considerably better than you do.'

'Too well—only too well!' sighed Mrs. Frere, much affected by the depth of her own knowledge.

A contemptuous curve quivered over her short upper lip for an instant as Grace looked at Randal, but she answered gently enough:

'You are all crazy, I think! The poor man was quite inoffensive and civil. When I said I was sorry I could not direct him, as I was a stranger too, he asked if he could be of any use, for he knew some parts of the town well enough; and I replied that he was very good, but that I wanted no help. He grew a little red—or rather a little

redder, for he was red to begin with—raised his hat, and walked away.'

'He had a beautiful big dog, too; something like poor dear Bran at home,' said Mabel.

'I hope this unpleasant adventure will teach you greater caution for the future,' remarked Mrs. Frere, 'if you wish to avoid similar annoyances.'

'I was not the least annoyed,' returned Grace.

Randal suggested that possibly he might have been some nobleman, taking a morning stroll, who had been struck with the superior style of Grace and Mabel; while Jimmy reiterated his opinion that he was an 'impident bla'guard.' And then an awkward silence fell upon them, broken by Mabel suddenly falling against Mr. Byrne's arm, almost overcome with sleep.

'Bless her dear heart!' said that gentleman, tenderly upholding the weary little figure; 'she is just tired cut.'

'Grace, *do* put that poor child to bed!' cried Mrs. Frere, in a voice which insinuated that Grace was keeping her out of it.

'Come, Mab, rouse up, dear; come to bed.'

'Shall I carry you upstairs, Miss Mabel? Sure, you are so tired you can scarcely stand.'

'No, no, Mr. Byrne; that would be too much. Mab, you can walk upstairs quite well.'

Mab stumbled to her feet, and looked about with dim eyes, permitted Byrne to shake hands with her, and Randal to kiss her, gave her mother a loving hug, and holding on tight to Grace's arm, tottered upstairs.

'Do not forget to ask Mr. Byrne about the fires and six o'clock dinner, mother,' said Grace, from the door as she went out.

Having accomplished her task, and sat for a few minutes by her bedside to soothe the querulous, sleepy child, Grace descended, to find tea being brought in, and the friends in counsel discussing projects for the ensuing day; Mr. Byrne being strongly in favour of utilising the holiday (Good Friday) by a visit on Randal's part to his uncle.

'You'll be pretty sure to find him at home,' Jimmy was saying, as Grace entered; 'every place is shut up. I tell you what, Mr. Randal—you go and pay your respects to Mr. Frere, and then meet me at the corner of Tottenham Court Road. We'll take a Hampstead 'bus, and look at the heath—it's just a curiosity for a stranger to see; but too rough for the young ladies, ma'am'—to Mrs. Frere.

'Thank you, Mr. Byrne; Grace and Mabel must come to church with me. I never could understand how people can turn a day of solemn humiliation into a *fête*—even in France it was never done.'

'Not there, of course,' said Grace.

'Well, it *is* a thrifle heathenish,' said Byrne, rather cast down by this rebuke. 'But if you just think, Mrs. Frere, ma'am, of how hard people work, and how few holidays they get——'

'I should like to see Hampstead too,' put in Grace, with a little sigh; 'but I will not leave mamma alone another day until we are a little more settled.'

'Well, Jimmy,' broke in Randal, whose tendency was to grow rapidly familiar, 'I am your man for Hampstead Heath to-morrow. I suppose I can't rout out that respectable buffer, my uncle, before twelve, and I must stay quarter of an hour there; so I cannot meet you before one.'

'And quite time enough, sir,' said Byrne, accepting, with a grateful bow, the tea poured out for him by Grace, who proceeded to recount the observations of their landlady anent the fires and late dinners, while Mrs. Frere requested Mr. Byrne to 'speak to her' about it.

Jimmy listened with a grave face, moving a little uneasily on his chair, and then gave utterance to the following words of wisdom.

'I daresay Miss Timbs is highly respectable—indeed, I wouldn't have brought any of the family here, ma'am, if I did not think so—but the best of these London lodging-house keepers are thieves of the world! And, Mrs. Frere, you'll excuse me, ma'am, you *must* be careful with them, or they'll rob you right and left. If I'm not making too free, Miss Grace, I would just venture to remark, that it wouldn't be bad for your health to dine early—say at *wan* (one) or two o'clock. Just think it's your luncheon, as you have been used to; and when six o'clock comes, you may as well have tea and a cold bone to save trouble, as Mr. Randal can't always be punctual; you'll see it will make more than a shilling a week difference!'

Jimmy spoke in the most insinuating tone, as though he would coax his charges into economy,

while his short, upturned face, with its wistful, black eyes, and shaggy, snubby, pathetic look, assumed an expression of imploring eagerness.

Grace gazed at him in surprise, wondering to herself how this poor fellow, son of a peasant farmer, possessed a delicacy so tender, so keenly alive to the probable soreness of a bruised reed like her mother! Surely the possibilities of nature are inexhaustible!

'But I hate tea-dinners!' cried Randal, pouting like a spoilt child, as he was.

'Ah! but, Mr. Randal—just for a bit, sir, at the beginning! You don't know what things cost in London. The elegant little dinner now you had to-day! I daresay you thought it common enough! Wait till you see the bill; and, Miss Grace dear, ask for it to-morrow—never let things run on.'

'I am sure, my dear sir, your advice is excellent,' returned Mrs. Frere, languidly. 'But how in the world is money to last if one is to pay for everything immediately?'

Jimmy Byrne was silenced by this astounding remark. He had to look back into bygone years, and remember the ready-moneyless condition in which the great family had long existed, with every comfort notwithstanding, before he could comprehend the utter confusion of mind on this topic in which poor Mrs. Frere habitually dwelt.

'Ahem!' said he at last. 'It is thrue for you, Mrs. Frere; but, ma'am, the paying *must* come, and it seems a deal heavier later on, when one has forgotten what you got for—for—your money.'

Grace listened intently, but before she could speak, Randal exclaimed:

'By the way, as we are on domestic matters, could we not find quarters nearer town? This place is terribly out of the way; and the room is rather small.'

'So it is, Mr. Randal—small and mean for what you and the ladies have been accustomed to; but "two-two" a week, sir, is not much as prices go; and if you were to make up your mind now to stay six months, I'm pretty sure she'd give them cheaper.'

'After all,' returned Randal, 'a few shillings a week more for better rooms, and a livelier situation, would not be really dearer.'

'Maybe not, sir; but it's as well just to think that there are fifty-two weeks in the year!'

Grace still kept silence, but though a very indifferent arithmetician, made a simple mental calculation that rather frightened her.

'Well, Mr. Byrne, until I have seen my brother-in-law, and arranged some plan, it is impossible to say what we shall do.'

The conversation was then chiefly absorbed by Randal, who treated his listeners to his views on various subjects—especially on literature in general, and newspaper writing in particular.

Mr. Byrne listened respectfully, and evidently thought the speaker a great genius, but he said little; and his last word at parting was a whisper to Grace: 'You'll excuse *me!—but* get in the bills regular, Miss Grace!'

CHAPTER VI.

THE memory of the ensuing week dwelt long with Grace Frere, as almost the dreariest period through which she had ever lived.

The narrow limits of their dwelling-place; the strangeness of everything; the loneliness—all were depressing, especially the want of ordinary occupations.

Thanks to the urgency of Jimmy Byrne, Randal was induced to call on Uncle Frere, and found him about to drive to the station for—to him—a rare holiday visit to some friend in the country.

He only spoke to his nephew in the hall, gave him an icy hand, said he would keep his (Randal's) card and write on his return, then asked when they had arrived, and stepped into his brougham without waiting for an answer.

'He is a heartless old buffer,' concluded Randal.

'And scarcely courteous,' added Mrs. Frere; how unlike your dear father!'

Grace said nothing, but thought with a certain

degree of comfort, that with such a parent change and indifference on Maxwell's part was not to be wondered at.

The ensuing days, however, were not all gloom. Jimmy, the faithful Jimmy, took them to Westminster Abbey on Sunday; and, under his guardianship, Randal and Grace ventured to the theatre on Tuesday—to the Prince of Wales, where they intensely enjoyed 'Ours,' Grace thinking it perfection, and Randal stating his intention of turning his thoughts to dramatic writing. On their return, they found Mrs. Frere tolerably cheerful, and in possession of a note which kept Grace unusually wakeful. It was dated 'H—— Square, April 3rd.'

'DEAR MRS. FRERE,

'As morning visits are out of the question for me, I hope you, your son and daughter, will dine with me on Thursday next, at 7.30, when I expect Maxwell will be at home to meet you.

'Yours faithfully,

'RICHARD FRERE.'

'That is cool,' said Randal.

'Business men have cold manners,' replied Mrs. Frere, 'and I have no doubt your Uncle Frere meant to be very kind.'

'I suppose it will be quite a family party,' observed Grace, 'so we need not dress much;' but though she was rather silent, taking little part in Randal's sarcasms and anticipations, the prospect filled her mind all night and occupied her hands next morning.

She was lady's-maid in chief, and her mother commanded a more extensive unpacking than they had hitherto attempted.

Treasures of tulle, and jet, and white crape frilling, and half-forgotten lockets were unearthed, and the morning passed away not unpleasantly in the unfolding and laying out of sundry garments and rectifications of the same, for Mrs. Frere was keenly alive to the importance of first impressions, and Grace, to the revivification of old ones. This pleasing occupation was not agreeably interrupted by the appearance of Miss Timbs and her little account, genteely presented on a small tray with the observation, 'You said as 'ow you wished it weekly, mum. You will see the rent is not mentioned; the gentleman paid the first week in advance, which is not my desire with a family of your respectability.' Having spoken, Miss Timbs ducked and departed.

'Oh, Grace! it is an awful sum!' was Mrs. Frere's exclamation as she glanced at the total, absolutely turning pale as she spoke. 'Do look here—I cannot make out the figures quite; can it be nearly five pounds!'

'Let me see, mother! do not distress yourself so much—yes, I am afraid it is. How very costly everything is! kitchen fire three shillings, sitting-room fire four! those miserable chickens seven shillings, and sea-kale five!—why we have only had it twice! and even cleaning the boots is charged a shilling, and the whole, four pounds eighteen shillings and twopence.'

'There must be a mistake somewhere,' said Mrs. Frere, slightly indignant, 'or frightful extortion. Ring the bell, Grace; I will speak to Miss—what is her name?—at once.'

'Stay, dear mother!' cried Grace, a little afraid of rushing upon the certain, though shadowy, dangers of a conflict with Mrs. Timbs. 'Randal says Mr. Byrne will come up this evening; let us wait and show the bill to him. He understands everything of this kind, and then we will make no mistake.'

'Perhaps it would be better,' replied Mrs. Frere, not sorry to postpone the struggle. 'I have no doubt he will compel her to reduce these monstrous charges. She sees we are strangers, and thinks she may presume on our ignorance.'

'But yet she is good-natured. You know she asked Mab down the other day when it was wet, and gave her bread and butter.'

'It was our butter,' said Mab, quietly, from the window where she was kneeling on a chair. 'She was having tea and buttered toast; there was a large piece of butter on the table, and when she gave me some of the toast, she made some more, with lots of butter on it; and a tiny bit of green leaf came off the knife, and I saw it still on the butter when Sarah put it on the table after dinner.'

'Oh, Mab!' cried Grace, 'you should not be a little spy when anyone is kind to you!'

'I am not a spy,' returned Mab, unmoved; 'I could not help seeing. I daresay mammy doesn't mind; Miss Timbs is not so rich as we are, and

lives down beside the kitchen. Mother would let her have some of our butter.'

'Rich, dearest!' exclaimed Mrs. Frere, tragically, 'we are only beginning to know what poverty is. I do not care for myself, but for my children—the idea is too bitter!—You know, dear Grace,' she resumed, wiping her eyes, 'that of all the money we had in Dublin—the trifle those few things poor dear grandpapa *could* leave me were sold for—we had only nineteen pounds left after our journey here; and if this rapacious woman is to charge us five pounds a week for common necessaries, without rent, how long will that last? Why, I cannot expect any more until the beginning of June, when the first quarter's interest is to be paid, they tell me. And how are we to exist if we are to pay ready money? It is quite unreasonable of Mr. Byrne to suggest it.'

Poor Grace felt this to be unanswerable, while her heart sank at the gloomy prospect. She could only say, as cheerfully as was manageable:

'We must talk to Jimmy Byrne about it; do not tease yourself too soon, mother.'

'Ah, my dear, at my age one thinks of the realities.'

However, by tea-time, when Randal came in and announced that Byrne could not come up till the next evening but one, realities were forgotten, and all made merry over their anticipations of to-morrow's dinner with Uncle Frere.

In spite of her outward cheerfulness and composure, Grace felt it would have been less tremen-

dous to lead the charge of the Light Brigade than to face the dinner at Uncle Frere's on that memorable Thursday. She had assisted at her mother's toilette; she had dressed and 'plaited' Mab, and left her with strict injunctions not to ruffle her hair; and then there was but a short quarter of an hour left to attire herself. Yet it was enough. The simplicity of her means did not allow elaboration. After her abundant glossy, red-brown hair was brushed and parted, and coiled into a thick knot low down upon her neck—after her fresh white gauzy frills were properly arranged, her gloves carefully drawn on and buttoned, and the drapery of her skirt finally put to rights, she was ready. Then they had to wait for Randal, whose tie was obstinate, and his studs contradictory.

At last all was prepared, a cab was brought, and they were off. Mabel, overawed by anticipation, was preternaturally amiable; and Grace, like a thoroughbred, answering to the spur of strong necessity, kept up the spirits of the whole party by her wild, gay, fanciful chaff, till her own colour rose, and her deep grey eyes lit up and sparkled, as if she was going to a great and assured triumph, instead of a dreaded mortification, while she quivered in every nerve as if struck with a deadly chill.

It was some minutes after seven thirty when the cab containing our party came up to Mr. Frere's door. A brougham was just driving off, and caught Randal's eye.

'I say, mother, Uncle Frere has some swells to meet us.'

'I hope not, dear boy; I want to speak to him alone.'

The next moment the grave and dignified butler, assisted by an equally sedate footman, was assisting, with deferential observance, to remove their wraps, and deciding in their own minds that 'Master's poor relations, who had come in a common "growler," were of the right sort'—a verdict which would have been endorsed by any observer who glanced at the group which presented itself as the solemn Ricketts threw open the drawing-room door.

Mrs. Frere, still pretty and eminently ladylike in her well-fitting black dress and feathery white cap, leading Mabel; Mabel, pale, plain, yet refined-looking, with big blue eyes, plentiful hair, and tiny feet; Randal, fair and tall, and slight; and Grace, slender, yet round, her small head, with its deer-like poise, giving an air of distinction to the whole figure; her graceful, pliant waist, her creamy white skin, her clear, earnest eyes—making a sweet picture of gracious girlhood.

The master of the house and an elderly lady—an elegant-looking woman, fashionably dressed—were standing before the fireplace; both turned at the opening of the door, and announcement of 'Mr., Mrs., and Miss Frere.'

'Very happy to see you,' said the host, rather rigidly; 'and you too—a—' to Grace and Randal, shaking hands with all three successively. 'Let me introduce Lady Elton, Mrs. Frere. I imagine you must have met in former years.'

'I think we have heard of each other, but never met,' said Lady Elton, sweetly, and offering her hand to Mrs. Frere. 'Your son and daughter'—a slight curtsey.

'I have often heard my dear husband and Max speak of you, Lady Elton. I am very glad to make your acquaintance.'

Lady Elton's tone, the atmosphere of the richly, elegantly furnished rooms, seemed like a return home to Mrs. Frere, and completely restored her soft, tranquil, ordinary manner, which the vexations and anxieties of the last three months had considerably frayed.

'I have brought my little Mabel, you see,' continued Mrs. Frere to her brother-in-law. 'I thought you had probably forgotten I had another girl, and I have no one to leave with her.'

'Oh, indeed! Good-evening, Miss Mabel,' said the uncle, with anything but cordiality; 'your first dinner out, I presume?'

'No, it is not,' replied Mabel; 'I dined out many times in Dublin;' and she gazed solemnly, though shyly, at her stately-looking relative.

'I am sorry Max has not come in; he returned this morning, but has been detained. We will not wait for him.'

While Mr. Frere was speaking, Lady Elton was uttering some civil nothings to Grace and Randal; but it was an infinite relief to all parties when Mr. Frere's words were appropriately capped by the announcement of 'dinner.' Whereupon the master of the house offered his arm to Mrs. Frere, Lady

Elton looked to Randal, who immediately offered his, and Grace and Mabel followed, hand in hand.

On reaching the sumptuous dining-room—duly furnished and ornamented with oak and bronze, covered with Persian carpets, and hung with deep crimson curtains—Lady Elton took the head of the table, with Randal on her left; Mrs. Frere took the host's right, and Grace his left; while Mabel was put next her sister—a place being set for her after they were in the room—which mark of her being unexpected and unwished for irritated Grace in her present state of nervous strain, but which Mrs. Frere contemplated with profound indifference. A place opposite still remained vacant during the soup period, and in spite of Lady Elton's well-bred efforts to be cheerful, and Mrs. Frere's unassumed ease, 'The cold chain of silence hung o'er them still!' Silence, and in Grace's sympathetic, keenly perceptive soul, the instinctive conviction that they were not favoured guests. It was hard work to swallow the soup, with a choking sensation in her throat, while her hands were icy cold, and the bright colour was fast fading from her cheeks. She had already disregarded two distinct nudges from Mabel, and had wondered, in a dull, hazy manner, at Randal's unusual quiet, when the door behind her opened, and her heart seemed to stand still, as a well-known voice, for which her ear had often yearned with an aching she would have died rather than confessed, exclaimed:

'A thousand apologies! I did not know I was so

late;' and Max walked quickly round to Mrs. Frere and said, cordially, 'Very glad to see you, my dear aunt! All right, I hope?' leaning over her chair and shaking hands with her quite warmly; then passing Lady Elton with 'Good-evening,' greeted Randal, patted Mabel's head kindly, and took Grace's hand: 'So, my sweet cousin, you are in London at last!' he said, with a keen quick glance into the eyes upraised to his,—moist, questioning eyes, and almost unconsciously pressing the cold hand given to him.

'Alas! yes,' was Grace's expressive answer in a low tone; and then Maxwell passed round to his place between Mrs. Frere and Lady Elton, and waved away the soup presented by the butler. 'No, thanks! let dinner go on;' and from that moment coldness and silence disappeared. With a nod to his father, Max told him 'That arrangement would be made, after all, on the most favourable terms,' an announcement that evidently gave the hearer satisfaction; and then Max devoted himself to the company generally. He described his visit to Paris, spoke of its altered aspect; he argued lightly with Lady Elton, who was disposed to defend the communists, probably for argument's sake. He made flattering allusions to his visit to Dungar, and for the first time took the trouble to put Randal in the best light. He looked to Mab's requirements in the way of sweets and fruit and wine; and though he paid least attention to Grace, she was not neglected. Lady Elton had never known Max so agreeable; Randal began to think he was not such

a bad fellow after all. Mrs. Frere's spirits began to rise as she noticed the easy friendly tone of the powerful only son, while Grace—Grace alone, with the unerring instinct of yearning tenderness, thought she detected under all this bright courtesy something that was not the ring of true metal; some lack which she could not define, even to herself; a consciousness which she could not resist, even when telling herself it was unworthy, that though well and naturally done, Max was playing a part.

But she would not permit herself to be silent; and, seeing her uncle the least absorbed by Max, she addressed her efforts at conversation to him. She was internally ashamed of the struggle this cost her. Why, she asked herself, should she have this dread of talking to this stern, self-contained man? He was not comparable in style and bearing to her grandfather. He was her father's brother. He was no great noble, accustomed to courts and senates, but a London merchant of ordinary wealth and standing. Why was she such a coward, such a despicable coward? She would not yield to it. Why should she, his equal, feel this fear of him? So, with resolution worthy of a better cause, Grace, looking straight into her uncle's cold, light eyes, began:

'You have never visited Ireland, uncle. You ought to have come with Max.'

Mr. Frere glanced at her, astonished. It seemed a liberty on the part of this penniless, obscure girl to address *him* with the familiarity of a relative, when he had scarce acknowledged her as such, for

Maxwell's views and visits committed *him* to nothing; and he was dimly conscious of a kind of resentful enmity towards this possibly dangerous girl, with her reprehensible frank fearlessness and incomprehensible brightness.

'No,' he returned shortly; 'I have no time for visiting of any kind.'

'I am sure a complete change would amuse you and do you good,' persisted Grace, feeling her courage revive, after making that first step which costs so much. 'Do you never go out of town?'

'Very seldom. Ricketts' (to the butler), 'Hock to Lady Elton.'

'I begin to like London, though we are only in a shabby lodging,' resumed Grace, smiling, now bent on making her uncle talk; 'it seems so inexhaustible. But I want to see the city; that must be the greatest wonder of all.'

'Not much to interest a young lady there.'

'Young ladies are thought very stupid, I am afraid,' returned Grace. 'Do you ever go to the Derby? I should like to see the Derby.'

'The Derby—um—I have seen it; it is now—a—scarcely the place for ladies.'

'What a shame!' exclaimed Grace; 'ladies seem to have nothing left but dull things.'

Instead of answering, Mr. Frere, raising his voice, addressed Lady Elton:

'I am told Sir Henry Darnell has had another apoplectic attack—nearly went off!'

'So I hear. His nephew was going to Paris, I believe, as he said here; but his uncle's medical

man advised him not to leave London till the patient rallied.'

'Ha! young Darnell is his heir. I understand Darnell was made a baronet last year.'

'And a very bad style of baronet our friend will make,' cried Max, whose eyes had dwelt on Grace with an amused curiosity during her attempt to converse with his father; 'but he is not a bad sort of fellow—uncommonly good-natured under the tobacco-smoke and swagger.'

'Yes,' replied Lady Elton, carelessly; 'he is a kindly animal, but a mere animal.'

A pause ensued while the dessert was handed round. Grace had vindicated her courage to herself, and felt it would not be in good taste to attack her uncle again. Max had exhausted his subjects, and was hunting through his mental preserves for a new one, and Mr. Frere's brow looked sullen. The silence continued for a few seconds, whereupon Mab, who had partaken largely and indiscriminately of the good things offered to her, felt satisfied and disposed to join in the conversation.

'Max,' she began abruptly, 'there is a cat and a canary in our house; they are kept downstairs in the kitchen.'

'Indeed, Mab!' returned Max, rather thankful to her for a fresh start; 'and have you penetrated into those regions to make their acquaintance?'

'Yes; I had tea one day with Miss Timbs.'

'And who is Miss Timbs, Mab?'

'Oh, she is the woman of she house; she buys everything for us, and such bad butter!'

'Mabel, my dear, do not talk at dinner,' said Mrs. Frere; 'little girls should be seen, and not heard.'

'Ah! we used to reverse that maxim at Dungar, Mab,' cried Max, laughing. 'So you have made friends with the cat.'

'Yes; it is a very nice cat, though she often eats up our cold meat, and fish, and things; but I will show her to you when you come to see us. When will you come, Max?'

'Oh, next Sunday. You know I have not any holidays in London. It is all work and no play, here.'

'That is horrid!' exclaimed Mab, with warm sympathy.

'It has not made *you* a dull boy yet, Max,' said Mrs. Frere, kindly.

'Rather exerted a sharpening influence on the original over-softness of his nature—eh, Miss Frere?' observed Miss Elton.

'Softness!' repeated Grace, opening her big eyes on the speaker with unaffected surprise; 'I never perceived much softness about Max.'

'What a fortunate fellow I am to be seated between two such charming aunts; both so alive to my many excellences!'

'To say nothing of a cousin who used to think you the wisest man of the day,' said Randal.

'Who, yourself or Grace? How cruel to speak in the past tense.'

'If you come on Sunday, Max,' recommenced Mab, 'will you take me to the Zoological Gardens? and Grace might come, too?'

'Ah! that would be very niee: but, unfortunately, I am engaged to dine at Rockhampton.'

'Well, the Sunday after,' said Mab, with her usual persistence; 'and then I can go with Mr. Byrne to Hampstead next Sunday.'

'With whom?' asked Max, raising his eyebrows in undisguised astonishment.

'Jimmy Byrne. Don't you know Jimmy Byrne?' returned Mab.

'Does she mean that sharp little beggar at Steenson and Greggs'?' asked Max, addressing himself to Grace.

'He is not a beggar!' cried Mab, indignantly; 'he has plenty of money. He brings me cakes and lots of things in his black bag.'

'It is the same,' said Grace, meeting her cousin's glance with calm, unshrinking eyes, though the colour came back faintly to her cheeks.

Max made no rejoinder, but turned to his pineapple in expressive silence.

'I wish you would not talk so much, Mab,' cried Randal, with some irritation.

He was much impressed by Lady Elton's manner and appearance, and consequently scandalised by Mab's revelations; but he brought his own punishment on himself, for Mab replied by openly, under Lady Elton's very eyes, then turned full upon her, making a grimace so indicative of utter contemptuous defiance, that Lady Elton burst out laughing.

'I am afraid you are not properly in subjection to your elder brother, Miss Mab,' she said good-

humouredly, to which, with a sudden return of the shyness that had kept her quiet during the first stages of dinner, Mab made no answer, only hung her head and twisted her napkin.

'If you will not take anything more?' continued Lady Elton, with the after-dinner cabalistic nod, seeing Mrs. Frere refuse the preserved ginger; and then the ladies rose to leave the room.

'Perhaps,' said Max to Mrs. Frere, 'you and Randal will stay and have a little talk with my father, as he has so seldom any time to spare.'

'Certainly,' returned Mrs. Frere, pausing and casting a quick, nervous look at her daughter.

'Then we will leave you,' said Lady Elton. 'Come, young ladies!' and she led the way decidedly.

Max held the door open, and Grace, who came last, full of sympathy for her mother, who she knew was trembling at the notion of a business talk with her frigid brother-in-law, whispered, as she passed: 'Stand by my mother, Max!' backing the injunction with a glance of frank entreaty from those soft grey eyes which used to quicken his pulses some few months ago.

'I will,' whispered Max, low, but emphatic; and as he slowly closed the door he stood at the opening to the last, looking after *her*, Grace felt convinced.

When Max returned to his seat, Mrs. Frere had resumed hers, and Randal, with too evident *sang froid*, was helping himself to a fresh supply of olives.

'Well, my dear aunt,' said Max, pleasantly;

'I suppose your first care is to dispose of this young gentleman?'

'It is indeed, Max,' replied that lady, pocket-handkerchief already in hand, prepared for emergencies, while the quick beating of her heart was visible in her throat. 'And I feel sure your father will do what he can, to help his only brother's only surviving son.'

'I should be happy to assist you, if in my power,' said Mr. Frere, with mechanical civility. 'What has Randal been trained for?'

An awful silence ensued.

'I mean,' resumed Mr. Frere, filling his glass with claret, 'has he been prepared for any examination? or do you think of an office, a—merchant's office, or a lawyer's?'

'I don't think Randal has been exactly *trained* for anything,' returned the mother, gathering courage, as she had to boast her son's requirements. 'But he is really very well educated. Though latterly my beloved father had *not* the means to give him the advantages we all wished for, he has kept up his studies with Dr. Stepney, he speaks French very well, though not so well as Grace, and he has remarkable facility in writing; indeed, I imagine his real tendency is for literature, only that is such uphill work. But I think, with his knowledge of French, and the rudiments of German, if he could get into the Foreign Office, or, as it does not do to be too ambitious, a private secretaryship to—a —nobleman, or ambassador——'

She ceased, having talked herself into a com-

parative calm, and profound silence fell upon the party for a moment or two. Then Max, suppressing a smile which yet gleamed in his eyes, said, not unkindly:

'For the Foreign Office it is necessary to pass an examination, and——' He paused, for Mr. Frere broke in, disapprobation in every wrinkle of his brow, and every tone of his voice:

'It seems, then, that your son is not fitted for anything! This sort of desultory education is pure loss of time; all the accomplishments and requirements possible are of no use, if not properly pigeonholed and directed. I would suggest a year's training in some house of business, either legal or mercantile; though I must warn you that it is exceedingly difficult to gain admittance into any house now. Many demand a premium—none offer any salary for the first year.'

'Do you mean Randal to be a clerk?' asked Mrs. Frere, with mingled astonishment and indignation.

'Yes, if he were so fortunate as to obtain such a situation; but it is not so easy.'

Mrs. Frere's pocket-handkerchief found occupation.

'I decidedly object to being tied to a desk,' said Randal, energetically; 'it is not a calling for a gentleman! Why, little Jimmy Byrne is a clerk; and as to my not being fit for anything, Uncle Frere, how do you know that till I am tried? At any rate, I have some plans of my own, and until they have failed I do not see why my mother need trouble you.'

'I am afraid, my dear boy, your plans are but vague,' said Mrs. Frere, tearfully. 'When you know the world as I do——' she broke off abruptly.

'I fear you have a good deal to learn, young gentleman!' said Mr. Frere, severely. 'Pray, how old is your son?' to Mrs. Frere.

'He was nineteen in November, and Grace eighteen in January last.'

'You see he has lost a great deal of time at the outset of his career. I am of course by no means anxious to press my assistance on him, nor should I wish to neglect my brother's children; so when Randal's present plans have fallen through, I am willing to give him a seat in my counting-house for a year, that he may learn business. I do not undertake to give him continued employment, but his training with our firm will give him a better chance for the future; and though I cannot make any exception in his favour as regards salary, I shall be happy to allow you fifty pounds a year for two years, payable quarterly, in advance; by the expiration of which time I hope your son will be in a position to afford you some effectual assistance.'

'I am sure you are exceedingly good,' Mrs. Frere was beginning, with heightened colour, when Max, as if not perceiving that she spoke, broke in:

'Come, Randal, that is a very fair offer of my father's; you ought to snatch at it. A sharp young fellow like you would pick up a very tolerable idea of business at our place in a year. What do you say?'

'I should never make a man of business,' said Randal, looking cross and uncomfortable. 'I am, of course, very much obliged to my uncle, but—I would rather try my hand at writing for the press first. I rather imagine I have an opening in that direction; the fact is,' with an air of importance, 'I am on rather friendly terms with the editor of the *Girdle*, and he has at present some of my MS. under consideration.'

'The *Girdle!* What the deuce is the *Girdle?* I never heard of it before,' exclaimed Max, laughing. 'I suppose it is one of those penny concerns that totter along for a month or two and then smash up.'

'Perhaps so,' returned Randal, with lofty scorn; 'but when I tell you that the editor is Halkett, probably you may not think so little of the "*concern.*"'

'Halkett,' repeated Max, with provoking emphasis. 'My dear boy, nobody ever heard of him. Do not let these obscure scribblers bamboozle you; they cannot help you; they can scarcely scrape along themselves. Take my advice; throw your MS. into the fire, close with my father's offer, and possibly, ten years hence, if you have the true author's stuff in you, you may give us a volume of experiences, or a new work on finance.'

'Max,' said Mrs. Frere, 'this is no laughing matter!'

'I know I was always a laughing-stock to my experienced cousin!' cried Randal, flushing fiery-red with indignation. 'But we will see! I am determined

to try my luck—much obliged to you all the same, sir!' to Mr. Frere. 'And though it's very good of you to offer my mother a pension for a couple of years, I think we'll see how we can get on, on our own resources. We are not penniless—eh, mother?'

'No—not exactly! Really your uncle is very considerate; fifty pounds is a great deal of money. But I should not like Randal to be tied to a desk all his life; and as he seems a little hurt (perhaps he is too sensitive), I believe we had better decline for the present your kind offer. Though my means are limited, there are feelings——'

'Do not decide on anything, my dear aunt,' interrupted Max, his lip curling with the contempt he could not quite conceal. 'You know your own resources; and I must say my father's offer is not of a nature to be lightly rejected.'

'I think we might join Lady Elton,' said Mr. Frere, calmly; 'for I believe there is nothing more to be said. The offer I have made is the utmost I can undertake. Should your son prefer law to business possibly Messrs. Steenson and Gregg might admit him among their *employés*, and—a—I have no other suggestion to make. Shall we go upstairs?'

'If it comes to a clerkship,' said Randal, insolently, 'I would rather serve under Jimmy Byrne.'

His uncle took no notice of him, but rang, to let the servants know they were leaving the dining-room.

'Randal, you are a blockhead, believe me,' said Max, with much candour. 'At all events, my father

will not expect you to decide for a week or two, —eh, sir?'

'Certainly, Randal may take time; but I do not say he may postpone his decision indefinitely. He has lost too much already, and every week of idleness renders him so much the more unfit for work.'

So saying, Uncle Frere held the door open with a slight bow, intimating that the audience was over.

Mrs. Frere, her heart throbbing painfully, and with a dull dazed fear that she had been somehow stupid and weak-spirited, and had injured Randal's interest by not saying or doing something, she did not know what, different from what she did, passed out and ascended the richly carpeted stairs, longing to be alone with Grace, to grasp her cool, soft hand, and pouring out all her fears and wrongs, be soothed by the tender tones and hopeful words of her youthful prime counsellor.

The gentlemen followed slowly.

Meantime, in spite of her anxious sympathy with her mother in the trial she was enduring, Grace found that time went with surprising speed and pleasantness in the drawing-room. So soon as they had reached that gorgeous apartment, and been served with coffee, Lady Elton drew an easy-chair to the fire, and indulged in a long, keen, scrutinising gaze at her companion. Mab had wandered away on a voyage of discovery to the inner drawing-room, which she was the better able to permit herself, because Grace in her turn was looking about with evident admiration.

'They are handsome rooms, and in good taste,' said Lady Elton, at last, as Grace began to turn over a fine collection of photographs which lay invitingly on a portfolio-stand near one of the windows.

'Yes, very handsome,' returned Grace, who had been too anxious and confused to notice anything before dinner: 'the handsomest I have ever seen. And yet——' she paused.

'Yet what?' asked Lady Elton, with a pleasant smile.

'I do not think I should care to live in them; they want something, I do not know what,' replied Grace, frankly, but with a slight blush.

'Exactly,' returned Lady Elton. 'They want the touch of a woman's hand—a real woman's. This London finery must seem all strange to you, after the wild grace of nature in your beautiful Irish home. Max told me it was very lovely.'

'Did Max talk to you of Dungar?' asked Grace, leaving the photographs and seating herself on a low ottoman near Lady Elton; not with any rustic suddenness of movement, but with a gliding deliberate step, as if too much in earnest to be shy or embarrassed. 'Ah yes! it is indeed lovely, yet I did not think he admired it as he ought. But he told you it was beautiful?'

'Yes; he has often spoken of its many charms,' replied Lady Elton, watching the countenance turned towards her through her half-closed eyelids.

'He has spoken of you to me,' resumed Grace. 'You are his aunt?'

'I am: his mother's sister, so you see I cannot claim you as my niece, which I rather regret. I suppose you have seen very little of London. How has it impressed you so far?'

'I can scarcely tell you. It is terrible to me, and yet—I believe I shall like it, but we live in such a distant shabby corner, that it is not like being in town at all.'

'Would you like to drive with me through the Park?'

'Oh, Lady Elton! I should indeed.'

'What are you going to do with your brother? He appears a very charming young man.'

'Do with Randal?' repeated Grace, laughing; 'I am afraid no one can do much with him. He is clever, I believe; but I know so little, I can hardly judge.'

'You have too low an estimate of yourself, Miss Frere,' a little cynically.

'Indeed I have not. Humility is not a virtue of mine, I fear. Mab, take care of the photographs; do not let them fall. Are they not lovely?'

Mab was soon absorbed, now and then putting a question to her sister; while Lady Elton continued her conversation with Grace, her interest steadily increasing, and gathering quite as much information from the speaker's face as from her frank replies.

'Your cousin's visit must have been a pleasant break in the monotony of your life at Dungar,'

observed Lady Elton, after Grace had given, in reply to her questions, a sketch of her existence there.

'Oh yes! it was delightful to have him to talk to; he was quite different from anyone else.'

'I suppose he was the only young man besides your brother you ever saw.'

'Not quite. Long ago, when I was a little girl about fourteen, some officers of a cavalry regiment used to come over to Dungar to shoot; and then there was Maurice Balfour.'

'Who was he?'

'The grandson of Dr. Stepney, our rector.'

'Ah!' said Lady Elton.

'But he has not been home for a long time,' continued Grace. 'He went away to England three or four years ago. He is an engineer; he used to work in a yard, and told us such funny stories about his adventures: for he used to come home once or twice a year at first; then he went away to Zurich, I think. We were very fond of Maurice, he is such a good fellow.'

'Then on the whole you liked him better than Max?'

'No! Oh no! Maurice was only a rough boy; and Max, he is quite different, and my own cousin.'

'Ah! blood was considered thicker than water at Dungar.'

'Yes,' said Grace, with a sigh and shake of the head.

'Do you mean to imply that the belief is not prevalent at this side of the water?'

'I cannot tell; I fear not,' returned Grace, sadly.

'Poor child!' said Lady Elton, as though to herself; then noticing that Grace's colour rose, and her eyes grew grave, she went on, 'Does it offend you to be called "child"? My dear! compared to me, you *are* a child; and remember, one has a sort of liking for people one can say "child" to.'

'Then, pray call me child,' cried Grace, with ready gracious tact.

'I think we may possibly be friends, but I am a very whimsical old woman,' returned Lady Elton.

'Old woman!' repeated Grace, with such real unaffected surprise at the epithet, that Lady Elton smiled a well-pleased smile.

'So you do not think me an old woman? that is charming! you cannot imagine how I hate growing old.'

'Nurse's mother was very old,' observed Mabel, joining in the conversation; 'she said she was a hundred; she remembered Emmet's rebellion, and the French landing. I thought it was only the Bible people that lived a hundred years.'

Here the conversation was stopped by the entrance of Mrs. Frere and the gentlemen. Grace saw at a glance that her mother was trembling on the verge of a fit of hysterical weeping, and from Randal's colour and carriage, that he was on the loftiest of high horses. Mr. Frere was of course imperturbable, unmoved by the useless writhings of such miserable weaklings as his poor relations; and Max too was cool and collected as usual.

'Have you had tea?' asked the host of Lady

Elton, as he rang for a supply of that beverage and the evening papers.

'Have you seen the photographs, Mab?' asked Max.

'Yes, but I want to see them all over again,' returned Mab; 'Grace could not tell me half enough about them.'

'Come along then, Grace; these views are worth looking at.'

Grace came at his invitation and stood by him, feeling her hands growing colder and her heart sinking lower, as he continued to comment and explain lightly, amusingly, but without a glance, a syllable, an indication of that veiled tenderness, that irrepressible admiration he used so dexterously to convey in every word and look and tone, and which he had rendered all the more precious, because it was so carefully hidden from every eye save her own; in short, Max had largely educated his young cousin.

Lady Elton, observing the furtive hand-pressure bestowed by Grace on her mother as she passed, guessed that the quiet ladylike widow required support, drew a chair beside her and soon attracted Randal, who had for some time stood in the centre of the room stirring his tea in solitary majesty. But Mrs. Frere was not equal to conversation; she complained of headache, and expressed a wish to leave.

Max, after a proper amount of regret, sent for a cab, and the much-anticipated dinner at Uncle Frere's was over.

'I shall have the pleasure of calling on you in a day or two, if you will allow me,' said Lady Elton, as she bid Mrs. Frere good-night.

'Good-night, aunt—good-night, Grace; if I can possibly manage to call on Sunday, I will,' was the valediction of Max; not a word did he address to Randal.

'I am quite interested in your Irish relatives, Mr. Frere,' said Lady Elton; 'there is a wonderful charm about the young people.'

'Glad you think so,' returned Uncle Frere; 'cannot say I perceive it.'

'Max,' whispered Lady Elton a few minutes later, as he put her into her carriage, 'I understand how excellent the Irish grouse-shooting must have been.'

'Do you?' returned Max, carelessly, with his bright passing smile, which always suggested a deeper source of amusement than the lookers-on knew: 'yes, it was excellent for two seasons; the third would probably have been a failure, so it is as well it is out of the question.'

'Home,' said Lady Elton to the footman, as she drew up the glass sharply.

Max stepped back, paused an instant, and then re-entered the house.

CHAPTER VII.

THE days which succeeded Uncle Frere's dinner were very trying to the whole party. Mrs. Frere was terribly cast down; her interview with her cold and powerful brother-in-law did more to enlighten her as to her insignificant and helpless position than volumes of kindly explanation such as Jimmy Byrne attempted, and which it must be admitted, between a respectful fear of offending and an ardent desire to impress the strong need of economy, were rather incoherent.

Randal, too, was more crestfallen than he would confess even to himself, and was consequently touchy and exacting in an unusual degree. The tone his uncle and Max adopted towards him grated on his sensitive self-consciousness with maddening irritation, so long as the impression lasted. He instinctively felt that the only cure for such a sore was an extensive application of praise and flattery, a salve which he naturally sought at the hands of

his brilliant and distinguished acquaintance, Halkett; a visit to the *E. G.* office about every second day was the consequence. Halkett, however, was not to be so easily found; sometimes he was out, sometimes so deeply engaged that he could not see even his gifted young friend Frere; then ''Pon his soul he hadn't had the ghost of a minute to himself to look at those sketches his dear boy had left with him! But on Sunday—faith! if all the press in London was howling at his heels for "copy," he *would* read his friend's lucubrations.'

The depression of her elders either really made Mab more restless or made her seem more restless; and then she managed to offend Miss Timbs, who in an odd mechanical way was disposed to be friendly. But one unfortunate evening, when Mrs. Frere was complaining of headache, Miss Timbs had asked Mab downstairs, and, apropos of the canary and birds in general, related a gruesome anecdote of a conflict between some rats and an owl, somewhere in the country, to which Mab listened with deep attention, but confounded Miss Timbs by inquiring at the end, 'What is a "howl," I cannot quite understand?'

'Why, bless the child! hain't you got no howls in your country?'

'I do not know exactly; there are some cries we call howls.'

'I mean a big white bird.'

'Oh, I know! Why do you call it "howl"? it is owl, without an "h."'

'Very well, miss! if that's all the thanks I get

for telling you a pretty story, you may go upstairs. No one ever found fault with my speech before. I don't say howl; I say howl!'

'There! that's just the same! you *do* put an "h" to it. Why are you vexed? I like the story. Please tell it all over again; only do say owl.'

It was amazing the bitterness with which the severe landlady resented the child's supposed insult. It woke up all her suspicion, and she soon decided that her elegant, fastidious lodgers were not possessed of an amount of this world's goods proportionate to their pretensions.

It is true her first bill was promptly paid (for after going carefully through the items, Jimmy had pronounced them not out of the way), but then there was a decided drawing-in, in which Grace was the chief agent. Yet of the whole family Grace was her chief favourite. There was something attractive to Miss Timbs' innate John Bullism in Grace's frank, straightforward, reasonable mode of dealing—her refusal to buy costly eatables, simply because they cost too much, her preference for walking to driving in cabs for the same reason—which elicited respect from the immaculate Timbs. 'Miss Frere is as sensible a young woman as ever I met,' was her verdict.

But on Grace herself this pause in the onward course of the family history pressed her most painfully.

If Max had been utterly cold and unfriendly, all the strength of her pride would have been up in arms to resist her own tenderness. But he had

been kind, helpful, and Mrs. Frere reported of him on the whole favourably at that awful after-dinner conference. While one answering look of his into her eyes as she made her whispered appeal in passing through the dining-room door, haunted Grace, and threw a welcome though misleading gleam over the dull grey mist of doubt and perplexity in which her thoughts worked round and round with painful iteration.

Was it not possible that, as she was evidently unacceptable to his father, Max avoided any display of feeling for all their sakes? She would have faith; distrust was so ignoble. But, oh! this unspoken uncertainty, how hard it was to bear, and yet to show a brave cheerful front, to resist the irritation that is the accompaniment of uncertainty, to bear with Mab, to soothe her mother's fears, and suppress the overwhelming temptation to snub Randal!

Small matters, perhaps, compared to the graver trials of after years; nevertheless, very real and bitter to the young high-spirited sufferer, whose heart alternately yearned with almost agonised longing for one kind look, one loving word from her lover-cousin, or roused itself into haughty self-contempt for thus casting its all at another's feet.

The period of inaction was short.

Early in the week following Uncle Frere's dinner, Lady Elton called. It was a fine day, and Grace had persuaded her mother to come with Mab and herself to Kensington Gardens. The sight of the cards left during their absence, however, cheered

both Grace and Mrs. Frere; it seemed a token that they were not quite forgotten, though Max had broken his promise to Mabel, and failed to appear on the previous Sunday. True, he had sent a pleasant well-bred note of excuse to his aunt, but the failure had cut deeply into Grace's soul, and strengthened her to resist the perpetual thought of him, which was at once a torture and a delight.

'I am so sorry we were out,' said Grace, as she stood looking at the cards. 'I have taken a great fancy to Lady Elton; she seems so kind and very clever, just like one of these wonderful women of the world in a novel, who understand everything, and put everything right in the end.'

'Ah, Grace! the real world is very different from what you read in your books; I am afraid mademoiselle allowed you to waste a great deal of time in novel-reading.'

'Indeed you need not blame mademoiselle; but you will return Lady Elton's visit soon, mother?'

'Yes, dear.'

'And you must take me,' remarked Mabel; 'I cannot stay with Miss Timbs, she is so cross and disagreeable.'

'Very well, Mab.'

'I like to see new houses and places,' continued Mab; 'and though I am looking about, I can hear all you say too.'

'You are a little spy—I always tell you so,' said Grace.

'I do not care if you do,' returned Mabel, with supreme indifference.

In the evening, Randal, who had returned in better spirits, having succeeded in seeing Halkett, was giving a lively description of the interview, when the last post brought a note from Lady Elton, which was eagerly opened and read:

'MY DEAR MRS. FRERE' (it ran),

'I have been prevented from calling on you till to-day; and of *course* you were out! pray do not let us exchange mere formal visits. Will you, Miss Frere, and little Mabel come to luncheon at two the day after to-morrow (Friday)? I will drive you back afterwards. Kind regards to your daughter.

'Yours truly,

'HARRIET ELTON.'

'How nice and kind!' cried Grace, over her mother's shoulder.

'And I am asked too,' said Mab.

'Why the deuce has she left *me* out?' asked Randal.

'Oh! you are supposed to have your mornings occupied,' said Grace, who was not sorry for the omission; 'suppose you call by yourself another day.'

'And perhaps be snubbed for my pains,' returned Randal, crossly.

'Why, Randal! I believe you are growing shy in London.'

'Nonsense!' he returned sharply; 'it is you who are growing conceited. *Why*, I don't know; I am sure Max does not seem to think much of you

here! He was at your beck and call at Dungar, and now he does not seem to remember your existence.'

At this rude embodiment of all Grace's resisted doubts, it need scarcely be said the iron entered into her soul; nevertheless, she had pluck sufficient to answer good-humouredly: 'Max has something else to do in London; he had only to amuse himself at Dungar.'

'Just that! and so he did,' rejoined Randal, with significance. 'Tell me, mother,' he continued, 'was the late Elton a peer or a baronet?'

'A baronet,' she replied; 'and I remember there was some story of a previous engagement or love affair, I do not exactly know what. Sir George Elton was a good deal older than his wife. He only lived six or seven years I think after the marriage, and left her very well off. She used always to live in Italy or Germany until lately; she was older than Mrs. Frere, I believe.'

'She is beautiful and charming,' cried Grace, with enthusiasm.

'Not *beautiful,* dear!' said her mother; 'charming if you will. There used to be some talk about her, but your dear father admired and liked her very much. I should be glad if she interested herself in you, and took you out; for as to *my* going into society, that is quite impossible; I have *not* the means or the spirits!'

'Oh, mother! it is hardly to be expected that Lady Elton would take so much trouble for a stranger, and no relation!'

'She is an uncommonly nice woman,' said Randal, with serious approbation; 'so different from the silly girls we used to meet at Aunt d'Arcy's, who did nothing but wriggle and giggle.'

'What a capital rhyme for some satirical lines on modern young ladies, Randal!' cried Grace, laughing.

Lady Elton occupied a flat in the 'Sutherland Mansions'—a range of new houses built after the continental fashion in the neighbourhood of St. James's Park. Here she had taken up her abode on her return from Italy, little more than two years before, and led a very easy, luxurious, well-amused life. She had told her friends on establishing herself in her new quarters, that she intended to assume the privileges of an old woman; that she would make no new acquaintances, unless moved thereto by special causes; that she would go out to no large parties; in short, that she would be no slave to society, but that her friends would find her at home every Saturday evening from nine to twelve, or later, and that those who wished to know her might get some acquaintance to introduce them there. The result was, that admission to Lady Elton's Saturday receptions was eagerly sought. She was well known to an immense circle, a mixed multitude, for she pretended to no exclusiveness; while her rare intimacies were generally with members of the literary and artistic world, especially with foreigners, who often appeared at her soirées in garments 'fearfully and wonderfully made.'

Though often animated, and always agreeable, the more observant of Lady Elton's acquaintances felt, rather than perceived, an undercurrent of weariness and profound indifference which occasionally chilled the warmer surface-stream of her manner and conventional conversation. But there is always a great reserve power in the indifference which puts the possessor above and beyond the reach of their fellows to wound or to annoy, provided it be not offensively shown, and that it does not go the length of declining to add a fair quota to the general stock of entertainment.

Then Lady Elton gave occasional charming little dinners, studiously simple, and far from costly, yet much prized. And above all, she had the reputation of being stingy; for although her surroundings were elegant, and in her establishment there was no lack, all was on a scale considerably smaller than that to which her reputed wealth entitled her.

She was therefore credited with large accumulations, especially as no one in London knew anything of her financial operations. She was supposed to dabble in foreign stocks, to have a confidential Jew agent at Frankfort, and a Russian banker at Odessa. She speculated in grain; she gambled on the Paris Bourse; she had managed to get up an understanding with Rothschild; she held preference shares in all the Indian railways; she was on confidential terms with Lesseps.

This chatter was of course limited to the furthest outsiders. Her intimates shrugged their shoulders,

and hoped 'dear Lady Elton would not be led away by the lure of high interest;' and her sedate brother-in-law, who held her in high esteem, solemnly deplored her refusal to permit Steenson and Gregg to guide her in the way she should go—financially.

Lady Elton, who heard a good deal of this gossip, laughed, and said that, thank heaven! she could afford to pay for her bread and cheese.

It was a bright spring morning when Mrs. Frere and her girls arrived at Lady Elton's abode; there was a fair amount of blue sky and sunshine; the lilacs were peeping forth, and the water-carts spreading temporary freshness. Hawkers were going about with small flower-gardens on their heads, making quiet streets ring again with the cry of 'All a-growin' and a-blowin';' and Grosvenor Place had decked its balconies and window-sills with a wealth of sweet many-coloured blossoms.

There was the indescribable quiver and renewed life in human as well as vegetable sap, and even Grace, in spite of her disappointment and bitter self-commune, felt gayer and more hopeful.

'Why, mother dear! this is like a French house,' she exclaimed joyfully, as they entered a large hall, and her eye was caught by an oak key-rack, with a range of pigeon-holes beneath, on the opposite wall.

'It is indeed,' replied Mrs. Frere, with a sigh.

'Lady Elton, ma'am?' said the hall porter, in answer to Grace's inquiries; 'third floor, ma'am, right-hand side.'

The door to Lady Elton's apartments was opened by an elderly, dark-eyed, soft-mannered Italian, once her travelling-servant, now her major-domo, her right hand and prime minister.

He ushered them through a dim, but prettily arranged passage, faintly illuminated by a borrowed light, and having at the end a bank of ferns, kept green and fresh by the constant spray of a diminutive fountain, which made a pleasant cooling murmur, and looked picturesque when lit up in the evening. A door on the left opened into a well-proportioned room, from which a large arched opening, draped with crimson curtains, led into another and more spacious drawing-room.

Her progress through these rooms was like the revelation of another world to Grace; hitherto, furniture was to her half-awakened sense but chairs and tables, curtains and carpets, pianos, and, in the more exalted order of things, cabinets and flower-vases. Here, these every-day necessities of ordinary humanity had developed into an expression of taste, habit, and individuality, beyond anything she had ever imagined, even with the help of elaborate descriptions in the few modern novels which had come within her ken. Inexperienced as she was, Grace felt in a dim instinctive way, as they followed the noiseless steps of their conductor, that she could read something of Lady Elton herself in the arrangement, form, colour, and ornamentation of her charming rooms.

Soft grey and crimson predominated. The

neutral tint of the walls was relieved by water-colour drawings of no mean merit. The curtains were of grey and crimson cretonne; the cabinets were of various kinds, ebony inlaid with ivory, of Venetian workmanship, marquetry, and grey maple; quaint corner cupboards, lined with crimson velvet, and full, not crowded, with delicate china, curious Japanese enamels, rare bits of carved ivory; the niches contained vases or dishes of Palissy or other choice ware. Tables with lace-bordered covers; chairs of every imaginable shape, suited to every sort of occupation; rich, soft-coloured squares of Persian carpet lying before the sofas and larger chairs, on the dark polished parquet; the looking-glasses sunk in the wall, or lightly framed in brown polished wood, delicately carved—the whole full of perfume from the flowers which were everywhere, in baskets, jardinières, vases, and a whole bed against the wide lofty looking-glass at the end of the first room, where, among a crowd of graceful broad-leaved oriental plants, stood a beautiful statue of Ariadne, in white marble.

The contents of the beautiful rooms conveyed an idea of personal treasures, each dear to the owner for some special reason, and not supplied by any 'well-known firm' of fashionable reputation.

The last notion suggested was costliness; and yet Lady Elton's rooms were costly, with a costliness that money could not supply. At Uncle Frere's the solid splendour almost made you look for fringes of sovereigns, like the decorations of coin which Egyptian women bestow upon their hair

and head-dresses. Here was something more than 'regardlessness of expense.'

'How lovely!' murmured Mrs. Frere, glancing round.

Grace did not speak, her admiration was too great; and in it there was not a tinge of the depression which often darkens our contemplation of beauty far above out of our reach.

Beyond the two reception-rooms was a third smaller apartment, darker and more subdued in colouring, fitted with amber brocade and brown velvet. Here were books of every description, new and old; curiosities, toys, bronzes, statuettes, vases of flowers. The only light was a very large bay or oriel window (the house occupied a corner), with a balcony beyond, from which two busy streets and the tops of the trees in the park might be seen.

Lady Elton was sitting at a writing-table of carved walnut-wood, a feminine edition of the regular library-table; and beside her stood a cane or basket work-table overflowing with bright-coloured crewels, while several newspapers, foreign and domestic, lay upon the carpet. She wore a rich, dull, black silk, with cuffs and cravatte of heavy foreign white lace, and a 'Charlotte Corday' cap of a lighter pattern, though of similar quality, adorned with a deep red bow.

'So glad to see you,' she said, coming forward quickly to welcome Mrs. Frere. 'I had just begun to hope nothing had happened to prevent your coming. Miss Frere, London has not robbed you of your colour yet;' for Grace was slightly flushed

with the pleasurable excitement of the visit. 'And Mab! little Mab! have you left all yours in your wild West?'

'She never had much!' said her mother.

'I was sorry to have missed you,' continued Lady Elton, 'but at the hour one usually calls, everyone is out.'

The few minutes which ensued passed in the ordinary beginnings of conversation, and then luncheon was announced. It was served in a moderately-sized but handsome dining-room, admirably and appropriately furnished; yet light, agreeable and suggestive of French cookery, rather than the 'roast beef of old England.'

'Let Mab sit next to me,' said their hostess, with a kindly smile. 'I have an idea I like children, but I have seen so little of them, I scarcely know.'

'They are most interesting and lovable,' returned Mrs. Frere, accepting some roast sweetbread from the gentle Luigi, who waited upon the party with tender alacrity and watchful interest.

'They are sometimes very provoking too,' remarked Grace, with a smile.

'Let me send you a little cold lamb; or will you try the currie, Miss Frere?' said Lady Elton, while Luigi with an impressive air placed a mysteriously thick plate, with a beautifully bright silver cover over it, before Mab, uncovered it, and displayed a picturesquely brown mutton-chop with a proper modicum of gravy.

'I am told children of tender years are always fed on mutton, especially chops,' said Lady Elton,

looking at Mrs. Frere; 'so I hope Mab will find hers good.'

'You are most thoughtful,' replied Mrs. Frere, smiling, while Grace laughed merrily, and Mabel said civilly, but with much decision:

'Thank you! I do not like chops, but I will take some sweetbread now, and a little curry afterwards.'

'Mabel, my dear!' began mamma, reprovingly.

'Pray, my dear Mrs. Frere,' interposed Lady Elton, 'let the little creature exercise her natural proclivities. Her nature, allowed to develop without needless pressure, may teach *you* as much as you can teach her.'

'Perhaps so, but she is naturally disposed to eat things which disagree with her,' replied Mrs. Frere.

'It is a great pity children have not the instinct of the lower animals, which preserves them, I believe, from unsuitable food,' said Lady Elton, thoughtfully; while Luigi, at a sign from his mistress, removed the despised chop and substituted a considerable supply of rich brown sweetbread, with new potatoes and seakale *ad libitum.*

'Have you seen Max since we met?' asked Lady Elton, as Luigi removed their plates, and placed the cream, jelly, and gooseberry-fool within reach of the *convives* before he retired.

'No, we have not,' replied Mrs. Frere.

'He said he would come on Sunday, and he never came,' put in Mabel, in an injured voice.

'Cousin Max has a great deal to do,' urged Grace.

'He has,' said Lady Elton, thoughtfully. 'Max

is rather peculiar: he is very clever. I always feel as if there were depths in Max I cannot sound, which is a little humiliating to an aunt and an elder—eh, Mrs. Frere? They may only be shallow holes shrouded in mist, such as one meets with on mountain-sides on a cloudy day,' she added with a smile.

'It is the less humiliating theory of the two,' said Grace, softly and thoughtfully; she was deeply interested in and gratified by Lady Elton's observations. Max was then remarkable, even in the estimation of an experienced woman of the world like Lady Elton.

'I always found Max very pleasant and well-bred, but I never remarked anything about him different from other young men. I must say, though of course it may be a mother's prejudice, I do not think he has as much ability as my Randal—certainly he has not for literature,' remarked Mrs. Frere, shaking her head with an air of reluctant but profound conviction.

'Indeed!' said Lady Elton, politely; 'is your son engaged in any profession or especial line of study? I wish you had brought him with you to-day. He seemed very charming—like you, my dear Mrs. Frere, but with gleams of his father. I had the pleasure of knowing Colonel Frere—oh! thirty-two or thirty-three years ago, before he was married.'

'You knew papa?' cried Grace, her eyes sparkling. 'Was he not nice and delightful?'

'He was,' replied Lady Elton, with a kindly look and some emphasis. But to return to your brother:

is he going into the army, or to the bar, or into business?'

'Indeed, Lady Elton,' began Mrs. Frere, delighted to find a listener on this vexed question, 'it is a matter of great anxiety to me how to direct Randal. Circumstances over which I had no control —not the least—prevented his being trained for any profession; regularly prepared, I mean, for he has really studied a great deal, and is full of information, but his own ideas are not settled. We are not rich enough for the army or the bar; and as to business, he is quite averse, and—and—you must allow it would be painful to have one's only son a clerk!'

'I do not exactly see that,' returned Lady Elton, thoughtfully; 'beginners cannot cut in as one can at whist, they must begin at the beginning. You would not mind his being the head of a great firm? and generals must first be subalterns.'

'Yes, dear Lady Elton; but to sit all day at a desk among men who are—well—not gentlemen!'

'A good many are, Mrs. Frere. To be sure, I have always been mixed up with mercantile people: there is our brother-in-law, not fascinating, but fairly well-bred; then my husband was only a remove or two from the counting-house, and "the scent of the roses hung round him still," though he was a good fellow and a gentleman *au fond*. Your son might do worse; and if he has a touch of literary genius, it does not much matter what foundation he builds upon.'

'Well, I am no great judge myself. I wish you

could see some of his productions, Lady Elton, if it would not give you too much trouble to read them, for his hand is *not* very legible; but at present he has left them with a literary friend, Mr. Halkett, a very well-known man, I believe, who hopes to get them published for him.'

'Ah!' exclaimed Lady Elton, slightly taken aback by this startling proposition, 'one can never form any opinion about MS. poems, unless you are a professional reader, accustomed to hieroglyphics of every description. I know something of the literary world, and as I do hope you will look on me as a friend, let me speak as one. Poems are not marketable: even good prose is almost a drug. So young and inexperienced a man as your son cannot possibly have any "wares" to offer that can compete with the craftsmen who are in constant work. Let him look about him, and study and ponder; by-and-by he may make a most successful literary venture.'

'I feel you are are right,' said Grace. 'I have thought so for some time, only I could not put my thoughts into shape as you do, and no one would listen to me if I could.'

Lady Elton smiled, and helped Mabel to more cream.

'You know,' Grace went on, with heightened colour, for she felt impelled to grasp their hostess's proffered friendship with both hands, while she feared to presume upon her kindness, 'my mother is very—terribly anxious to get Randal something to do; it is of the greatest importance. And as he

seems not properly educated for the army, or appointments, don't you think it was foolish to refuse Uncle Frere's offer to take him into his office?'

'Did he refuse?' asked Lady Elton, opening her eyes. 'I have not seen Max or his father since we met at their house. Yes! it was very foolish indeed.'

'Oh, Lady Elton!' cried Grace, clasping her hands, 'do forgive me if I ask too much; but *would* you mind seeing Randal, and speaking to him? He thinks you so wise and delightful, and a woman of the world, which he is always telling mamma and me we are *not*. He would listen to what you say, and it would be such a help.'

Lady Elton looked at the eager face and wistful eyes of the speaker with a somewhat sad expression in her own, whilst Mrs. Frere observed:

'Really, my dear Grace, I fear you are taking a great liberty.'

'Child!' said Lady Elton, as if forgetting there was anyone else present, 'are you trying to play providence to your family at eighteen?'

'But, Lady Elton,' urged Grace, now blushing to the roots of her hair, for she thought their hostess meant rebuke, 'we are *all* so strange and lonely. We have come out of such a remote, quiet, peaceful retreat, that even the dear mother forgets what the world is like; and we must all try to do our best —even I—I must try to be like eight-and-twenty, not eighteen, if I could.'

'*If!* but what an if! Yes, dear, I will see and

talk with your brother. He rather pleases me. I am engaged all to-morrow, and the day after, but I will write and ask him to luncheon; I shall not forget.'

'May I get down and go look at the flowers in the next room, and out on the balcony?' asked Mabel, having reached the limits of her discursive appetite.

'Yes, certainly; go, my love only I should feel obliged if you will abstain from turning over my writing-table.'

'Oh, Lady Elton!' cried Mrs. Frere, a little hurt, 'Mabel would never think of such a thing.'

'She is not mischievous,' added Grace, 'only impatient and idle, poor child! It is very hard for her to be shut up in our tiny lodging, after the free life she has had.'

'I daresay she would be happier at school,' said Lady Elton, kindly.

'I cannot say I approve of schools—boarding-schools particularly,' returned Mrs. Frere, coldly.

'And I do not see how we can possibly pay for her education, even the simplest,' said Grace, with great candour, feeling irresistibly drawn to speak openly to this strong sympathetic woman.

'Grace! you really should not obtrude our private affairs on Lady Elton. I fear she will think you terribly rustic.'

'Believe me, I accept her confidence in the same spirit with which she gives it, Mrs. Frere. Come, shall we go into my writing-room? (I cannot bear the term *boudoir*.) I can quite imagine the change

from so delightful a residence as Max describes Dungar to be, to a small London lodging, must be depressing and miserable; but we will hope for better times. Why not, when you have settled your son, Mrs. Frere, go abroad—to Germany or Italy? *I* prefer Italy; life is cheaper and easier there, and education also.'

'I know that,' said Mrs. Frere, sadly. 'I have spent many happy days on the Continent, especially in the south of France; but I feel as if I never could go so far away, or find the means to do so.'

'It is not so costly if you know how to set about it,' returned Lady Elton, leading the way into her private sitting-room. And here the conversation turned on her ladyship's travels and continental experiences, illustrated by photographs and art specimens from various localities known to fame. The books which were lying about were overhauled, and some matters of which they treated discussed. In short, a delightful and, to Grace, most instructive hour passed only too quickly; and then the carriage was announced.

When seated therein, the coachman was ordered to drive down the Thames Embankment, back through Piccadilly and the Park. After the second round of that famed enclosure, Lady Elton said she was obliged to dine with some friends to go to the opera; so the horses' heads were turned to Camden Hill.

At parting Lady Elton pressed Grace's hand, and said in a low, almost caressing, voice, 'I must see more of you,' which sent Grace in, highly elated, to

the sordid little parlour, where the smell of some minced mutton preparing for Randal's tea-supper was only too perceptible.

The day and its enjoyments had sent a thrill of life and hope through our heroine's veins, such as they had not known since her arrival in London; and she deposited three or four books, lent her by her new friend, upon the unsteady little chiffonier with a heart full of thankfulness and silent resolve to be brave and helpful, to stamp out morbid longings, and to make the best of the materials which fortune had left her.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE Sunday after the luncheon with Lady Elton was a dull day; the footways damp and greasy from a continuous drizzle, and the fog lying low and thick. Grace had been anxious to go out, if possible, immediately after their early dinner, but Mrs. Frere had raised not unreasonable objections. In truth, Grace felt it was not unlikely that Max would pay his promised visit, and she did not wish to see him, while longing unspeakably to look upon his face again. But having broken his self-made appointment the previous Sunday, she wished to avoid the appearance of expecting or waiting for him. None, herself included, knew what a thick strata of pride lay under the bright kindly frankness of her surface manner and feeling. It was a pride that excluded most small vanities, but did not raise her above a strong instinctive delight in pleasing. Were it a beggar on whom she bestowed a penny, or a great lady, clothed with the majesty of social influence, she had a pleasure in charming both,

partly due to kindliness of nature, partly to personal vanity; but this only came into play when brought into contact with individuals: she had no vulgar ambition to shine, or attract attention. What she abhorred was defeat; and to show Max any tender longing, any reproachful resentment, would be to confess defeat; and she knew she could scarce trust her voice to speak to him, or her eyes to look at him, lest they should betray the bruised love, the trampled pride, the bitter disappointment that tortured her heart. She did not know, till this uncertainty came to irritate and humiliate her, how her all of thought and intellect and passion had entwined themselves round Max, or her idea of Max.

But at eighteen nature rejects continuous pain, and Grace had many moments in which the image of Max, if not absolutely obscured, was dimmed. When circumstances offered fresh exciting subjects to her imagination, or, assuming a more adverse and engrossing form, the family anxieties and necessities seemed to pose themselves on her young shoulders, and hers only, the deep, tender, enduring love for mother, sister, brother, that at once weighed down her heart, yet gave it strength for its burthen, for the moment hid her personal griefs, and so gave a respite of which, even while she reaped its benefits, she was almost unconscious.

'Fortune favours the brave.' While she argued with her mother the question of her going forth, Jimmy Byrne opened the garden-gate, and rang the bell.

'I am so glad you have come,' cried Grace, after he had made his bow to Mrs. Frere. 'Randal went away to the Temple church this morning, and was to try and find Mr. Halkett afterwards, and my mother does not like me to go out alone; will you be so kind as to take me to Westminster Abbey? I think, with an umbrella, we might manage to walk.'

'Faith, I'll take you, Miss Grace, with the greatest of pleasure. But we'll have a lively rowl in a hansom, if you please; and walk back, if it's fine enough.'

'It is terrible weather, Mr. Byrne,' said Mrs. Frere, 'and I really think Grace is better at home. It is so damp, she will probably take cold.'

'Now you know, mother, I never take cold,' cried Grace, laughing and blowing her a kiss as she ran away to put on her hat and mantle.

'I think it is just a trifle lighter,' said Jimmy, whose utter devotion to Grace would have led him to declare a promenade through Nebuchadnezzar's burning fiery furnace a desirable exercise if Grace willed it, 'and Sunday's a long, dull day in the house. Maybe missie here would like to come too, and leave you to have a couple hours' rest, ma'am,' he concluded.

'No, I shall stay with mamma,' said Mabel, decidedly; 'and besides, I think Max will come—he ought to come.'

'Just as you like, Miss Mabel,' returned Mr. Byrne, not sorry to have a *tête-à-tête* expedition with his 'darlin' Miss Grace.' So the curiously-assorted couple started, Grace masking the nervous

excitement into which her resolution to avoid Max, in spite of her longing to see him, had wrought her, by an assumption of gaiety. This she kept up with tolerable success during the 'lively rowl' proposed by Jimmy, but the enforced silence which succeeded their arrival at the Abbey was an infinite relief. The rich, subdued light, the music, the sense of rest, were soothing, though the stream of her thoughts still ran in the old channel. It seemed impossible, under the solemn, tender influence of song and prayer, to dread falsehood and change, harshness and indifference, as she did when walking about in the every-day world of dry facts. 'For I have said, Mercy shall be set up for ever. Thy truth shalt Thou stablish in the heavens,' chanted the choir. Grace drank in the sounds as if they brought a special message to herself. Mercy and truth—these are enough to make a heaven; but did she want mercy? Not from any fellow-creature!—and fellow-creatures were fallible. What was she that she should call forth undying attachment?—an untrained, half-educated girl. No, she must not expect it; neither would she make any whining, cringing efforts to win it back. Instinct told her they would be vain and degrading. Only she wished—oh, how passionately!—that Max had never visited Dungar, never argued with, and offended, and soothed, and sought her: yet *did* she wish that delicious episode obliterated from her life? She could not, after all, part with such a memory. Love is a mighty, soul-subduing lord. He gives and he takes away, and blessed is

the name of that lord. The choir, having reached the end of the psalm, sang, with the full swell of organ and voices, 'Praised be the Lord for evermore. Amen and amen.' Grace resumed her seat, and strove to attend to a very tough chapter from the Old Testament; and, failing this, fell into deep thought, resulting in excellent and enthusiastic resolutions to devote herself to her mother and Mab, to be patient and believing with Randal, to strive after impossible economies, to banish Max from her mind: whereupon imagination conjured him up more vividly than ever in all varieties—cold and sneering, genial and quietly amusing, tender and impassioned, with a kind of reluctant yielding to the force of feelings he could not control that made him specially attractive—and now! why—why was he not true to himself and the love he had implied? How was it that he did not find opportunity to tell her that, whatever front he was compelled to present to the world, he was still hers; that he longed to shelter her from the ills of life, to share her troubles and her tender care for those so dear to her?

With a strong effort she roused herself and crushed down thoughts she knew were so vain, so widely unlike reality. How was she to resist these haunting visions, so maddeningly painful in their delusive sweetness? She would not yield to these promptings, she would fill her heart and mind with other things—with the duties and troubles of her present condition, with an effort to supply some of the many deficiencies of her scattered education;

and so, with a slight shiver, she came out of her dreams as the officiating clergyman, with outstretched hand, was pronouncing the blessing:

'The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds——' And Jimmy Byrne, anxious to get out before the crowd, was struggling furtively to find his hat under the seat.

'What do you think, Miss Grace? Would ye like to walk back? It's horrid dirty, but it ain't raining.'

'We will walk, certainly. I feel absolutely suffocated; the Abbey was so crowded and hot. But oh! Mr. Byrne, what music! I should always be good if I heard such music.'

'Ah! if you were any better than you are, Miss Grace dear, we'd have to tie a string to you to keep you with us. Sure, you'd be flying straight away to the skies; so you would.'

'No fear of that,' replied Grace, laughing, as she gathered up her skirts dexterously, prepared for a long, quick walk across the parks.

The motion, the frank, confidential talk with her humble, devoted friend did her good. To him she poured out her difficulties, her projects, her vague anxieties. Would it be possible to induce Miss Timbs to lower her rent and accept quarterly payments? Money was so scarce, and mamma only had hers every three months. Would it also be possible to persuade Miss Timbs to take away that huge, hideous dining-table, at which ten people could sit with ease, and give them a round one of

moderate dimensions? Then she (Grace) might make the room a trifle less ugly. Did Jimmy think Randal had any chance of finding literary employment? Would he venture a suggestion to that youth, hinting the prudence of accepting Uncle Frere's offer? What were Jimmy's views as to the possibility of maintaining the family on three hundred and twenty pounds a year, and educating Mab into the bargain? Into all these questions the faithful Jimmy entered with deep interest and sound sense. So the walk back seemed wondrous short to Grace, who, sincerely occupied with the subjects under discussion, escaped all thought of Max for nearly a blessed hour.

It was almost six o'clock when they reached Albert Crescent, and Grace entered the little sitting-room feeling quite sure that, if Max remembered his original undertaking to call on Sunday, he would most probably have come and gone by this time.

The room looked unusually common and forbidding. Fires having been dispensed with, a frightful apron-like contrivance of puckered paper, decorated with red and yellow roses, also paper, concealed the grate. The chiffonier was covered with a confusion of children's books, some ragged doll's clothes; and the big table, with a green and red cover, seemed more than ever to reduce the space to a passage round it, like a large island in a small river.

Beside the window sat Mrs. Frere, always neat

and even elegant, but with a sad tearful expression; and facing her at the end of the obnoxious table, with Mab leaning on his shoulder in the act of showing him some exceedingly crooked drawings, the product of her own pencil, sat Max Frere—civil, smiling, self-possessed, irreproachable in air, dress and manner. He rose as Grace entered, followed by her squire. Her first thought it must be admitted, far from being any noble effort at self-control, any dazzling gleam of hope that Max's coming indicated a renewal of old tenderness, was a sudden wonder as to what Max would think of her going about with no better escort than little Jimmy Byrne. Not that she felt the smallest inclination to suppress or turn her back on the good little fellow, to whom she felt sincere gratitude; still, what would Max think?

'I am so glad you have come in,' exclaimed Mrs. Frere. 'I have been keeping Max this half-hour, for I knew you would be vexed to miss him.'

'But you should not, mother,' said Grace, mustering all her strength and natural self-control, while she smiled a courteous smile, and gave her hand to her cousin. 'Max has many engagements, and——'

'Would certainly not have gone without shaking hands with you,' interrupted Max, pleasantly, letting his eyes rest upon her for an instant—just an instant—and then looking with a curious expression beyond her, to Jimmy Byrne, who was following, after carefully and audibly rubbing his boots on the mat.

'Mr. Byrne;' said Mrs. Frere, introducing them. 'Our good friend, Mr. Byrne; I believe you have met before.'

'Steenson and Gregg's,' murmured Jimmy, as a slight nudge to the fine gentleman's memory, while he bowed and rubbed his hands.

'Yes, certainly. I have already made Mr. Byrne's acquaintance,' said Max, carelessly.

'Mrs. Frere, ma'am,' remarked Mr. Byrne, with the tact of simple good-feeling, 'I think I'll just be walking down the road a bit, towards Nottinghill way. Maybe I'll meet Mr. Randal coming back, an—and I'll look in again, later on, to see if you have any commands.'

Without waiting for a reply, Jimmy softly closed the door and effaced himself.

There was a moment's pause, while Grace took off her hat and placed it over the unseemly doll's garments on the chiffonier.

'You must like walking,' said Max, in a slightly cynical tone, 'to go out in such weather.'

In that instant's pause he had done a short battle with himself. His first impulse was to utter some cutting sarcasm on Grace's choice of a companion; but a moment's thought suggested it would be unwise to express disapprobation, as that would imply a tendency to interfere in his cousin's affairs, and to adopt a certain amount of responsibility for her.

'You see the room and the look-out are not in themselves so charming as to tempt one to stay at home,' returned Grace.

'Home!' repeated Mrs. Frere, with emphasis; 'there is nothing to be called home here.'

'No, of course not,' said Max, soothingly. 'The change must be very great for you;' and he stroked, in an absent way, the hand which Mabel had placed in his, when he resumed his seat.

'Come here, Mab,' cried Grace, quickly.

'What do you want?' returned that young lady, without stirring.

'I want you to take away these ugly doll's clothes. Just put them in Randal's room, like a good girl; you can do it in a moment.'

'I will when Max is gone; I won't go now.' Max smiled.

'Well, come and sit here by me; you tire Cousin Max. You must remember you are not at Dungar.'

'She does not tire me,' said Max, good-humouredly; 'but it is quite true we are not at Dungar, and life here is a different and less agreeable thing.'

'To us, yes; but I daresay I shall grow to like it,' said Grace; adding bravely, 'the young are adaptable. Have I not heard you say so, Max?'

She got over the strange painful shrinking from the sound of his name which had come to her of late, with an effort; for to her heart its utterance always seemed like a caress.

'I am glad you cherish the words of wisdom which have fallen from my lips,' returned Max, lightly. 'I only wish that fortune had treated my aunt as she deserves, and given her the disposal of the Dungar rent-roll.'

'I am afraid the estates are dreadfully encumbered,' observed Mrs. Frere; the word 'rent-roll' rousing a train of thought not unnaturally associated with difficulty in the Irish mind.

'I wish we could go abroad,' said Grace, 'as Lady Elton advised; that is, if Randal were settled, and did not mind staying here by himself.'

'Then you have seen Lady Elton?' exclaimed Max. 'I mean since we all met at H—— Square. I am glad of it; she can be a very kind, and a very useful friend, *if* she chooses; but she always requires a tinge of management.'

'I think her quite charming,' said Mrs. Frere.

'And quite sincere,' cried Grace, with enthusiasm.

'Do you know she wanted me to have only a mutton-chop for my dinner, when there were heaps and heaps of goodies?' remarked Mabel.

'I am quite sure you would not allow yourself to be put off with a chop under such circumstances!'

'Of course not,' replied Mab, decidedly.

'By the way,' continued Max, addressing Mrs. Frere, 'have you persuaded Randal to take my father's proposal into favourable consideration? I assure you, as times go, it is not to be despised. What with competitive examinations and crowds of competitors, it is very hard for a young man to get a start.'

'But as a clerk, my dear Max!' cried Mrs. Frere. 'How can you recommend such a thing—you, who have been with us, and know how we lived?'

'Well, you see, the thing has no horrors for me. I am to the manner born. And if Randal proved

himself a clever, useful fellow, he might possibly end in having a small share in the concern, as junior partner, especially as he might command a little capital, when—oh! when my fair cousin here makes that wealthy marriage which no doubt awaits her, and the high-minded bridegroom refuses to receive any filthy lucre in addition to the dower of grace and beauty bestowed upon him—eh, aunt?'

Mrs. Frere smiled.

'Ah, Max!' she said amiably, 'there is no such luck before us; though many girls less good-looking than my dear Grace have married well.'

This calm but covert declaration that he renounced her, and would unhesitatingly hand her over to the highest bidder, spoken in Maxwell's frankest pleasantest voice, and her mother's matter-of-fact reply, sent a keen poisoned dart to Grace's heart that set her high spirit sparkling and effervescing to the surface, though the shock and mortification made her head reel, and the room and the forms about her grow for half an instant indistinct; but she rallied directly. With a nod, and a quick, bright smile, she exclaimed:

'No, Max! It is only a poor, irrational Irishman who would do such folly. I am going abroad to look for a rich husband. I have read somewhere that only wealthy Russian princes are able nowadays to indulge their fancy in the matter of wives, so I intend to look out for one; and when I come to London as ambassadress from the Czar of all the Russias, I will send you a card for my grand ball, though you are a city man!'

Max paused a moment before he replied, looking at the speaker; in that moment their eyes met. Utter what phrases they would expressive of indifference or defiance, there was electricity in their glance, a marvellous fascination that eye exercised over eye, which was not to be resisted; a flash of passionate admiration gleamed and disappeared in Maxwell's, and he was cool as ever. Grace, wrought up to a high pitch of proud self-possession, met the glance steadily, though the colour mounted to her cheek, and lent beauty to her speaking face.

'I have no doubt you would fill the place of ambassadress admirably, nor overlook your humble relative,' said Max, slowly. 'But to come down to realities again, what are Randal's plans? for I suppose even Randal has a plan.'

'You see, if he could get an opening in literature,' returned Mrs. Frere, in a very sensible tone—'but it seems rather difficult—it would be so nice. He then could do his writing at home. However, Lady Elton appears inclined to take him up. He is to go and see her, and read his manuscripts to her.'

'Ah, Lady Elton is rather an extraordinary woman, but she cannot force raw writing down publishers' throats,' said Max.

'Well, we must have patience,' replied Mrs. Frere, placidly. '"Pickwick" and "Vanity Fair" were rejected at first, I am told, by several publishers.'

Max smiled—an irritating smile.

'I think that a lawyer's office would suit him better than a merchant's,' observed Grace, nettled by Max's evident contempt for Randal, yet aware from experience that the only chance of holding your own against Max was to keep your temper.

'My dear, you would not have him a clerk in a lawyer's office, like little Jimmy Byrne?' asked Mrs. Frere.

'I can assure you it would be a capital thing for Randal, if he could work himself up into as good a position. With his small capital, he might become —well, head of a firm himself. As it is, you and your daughter do not disdain Mr. Byrne's companionship,' retorted Max, a little bitterly; for he was feeling uncomfortable, and thought the visit had lasted long enough.

It was an enormous increase of worldly wisdom since the old Dungar days that enabled Grace to suppress a sharp rejoinder, and answer, with great equanimity:

'No, certainly not. He is kind, and a true gentleman.'

'No doubt; though considerably disguised.'

'Very likely,' said Grace, carelessly; 'but then there are disguises and disguises. Yet it is better to have a real brilliant set in bog-oak than a bit of paste in gold from Ophir—eh, Max?'

'Well,' replied Max, rising, 'I have outstayed my time; though I intended to make you a visitation, for there is so much to do just now I may not be able to come again for a long while.'

'I am sure you are very busy, and I have always

heard that money-making is most absorbing,' said Mrs. Frere, giving her hand to her nephew. 'But do come when you can. It is so wretchedly dull and lonely here; even Randal, who is so brave and hopeful, gets depressed. I do not know what we should do without Grace.'

'Won't you come any more?' cried Mabel, instinctively comprehending his tone. 'Why are you angry with any of us? When you used to quarrel with Grace at Dungar you used to make friends again very quick. I remember the day you waited——'

'Pooh, Mab! All you must remember now is that London and Dungar are quite different. Let Max go, dear,' interrupted Grace, drawing the child almost forcibly away.

'Of course I shall see you again,' said Max, gaily; 'and in the meantime, aunt, if I can do anything for you, send a line to the office.'

'Thank you, I will. Remember me to your father.'

'Shake hands, Mabel. Be a good girl till we meet again.'

'I'm good enough,' peevishly, and shaking hands reluctantly.

'Good-morning,' he said a little formally, concluding his adieux with Grace, who put her hand in his, and, with a look straight into his eyes, said quietly, yet somewhat sadly:

'Good-bye, Max.'

The next moment the front-door closed upon his exit, and Grace stood quite still where he had

left her, the sound of her own 'Good-bye' ringing in her ear.

It was good-bye, indeed!—the funeral-knell of her first illusion, and yet it was not all illusion. There had been some reality in it. She had, at least, the consolation of knowing it had not been all self-deception. And so Grace Frere made her first step at the other side of the invisible barrier that parts childhood from womanhood. In these early weeks of her new existence she had lived through a distinct period, and entered another.

But of this passage of the Rubicon there was no outward and visible sign. Grace, after a second or two of stillness, turned to collect Mab's doll's clothes, and to exhort and entreat that young person to take them upstairs. Then she remembered a big bunch of flowers brought to her mother by Jimmy Byrne, and hastily stuck in a water-jug as she was going out. These she now untied and disposed as best she could in a soup-plate and a couple of small ill-shaped vases, enduring all the time a flow of conjectures and wonderings from her mother on the subject of Max. His opinion of Randal, his evident intention not to come again for a long time, etc. At length, when Mab had carried off her belongings, Mrs. Frere said, in a lowered and mysterious voice:

'Grace!'

To which Grace, a little startled by the solemnity of this beginning, replied:

'Well, mother!'

'Do you know, dear, I should not be surprised if

your uncle objected to Max visiting often here! He might fear his forming an attachment to you, now that you are no longer a school-girl.'

'Mother!'

'Indeed, my love, I am too apt to forget that you are a woman—and your mother is foolish enough to think a charming woman—so perhaps Uncle Frere has some such idea, though I am sure I never saw the slightest cause for alarm; and I am a close observer, dear! Max never said anything that would lead you to suppose—eh, Grace?'

'That he was in love with me?' Grace forced herself to say carelessly, while unspeakable bitterness made her heart ache. 'Make your mind quite easy, mother dear! I am an object of utter indifference to Maxwell Frere.'

'I thought so; but it would not have been unnatural. Only I quite object to marriages between cousins, and it would have been painful to refuse him. I wonder if he is attached to, or engaged to anyone? What do you think, Grace? Has he ever said anything that would lead you to suppose——'

Mrs. Frere belonged to that class of not very actively-minded women—perfectly simple and pure, to whom, nevertheless, a man is nothing, if not a lover of themselves, or of somebody else.

'Nothing—nothing whatever; I have no idea on the subject, and—— Hush, mother! here is Mab! pray—pray say nothing of this before her!'

'My dear! of course I should not——'

Enter Mab: 'Oh, Grace! here is Randal with-

out Mr. Byrne, so he did not meet him. I will open the door for him.'

'Mab! come back, Mab!' cried Mrs. Frere. 'You must not get into the habit of running to the door.'

But Mab paid no heed.

'I must go upstairs, and put away my things,' said Grace, beating a hasty retreat.

She did not return till summoned to tea. Then the whole party was assembled, Jimmy Byrne included, and Randal, exceedingly wroth and gloomy.

Halkett had proved faithless. After tracing him to his private lodgings—a complicated search—Randal had forced him to return the precious MSS., which he had repeatedly promised to read, and to show to this editor, or the other publisher, all especial friends of his own.

At first Halkett endeavoured to put his 'dear boy' off with the usual palaver; but on hearing that Randal wished to submit his writings to the criticism of a lady of rank, of great wealth, of enormous social and literary influence, Halkett succumbed, and with a confused apologetic mumble about 'overwhelming business,' and 'pressing engagements,' produced the unlucky packet intact, the twine uncut, the seals unbroken; so that 'the peeps,' and 'tastes' of 'first-rate flavour, faith,' in which he said he had indulged, must have been pleasures of the imagination, as Randal told him with withering scorn. Halkett smiled, and then they parted, not with the most exalted opinion of each other.

'It only remains now,' said Randal, crossly,

'for my Lady Elton to forget her promised invitation, and then I shall be regularly stranded.'

'She will not, Randal,' said Grace, who had been particularly silent, and now spoke earnestly. 'She will neither deceive nor forget you, believe me.'

'How can you tell? you do not know so much of her,' returned Randal, who was in a most contradictory mood.

'I may be wrong; but I feel somehow that she is loyal and true.'

Whereupon Jimmy Byrne observed that the late Sir George Elton's affairs had been entirely in the hands of his respected principals, 'Steenson and Gregg;' but that about two years after his death, Lady Elton withdrew her business from them, which had always been a sore point with the firm, even after the lapse of time which had since rolled over. Then the conversation took a financial turn, as it generally did when Mr. Byrne was of the party, ending with a resolution to sound Miss Timbs on the questions of permanent tenancy, reduced rent, and quarterly payments.

CHAPTER IX.

GRACE was right. Lady Elton neither forgot nor delayed the performance of her promise respecting Randal.

A few days after her interview with Mrs. Frere and Grace, Lady Elton wrote to invite Randal and his manuscripts to visit her.

Poor fellow! he started with high hopes, and returned woefully crest-fallen. Lady Elton had had the cruel kindness to tell him the truth; and more, the tact to convince without alienating him. She did not refuse him a remote anticipation of success, but she set before him with unanswerable force the impossibility of working without materials, and that hitherto his life had not permitted him to accumulate them.

Mrs. Frere and Grace had evil times of it after this interview. Randal was out of sorts, and out of temper. He was contradictory and dissatisfied.

This mood pressed hardest on the mother, for Grace found frequent respite in expeditions with

Lady Elton, who had taken a sudden strong liking to the bright fresh young creature, whose brightness had a tinge of melancholy at times which deeply interested her new friend.

In truth, a life of worldly experience had not yet quenched the ardour with which Lady Elton seized upon a new interest—her detractors said, a new whim.

In early days this warmth of nature and imagination had wrought her much mischief, and heaped up troubles for her after-years. But whatever her trials and griefs she bore them alone, and extricated herself without extraneous aid.

To drive with Lady Elton, and talk with her, or rather to hear her talk, was high delight to Grace Frere. It was the opening of a new world to the novice.

But Lady Elton was a little nettled by the steadiness with which Grace refused first to go to her 'Saturdays,' and then when the reason thereof proved to be a difficulty of toilette, by the resolution with which she rejected aid in this particular. Lady Elton only overcame her young *protégée's* reluctance to appear, by assuring her that the mixed character of her (Lady Elton's) *soirées* permitted morning as well as evening dress.

Grace had already enjoyed the opera and a flower-show under her kind chaperon's guidance, and had longed very much, if the truth must be told, to appear at one of the 'Saturdays,' which she fancied must be 'feasts of reason.'

'Well, Grace, I shall send the carriage for you

on Saturday, without fail,' said Lady Elton, at parting one night after the opera. 'Be sure you are ready. I will take no putting off.'

'I shall only be too glad to come, as I may wear morning dress,' returned Grace, kissing her before she alighted.

'Have you enjoyed yourself, dearest?' asked her mother, as Grace threw aside her white opera-cloak, and drew off her gloves. 'I have made you some lemonade my own self, as Mab would say. I thought you would be warm and thirsty;' and with much pride Mrs. Frere, whose housekeeping and culinary powers were very limited, produced a large glass full of the beverage.

'Oh, thank you, mother dear! How nice it is! there is nothing I like so much as lemonade. But oh, how wonderful the opera is! It is like fairy-land, and such beautiful music! some of the songs seem to tear one's very heart. Ah, if I could but sing!'

'So you would, dear, if you were taught. But Grace, I have news for you. When Mr. Byrne was here this evening we settled everything with Miss Timbs. We are to have the drawing-room from to-morrow, and rather cheaper than this dreadful room, because we are to take it for six months; but chiefly because Mr. Byrne recommended some old man who is to replace us in these rooms.'

'Jimmy is our good genius,' cried Grace. 'Now, dearest mother, you must go out for a nice long drive with Lady Elton—she desired me to ask you

—to-morrow; and while you are out Mab and I will move everything, and make the room look pretty. So, to bed! You look quite tired. Why did you sit up for me?'

'I was longing to talk to you, my love. The greatest comfort I have is talking to you. But it is late. Good-night, and God bless you.'

The following Saturday was bright and spring-like, as becomes the opening of the first summer month. And Grace, as she always did with Lady Elton, enjoyed the relief of, at any rate, temporary forgetfulness. At eighteen the wounds must be deep indeed which cannot be skinned over by pleasant, sympathetic company, sunshine, air, motion, and even second-hand contact with prosperity.

Lady Elton proposed that they should try and heighten their bloom by a drive to Richmond, and a walk in the Park while the horses rested and refreshed; which programme was carried out, to Grace's great delight, and they returned to a late dinner.

Grace was less impressed than she expected to be by the assembly at Lady Elton's.

Being, as it were, a daughter of the house, she was present at the gradual gathering of the company, which is not so formidable as a plunge into a [illegible] already assembled, and, as Lady Elton [illegible] to almost all the first arrivals, or [illegible]s became crowded, she soon found [illegible]o.

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'Jimmy is our good genius,' cried Grace. 'Now, dearest mother, you must go out for a nice long drive with Lady Elton—she desired me to ask you

—to-morrow; and while you are out Mab and I will move everything, and make the room look pretty. So, to bed! You look quite tired. Why did you sit up for me?'

'I was longing to talk to you, my love. The greatest comfort I have is talking to you. But it is late. Good-night, and God bless you.'

The following Saturday was bright and spring-like, as becomes the opening of the first summer month. And Grace, as she always did with Lady Elton, enjoyed the relief of, at any rate, temporary forgetfulness. At eighteen the wounds must be deep indeed which cannot be skinned over by pleasant, sympathetic company, sunshine, air, motion, and even second-hand contact with prosperity.

Lady Elton proposed that they should try and heighten their bloom by a drive to Richmond, and a walk in the Park while the horses rested and refreshed; which programme was carried out, to Grace's great delight, and they returned to a late dinner.

Grace was less impressed than she expected to be by the assembly at Lady Elton's.

Being, as it were, a daughter of the house, she was present at the gradual gathering of the company, which is not so formidable as a plunge into a large party already assembled, and, as Lady Elton introduced her to almost all the first arrivals, or until the rooms became crowded, she soon found people to talk to.

Her large, soft, wondering eyes and ready, frank speech soon found favour with the varied individuals who were presented to her, and the first three-quarters of an hour sped quickly in pleasant talk with many men and women whose names would have quenched a novice better informed than Grace as to the celebrities of the hour. Something in the *tourneur de phrase* and the tone of the conversation charmed her. It was like sipping new and exhilarating wine. Not that the talk was remarkable for originality, or depth, or wit; but the sentences were so well-turned, the words so quaint, or chosen with the skill of practised talkers, that all sounded new and brilliant to Grace. She listened admiringly, yet unabashed. Moreover, there was unspoken flattery in the manner with which both men and women addressed the 'favoured guest' of their hostess. For the moment, poverty and disappointment were forgotten; she only felt that she was the equal of the accomplished people who were so unexpectedly familiar and kindly to her. Hope and self-confidence seemed to come to her with fresh courage, and many a piquant answer put old men about town on their mettle, while more than one flattering query respecting her was addressed to Lady Elton, who absolutely revelled in her *protégée's* success.

Among the many to whom Grace had not been introduced she noticed an exceedingly pretty, fragile-looking young lady, with pale golden-brown hair, large sleepy blue eyes, and a complexion like an ivory miniature. She was most charmingly dressed

in pearl-grey satin and delicate, costly white lace; the only bit of colour about her, a deep-red rose in the left angle of her low square corsage. Her hair was picturesquely frizzy, and out of it her sweet childish face and innocent-looking eyes peeped smilingly. Grace could not for some time make out who she was. She had seated herself in front of a bank of ferns and greenery near the entrance, and looked admirably against this background.

Grace had just been introduced to an old lady very richly dressed, who had at once begun a string of questions; and she only waited a good opportunity to ask for information in her turn, when through the doorway came a figure which she had vaguely hoped, yet feared, to see. It was Max Frere—Max, in very accurate and admirable evening dress, yet with a cloud on his brow and a cynical curl on his lip. He stood still as he reached the middle of the room, and looked round him. Grace felt he saw her, though he made no sign, and therefore forced herself to bestow a most flattering amount of attention on her interlocutor. Yet she was aware of every look and movement of her cousin. He did not seem to know many people, but she noticed that when he caught sight of the Greuze-like little beauty whom she admired so much, he bowed and smiled with an air of deference, and made a step in her direction. His progress was, however, arrested. A stout, broad-shouldered, red-faced young man, who seemed, in some odd way, not unknown to Grace, laid a hand

on his shoulder. They spoke together pleasantly for a few minutes, yet Grace felt certain that Max was in one of his bitterest moods. Suddenly they looked towards her, and she observed Max raise his eyebrows with an expression of surprise. Then both made their way through the groups of people standing about, and Grace felt her heart bound as they paused before her.

'I did not know I was to have the pleasure of meeting *you* here to-night,' said Max, looking at her with a half-smile on his lip and a slight frown on his brow.

'Nor I, that I should see you,' returned Grace, quietly.

'No, I do not often frequent Lady Elton's gatherings; but, Grace, my friend Darnell wants to be presented to you—Mr. Darnell, Miss Frere.'

The red-faced young man bowed, and Grace, dreadfully puzzled by her curious sense of having met him before, returned his salute, looking steadily at him, to his evident discomfort.

'Is Randal here, too?' asked Max.'

'No,' said Grace, shortly, she did not like his tone.

Max turned away, and walked straight up to the young lady in grey, beside whom he sat down, and entered into what seemed a very interesting conversation.

Meantime, Mr. Darnell stood before Grace, evidently in the deepest embarrassment, and seeking for words that would not come—a difficulty so evident to her, that in spite of herself, an arch yet kindly smile parted her lips, as their eyes met.

'I see you recognise me, Miss Frere,' he said at last; 'and, on my honour, I have done nothing but think how I could excuse myself ever since I saw you were in the room.'

While Grace pondered these words, the interrogative dowager, spying an acquaintance opposite, rose, and crossed to where she was sitting. Darnell immediately seized upon the chair she had vacated, and at the same moment Grace found the clue to the puzzle.

'Ah! I remember now; you are the gentleman who spoke to Mab and me in the Park some weeks ago.'

'I am sure I do not know how to apologise; but the fact is, a fellow loses his head sometimes. And after all, it was your own fault!'

'Loses his head!' repeated Grace, a little bewildered, and not yet catching *le mot de l'enigme;* 'his way, you mean. There is nothing to apologise for. If I wanted to find my way, I, too, would ask the first person I met.'

'You are exceedingly good to take it in that light,' returned Darnell, earnestly, 'and it can just be kept dark between us; people are so deucedly ill-natured, and given to chaffing.'

Grace opened her big eyes.

'Oh, very well!'

'I know I ought not to have spoken to you; but you'll grant it was a deucedly strong temptation?'

'Oh!' said Grace again, with a sudden blush, that faded away quickly, 'perhaps you had better say no more.'

'Very well, Miss Frere; only I wish you could just see all I think and feel, and—and—all that—I know you would forgive me.'

An awkward pause, which Grace would not break. She sat playing with the tassel of her fan, and watching the sweet smiling infantile looks bestowed by the pretty *blonde* on the dark, keen countenance of Max Frere.

'Is this your first visit to London?' began Darnell, with a desperate effort.

'It is.'

Another fearful pause.

'And—a—you are a regular country girl: you look like it. I mean—you have such a beautiful colour.'

'It is well for you you corrected yourself,' said Grace, laughing good-humouredly. 'The first part of your speech was fearfully insulting.'

'Now, Miss Frere, I see you have no nonsense about you; there is something to eat in the next room. Will you have an ice?'

'Thank you,' said Grace, rising readily.

She was glad to get away from the sight of Max's air of devotion, of the grace and gentle flattery of his companion's aspect. They looked so well matched—a pair of Fortune's favourites; and catching a glimpse of herself in one of the many looking-glasses, she contrasted her own tall figure, her plain dress, her earnest face, and large, serious eyes, with the airy elegance, the butterfly beauty, the sunny sweetness of the unknown lady in grey.

'No wonder Max is charmed,' she thought. 'A creature like that is formed to receive homage—

adoration; while I—how was it that in his temporary banishment Max could have a passing fancy for me? What am I compared to such women as he must be accustomed to?'

It was a moment of intense bitterness, of utter self-abasement, yet untinged by any feeling of personal dislike to the pretty creature who evoked it. Through all the sense of contrast, Grace was sound and strong enough to admire heartily the beauty and fascination which she thought so far above herself.

But while she pondered these things, and combated the crushing sense of hopeless inferiority which for a few cruel moments prostrated her, Mr. Darnell was piloting her through the well-filled rooms, and talking freely.

'Your first visit to the opera the other night—eh, Miss Frere? I saw you there. How did you like Patti?'

'Oh, she was too delightful! she made me forget there was any other world but one of truth and troubadours.'

'Ha, ha, ha! I am afraid truth at the opera is a homœopathic quantity; but it must be awfully jolly to be so fresh. It is quite delightful even to hear anyone speak like you.'

'Were you never fresh yourself? You are quite young still,' said Grace, with startling directness.

'Ah! I was green enough once,' returned Darnell, with a good-humoured laugh. 'I could hardly apply the word "fresh" to myself.'

'Well, I think Randal—that is my brother—is

quite as fresh as I am. He saw Fanny Josephs in "School" the other night, and he has been writing verses to her ever since.'

'Oh—a—your brother? (Will you take strawberry ice or vanille?) Is he staying here too?'

'With Lady Elton? No, we are staying in London; my mother and little sister—all of us. I am not with Lady Elton.'

'I see; come up for the season. I suppose you will be presented at the next drawing-room.'

'Oh no, indeed I shall not,' said Grace, with such utter denial that Darnell thought he had committed some blunder; and glancing at her simple black dress, he remarked:

'No, of course not; in too deep mourning?'

'That is not the reason. But do tell me who some of the people are. Who is that kind-looking old—no, elderly man, with such a beautiful head and white beard, and that one with straggling hair and great glittering eyes?'

'Indeed, Miss Frere, I am quite at sea here, especially with the men. I believe they are all howling swells in their own line—poets, and artists, and engineers, and learned foreigners. But there, you see that fellow with a light moustache and his hair parted down the middle? that's Lord Albert Neville, of the Blues. They say he dabbles in water-colours.'

'He looks dreadfully stupid,' said Grace, gazing after him.

'And,' continued Darnell, filling himself a tumbler of claret, and highly pleased to act show-

man, 'that tall lady dressed in crimson velvet and black lace, with diamond stars in her hair, is Mrs. Damer. I daresay she is going on to Lady Mountgarret's ball, and so, very likely, are those three girls in white and gold—the Miss Mordaunts. They sing wonderfully. All these people who are so much dressed are going to other parties, I fancy.'

'And who is that beautiful girl in grey that Max Frere was talking to?' asked Grace, with wonderful self-possession.

'After he introduced me to you? Oh, that is a charming young widow, Lady Mary Langford. Yes, she is awfully pretty, but too much of a doll. I think it's a case of spoons with Frere, in that quarter; at any rate, I think he is a sort of fellow to go in for rank and political influence, and all that. Don't you think so, Miss Frere?'

'Yes, Max is ambitious,' said she, slowly; 'and he is right. I would be too, were I a man.'

'I am sure,' began Darnell, reddening with a confused sense that there was an opening for a compliment, but not feeling at all equal to the occasion—'I am sure, Miss Frere, you needn't trouble about ambition, or anything else. You——' an agonised pause.

'No! Well, I do not,' returned Grace, who mistook his meaning, and fancied he was going to administer a philosophic rebuke, to which his courage was unequal. 'Ambition can only be a torment to women. But how young to be a widow, and how sad!'

'Lady Mary Langford seems to bear her griefs

with fortitude,' returned Darnell, drily. 'If you will not take anything else, let us come into the next room. I heard a fellow say that Eberstein, the German baritone, is going to sing.'

Grace rose, and as they passed into the larger drawing-room, Max Frere went by with Lady Mary on his arm. She was chattering gaily; he looked distrait and stern. He caught a glance from Grace, and they both smiled, just a gleam of recognition; but Grace thought she heard the fair young widow ask who she was.

Her conjectures, however, were stilled by the rich strains of the promised baritone, and she was soon listening with rapt attention to the beautiful 'Folkeslieder' and thrilling battle songs which he poured forth.

'Oh, how delicious his voice is! What would I not give to sing like that!' she exclaimed, as he left the piano, and stood in animated conversation with Lady Elton.

'I daresay you sing capitally yourself—eh, Miss Frere?' said Darnell, who was watching her speaking face with unconcealed admiration. 'I wish I had a chance of hearing you.'

'Indeed, I cannot sing. I never had any lessons; but I could listen to it all day long.'

'And where do you put up, as you are not staying with Lady Elton?' asked Darnell, encouraged by her frank simplicity.

'A long way from this, almost out of town. Do you know a place called Camden Hill? It is not so easy to find as the National Gallery,' she added, with a smile.

'Now, Miss Frere, that is too bad,' exclaimed Darnell, not knowing exactly what to make of his companion, whose style was so unlike all the girls he had ever met before.

'But I am quite sure I could find Camden Hill, if you would allow me to call on you.'

He felt this was a bold stroke, but he also felt that his companion was too ignorant of the world to perceive its boldness.

'Of course we should be very glad to see any friend of dear Lady Elton's,' began Grace, carelessly; and then remembering the horror her mother would feel at the idea of a visitor, she added, colouring as she spoke, 'but my mother is still so sad, and unequal to see strangers; and—' she hesitated, wisely restrained her lips from uttering the words, 'ashamed of our lodgings,' and continued, 'that it would be better if you waited for a while. It is very kind of you to think of coming. I am sure Randal would be delighted to know you.'

Darnell looked at her sharply as she spoke. Was this put-off a bit of finery and exclusiveness, or—— With the last words Grace raised her eyes and looked straight into his. Then Darnell doubted no more.

'Later on, then, if you will allow me?'

'Oh yes! certainly,' she returned, with polite but, Darnell felt, utter indifference.

'I do not think I ever met your brother with Max Frere,' he resumed.

'No, I am sure you never have,' said Grace, with a slight laugh. 'We always lived in Ireland until grandpapa died.'

'Ah, I remember now hearing that Max had gone to some grand place in Ireland to shoot, and that he had Irish cousins. I fancied there was something not quite English in your voice and accent.'

'That I have the brogue, in short,' said Grace, with another distracting smile and glance.

'Nothing of the kind, by Jove! Only your voice is softer and more musical than the generality of——'

'Are you sure you have not been to Blarney yourself, Mr. Darnell?' archly.

'Indeed I have not. I am fearfully stupid about paying compliments. I never seem to have anything ready at the right time.'

'That is very unfortunate. I suppose there are a great many like you. But the people are going away. Pray take me back to Lady Elton—perhaps I ought to have gone to her before.'

'I am sure she does not want you; but if you will——' He offered his arm; and, as they went, Grace noticed Lady Mary Langford leaving the room, escorted by a dishevelled foreigner, much decorated.

When they reached Lady Elton she was saying good-night to several parting guests, and behind her stood Max Frere, talking to the white-bearded man who had excited Grace's admiration.

As soon as they had reached their hostess Grace relinquished Darnell's arm with a slight curtsey.

'My dear, I have hardly had time to speak to you,' said Lady Elton. 'I hope you have not been bored.'

'Bored! No, I have been much amused. I do not think I ever saw so many people together before.'

More guests came to say good-night. The greybeard with the interesting head shook hands with Max and departed, and at last he and Darnell were the only ones left.

'Grace,' said the former suddenly, drawing close to her and looking down into her eyes with a curious, half-angry light in his own, 'how are you going home? Has anyone come for you? Shall I——'

'Oh, thank you! I am staying with Lady Elton till to-morrow evening.'

'Indeed! Much better than——'

He stopped abruptly, as Lady Elton, who overheard her young *protegée's* answer, turned and interrupted him:

'Yes, Grace is staying with me. You had better come with us to the Zoo to-morrow, Max. We can have the benefit of your escort, and you will probably be rewarded by meeting the charming widow.'

'You mean Lady Mary Langford,' returned Max, with a peculiar smile. 'No, I cannot have the pleasure of escorting you, because I am engaged to dine with her and Mrs. Damer at Lady Mountgarret's, at her Richmond villa, where she goes to get out of the way of the ball *débris*.'

'Ah, you are better engaged. Are you going to the ball, young gentlemen?'

'No,' said both, and made their adieux.

'Better engaged,' said Darnell, as the young

men descended the stairs together; 'I should say worse. That cousin of yours is a deuced fine girl—beats Lady Mary all to nothing. Such go in her, too! I did not know you had such charming relatives stowed away among the bogs.'

Max turned a glance of mingled dislike and contempt upon the speaker.

'Yes,' he said slowly, 'my cousin Grace *is* a very fine girl altogether, though untrained and terribly natural; but, Darnell, my good fellow, she hasn't a rap, and her people are paupers.'

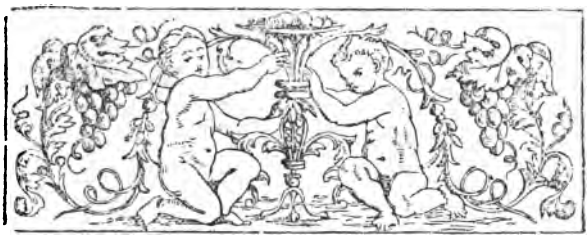
'Though she is a Frere?' cried the other, astonished.

'Though a Frere,' repeated Max, sneering. 'Her father was a cavalry man, and had no share in the concern.'

'Oh, I see! Well, a girl with such a pair of eyes doesn't want a bank at her back.'

'Perhaps not; it is quite a matter of opinion. Good-night, Darnell.'

'Good-night,' said the other; adding to himself as he stood alone on the entrance-steps trying to light his cigar, 'Anyhow, it is a jolly shame.'



CHAPTER X.

'IF you will stand on a footstool, Mab, you might hold it up at that side, until I fasten it here,' said Grace to her little sister.

They were busily engaged decorating the fire-place in the 'drawing-room,' as Miss Timbs proudly designated the larger of the first-floor apartments. It was no doubt a great improvement on the stuffy parlour beneath, and Grace had done her best to give it something of a home-like aspect. She had unpacked her books and little treasures, expended a few pence on some pots of mignonette, and was now putting the finishing-stroke to an attempt to drape the empty grate with white muslin curtains, in humble imitation of Lady Elton's fireplace.

Poor Grace was terribly awkward about needle-work when she began to exercise that womanly craft. No one, except nurse, ever troubled about mending or making at Dungar; but a feeling of strong necessity, and natural aptitude, enabled

Grace to make rapid progress. Moreover, Mrs. Frere, though very slow, was an accomplished needlewoman, of a refined order. To sit and sew delicate plain work, with the perfection of neatness, was to her a tranquillising occupation, so her instruction was of great assistance to her daughter.

It was more than a fortnight since Lady Elton's 'Saturday,' and Grace had been frequently her companion in the interim to a dinner at Greenwich, a garden-party at Fulham, and to a concert, beside sundry mornings shopping; for Lady Elton, who, in spite of her reputation for a whimsical degree of stinginess, could be lavishly generous, had insisted, in a tone that Grace could *not* resist, in conferring sundry additions to her toilette, which were, indeed, indispensable, if she was to be the donor's companion.

Grace had enjoyed all mightily; the change and variety had done her a world of good, while her cure was further assisted by the evident determination of Max to renounce her.

At the present moment her whole heart was occupied in the effort to fasten the lace-edged muslin drapery, which she had made up for a few shillings, to the green-cloth-covered board, which ornamented while it increased the width of the mantel-shelf.

'There, Mab! I think that looks very nice, with the white shavings and fern leaves behind, and this azalea between the festoons of the curtains.'

'It is quite lovely, Grace—*quite* as pretty as the

grate in Lady Elton's own sitting-room. How pleased mamma will be when she comes back!'

Mrs. Frere had gone with Randal to the city with a bank bill, received that morning from Ireland, respecting the endorsement of which they were all uncertain, so it was thought she had better go with it herself.

'Poor dear mother! how tired she will be, and dazed with heat and noise!' exclaimed Grace, gathering up needles, thimble, thread, and various snippets of muslin and cotton fringe. 'Why, Mab, it is past five o'clock!'

'Here they are,' cried Mab, going to the window. 'And in a hansom, too, after all you have said to Randal!'

'Oh, with the mother, it is a different thing; but I did not think she would go into a hansom.'

'But, Grace, it is a strange gentleman. He is paying the driver—he is coming in!'

'It cannot be anyone for us,' said Grace calmly, as she stood by the table, regulating the miscellaneous contents of her shabby little work-basket.

She had hardly uttered the words, when the 'slavey,' Sarah, came in with a card.

'A gentleman for you, miss.'

'Mr. Darnell!' exclaimed Grace, in much surprise, and with small pleasure, as she glanced at Mab's rough head and the untidy table.

The next moment Darnell, beaming, red, irresolute, and not knowing how to excuse his appearance, still further confused by the unexpectedly

humble, not to say mean, shrine which sheltered his divinity, stood bowing before her.

'Oh, Mr. Darnell! I am quite surprised to see you.'

'Hope you will excuse my calling; you said I might come after a while, and—and—I hope—that is, I wished to know how you are after that garden-party. Caught no cold, or anything?' he concluded indefinitely.

'No, thank you. Will you not sit down? My mother is not at home.'

'Thanks,' returned Darnell, taking a chair, and growing a little more comfortable.

Mab stood leaning on the table, and gazing at the visitor with intense delighted curiosity; and Grace took Mrs. Frere's easy-chair, leaning her elbow on the arm, and resting her head on her hand with careless, graceful ease.

'There was rather a heavy shower, you know,' resumed Darnell, reverting to the saving clause of a possible cold.

'I was in the conservatory then.'

'This is your sister?' asked Darnell, bent on amiability, and turning to Mab.

'Yes, my only sister. Mab, shake hands with Mr. Darnell.'

Mab sidled up with evident reluctance, and placed a dingy little paw in Darnell's ringed fingers.

'How do you do? and how do you like London?'

Mab hung her head, overcome by one of her very intermittent shy fits.

'Can't you speak, Mab?' cried Grace. She had

a dim feeling that Mr. Darnell, with all his good-nature and fine surroundings, was not a gentleman, and she felt especially anxious that Mab should show her good-breeding.

'No, I can't!' said Mab, sharply; roused to instant resistance by the slight tone of rebuke.

'Ha, ha, ha! Why, you are a regular little Paddy,' exclaimed Darnell, facetiously, growing more at ease as he noted the comparative poverty of the room and its belongings. 'You speak to tell us you cannot.'

'Who are you?' asked Mab, restored by this small amount of friction to her natural assurance, though her tone was by no means pert. It was one of calm, logical inquiry.

Simple as the query was, it almost annihilated Darnell. He could not go into an elaborate account of himself, neither could he summarise himself. It was then an infinite relief, when Grace forestalled his reply in a rather indignant tone:

'Mr. Darnell is a friend of Lady Elton's, Mab. You must not ask rude questions.'

'Oh,' said Mab, her scrutinising gaze still bent unflinchingly on their visitor. 'Do you go to luncheon with her, and does she give you mutton-chops?'

'No, I never had the honour of having luncheon with Lady Elton.'

'Mab,' began Grace, in a tone of remonstrance.

'Now, Miss Frere, now, do let her have her own way!' urged Mr. Darnell. 'She is such a jolly little girl. I have some nieces about her age, but

the poor little beggars haven't a bit of nature left in them; they are so trained and tortured.'

'Tortured,' repeated Mab, deeply interested; 'racks or thumb-screws?'

'By Jove!' cried Mr. Darnell, in deep surprise, 'she knows a lot. I suppose, Miss Mab, you are up in history, and geography, and all that?'

Mab shook her head, and Grace laughed.

'I do not think Mab would ever open a book of her own accord, but she likes hearing stories.'

By this time the keen edge of Mab's curiosity was blunted, and she withdrew to the window which opened on a balcony, and busied herself rooting up the mould in some flower-pots with a stick. An awkward pause ensued.

'Have you seen Frere lately?' asked Mr. Darnell.

'Who? Max. No, not since I saw him at Lady Elton's.'

'I fancy he is very steady in the City, though he is such a swell. Shrewd fellow! Don't you think so, Miss Frere?'

'Yes, he is clever.'

'They say young Lord Rushborough is very much struck with Lady Mary Langford. That will be a spoke in Frere's wheel, for he has wealth as well as rank.'

'And is he nice?' asked Grace, with interest.

'Yes, a very nice fellow, I am told.'

'Poor Max!' exclaimed Grace, with a smile.

'Oh, he will be all right!' cried Darnell, with a knowing nod. 'It is not easy to turn *his* flank!

But, Miss Frere, I am going to give a little dinner at Richmond, one of these fine evenings; perhaps Mrs. Frere, and your brother, and yourself would do me the honour to be of the party.'

'At Richmond!' cried Grace, sitting straight up. 'Oh, I wish my mother would go. It is very kind of you, Mr. Darnell, to think of us,' she added earnestly. 'But I am afraid, if it is a party, my mother would not go; she has never recovered grandpapa's death. She is so depressed, and——'

'Well,' interrupted Darnell, eagerly, and changing his seat to one nearer to her, 'don't let us have a party; just yourselves, and Lady Elton, and your cousin, Max Frere. We can stroll in the Park, and drive home by moonlight. It will be awfully jolly.'

'And I may go too?' asked Mab, leaving her flower-pots to listen. 'May I?'

'To be sure you shall. You ask your sister to bring you.'

'Oh, Grace always takes me when she can; though she is cross enough often.'

'You are an ill-natured little puss,' said Grace, laughing.

'Come, Miss Mab, I am certain your sister is no end of an angel to you; at any rate she looks like one,' exclaimed Darnell.

This speech cost him a desperate effort; he reddened so violently that Mab wondered the handkerchief with which he wiped his brow, did not take fire; and his reward, poor fellow! was a steady surprised look out of Grace's great eyes, which changed into an expression of amusement

not untinged with scorn. However, she only smiled good-humouredly, and said:

'I will ask my mother, and try to persuade her. Thank you very much, Mr. Darnell; the dear mother has but a dull life here.'

'Yes, it is an awfully out-of-the-way place,' he returned with sincere sympathy, and then doubted whether it was quite the right thing to say. 'You ought to come nearer town. I am sure Lady Elton never planted you here.'

'No, indeed. We did not know Lady Elton till we had been a short time in London.'

'Are you going to make any stay?'

'Yes, some months, certainly. Oh, Mr. Darnell! here is my mother and Randal.'

'Very glad. I shall ask her myself now.'

Mrs. Frere was tired, but evidently in tolerable spirits. She looked with great surprise at the strange visitor, but received him most graciously.

'I fancied it must be Max when I saw a gentleman in the room,' she said, with her soft, sweet smile. 'He is almost our only visitor.'

'Indeed!' said Mr. Darnell, with an uneasy, though unconscious glance at Grace.

'A very rare one,' remarked Randal, who could not let the name of Max pass without a sneer. 'Max was a favoured guest of ours in Ireland, but he can only manage to call once in six weeks here.'

'Nonsense, Randal! Max is not an idle man. Remember how much he has to do, and how far off we are,' said Grace, much annoyed.

'Yes, Max Frere is a very good fellow,' observed Darnell, with an air of wisdom, 'but he will never put himself out of the way for anyone;' and he made a mental note, 'Wants to cut 'em—deuced shabby!'

'I don't call *that* good-fellowship,' cried Randal, contemptuously.

'Perhaps, Miss Frere, you would be so good as to mention——' suggested Darnell, after a little further talk.

'Oh yes,' said Grace, with a friendly nod and kindly glance that delighted Darnell. 'Mother, Mr. Darnell wishes us all to dine with him at Richmond some day soon. Will you, mother dear? I wish you would.'

'My love, I do not think I could possibly dine away from home, if home I can call it'—with a disparaging glance at her *entourage*. 'But I am very much obliged to you for taking the trouble to come here and ask us. Randal and Grace will probably be pleased to accompany Lady Elton (I suppose Lady Elton will be of the party?), but I——'

'Now, don't say no, Mrs. Frere. You really must come, just this once.'

'Yes, mother dear, to please me. I shall enjoy myself ever so much more if you will come.'

'I am sure, Mrs. Frere, you can't possibly refuse such an appeal. I don't know who could, when Miss Frere asks.'

'Well, if you really care for an old woman's company,' said mamma, with a well-pleased smile,

while her whole countenance brightened as it had not done for a long time.

'That's right,' from Randal.

'You are a dear good mummy,' from Mabel.

'You know *I* care,' softly, with a gentle squeeze of the hand, from Grace.

'I am greatly flattered that you make an exception in my favour,' said Darnell gallantly, though feeling it was quite his due, and hugging himself in the notion that, at any rate, the 'adored one's' people recognised his value. 'I shall see Lady Elton this evening—there is a big dinner at the Freres'—and I shall settle all about it with her.'

Then the conversation turned on the theatres and amusements of London, in which Randal did most of the talking, and displayed a large amount of ignorance to the knowing eye of their visitor: for Darnell's simplicity was but an outer shell—his experience of London life was large, if not deep.

Grace took little part in the talk, save when appealed to by Darnell, which was tolerably often; but Mrs. Frere displayed unusual animation, and bestowed an amount of interested attention on their visitor which surprised her daughter. At last Darnell rose to take leave, with a confused apology for having stayed so long.

'If you allow me, I will come over to-morrow and let you know what arrangements I have made with Lady Elton and Max Frere,' he concluded.

'Very well,' said Grace, seeing nothing to remark in what seemed a perfectly natural piece of courtesy.

'If you will be so good,' replied Mrs. Frere.

Radiant with his success, Mr. Darnell turned to depart, and as he placed his hand on the door-handle it was suddenly pushed open, and Jimmy Byrne walked nearly into his arms: Jimmy himself very hot and dusty, and holding with some difficulty a huge round basket, covered with blue paper, evidently fresh from Covent Garden.

Both started back, both apologised profusely. But, of the two, little Jimmy Byrne was the least confused.

'I'm sure, Mrs. Frere, ma'am, I had no notion there was company in the drawing-room, or I would not have come up. The girl never let on a word to me. I am ashamed entirely, sir, to have trod on your toes like that.'

'Oh, never mind; I am sure Mr. Darnell does not. Pray come in, Mr. Byrne,' exclaimed Grace, starting forward with outstretched hand, and such a look of warm welcome in her eyes and on her smiling lips that Darnell felt a sudden jealous pang, a sullen envy of the shabby little beggar who was, perhaps, to bask in such sunshine all the evening, while he (Darnell) was obliged to sit out a dinner of three hours with, probably, a solemn dowager on one side and a simpering, highly-trained, and rigidly-moulded *demoiselle* on the other.

But there was no attempt at an introduction, and Mr. Darnell, after reiterated adieux, took his departure.

Byrne looked after him with a wistfully curious expression on his short honest face, but was far too innately well-bred to ask any questions.

'Oh, I am so glad you are come!' cried Mab,

clasping his hand in both hers; 'it is so long since you were here.'

'Indeed, I have thought it long myself, Miss Mabel; but we have been that busy the last fortnight, I have been a'most afraid to go to bed. And I hope I see you well, Mrs. Frere? you'll excuse my remarking it, which I do with the greatest of pleasure—you're looking pounds better—pounds, ma'am, upon my word! Isn't your mamma now looking well, Miss Grace?'

There was the heartiest earnestness in his tone; and smiling gratefully on him, Grace replied:

'Yes, indeed! and I am so glad you, too, see the improvement.'

'The mother is looking quite young and charming,' said Randal, who was in a good humour; and Mrs. Frere, who dearly loved her children's tender flattery, coloured with pleasure, and really looked pretty enough to justify it.

'Do you know, Mr. Byrne, I have been in the city to-day—quite an expedition for me; but it was necessary to get the money for a bank bill. I must say the new agent of the estates is very obliging; I was compelled to ask him to advance the quarter's interest which will be due in June, for we really had no money, and he did so at once. Now we shall get on quite comfortably; it is wonderfully cheering to have money in one's purse.'

'It is so, ma'am,' returned Jimmy, with his usual ready acquiesence; but Grace noticed that his countenance fell, and that he grew very grave.

'Then,' resumed Mrs. Frere, complacently, 'we

took the opportunity to order a dress suit for Randal. He is unable to go to Lady Elton's receptions for want of a proper toilet, so we went to his poor dear father's tailor, Macleland, in St. James's Street.'

'Who did you say, ma'am?' asked Jimmy, in a startled tone.

'Macleland,' repeated Mrs. Frere, and continued, without heeding a half-stifled exclamation of 'Oh Lord!' from Byrne, 'Do you know, they quite remember Colonel Frere, and'—pressing her handkerchief to her eyes—'they keep his measure still; so the man who took Randal's——'

'Really quite a gentlemanlike fellow!' interrupted Randal.

'——said he should have a suit of the best quality on the most moderate terms,' Mrs. Frere went on.

'Might I ask, ma'am, if he named a price?' said Jimmy Byrne, insinuatingly.

'No, of course not,' replied Randal, loftily; 'one cannot bargain with people of that sort; better to leave it to themselves.'

'Ahem!' said Byrne, and a portentous silence fell upon them.

Randal felt indignant that Jimmy presumed to be silent; Grace, that some serious imprudence had been committed; while Mrs. Frere dimly wished she had never mentioned the dress suit. Disapprobation from anyone, peasant or prince, infant or sage, annihilated her; she was utterly without a moral backbone, and could not stand without support.

'By the dint of good luck,' he went on, 'I got out of the office an hour earlier; and as I come through Covent Garden I saw these strawberries; so I thought they'd just do for your dear mamma and Miss Mabel.'

'And not for me? that is too bad of you, Mr. Byrne.'

'Ah, then, Miss Grace, I do *not* think of you along with them kind of things,' said Jimmy, with much earnestness. 'Sure, you are the man o' business of them all! and I am always wanting to trouble you about what may be too much for a young creature like you.'

'Ah!' said Grace, with a somewhat sad smile, 'I can bear a good deal.'

And a pause ensued while the servant was laying the table, Jimmy Byrne standing meantime with his hands in his pockets, and an unmistakable look of trouble on his brow.

'That will do, Sarah,' said Grace, as Randal left the room, and Mabel ran upstairs after her mother. She proceeded to set forth the tea-things with quick deft fingers.

'I am afraid you think my mother rather imprudent to-day,' she continued, anxious to utilise the few moments *tête-à-tête.*

'Imprudent!' repeated Jimmy in a low tone, but with strong emphasis. 'It's downright madness, divil a less,' asking pardon. 'Look here now, Miss Grace; you see if the coat isn't five-pound, or five-pun-ten; and the trousers—God forgive me for naming them—two, or two-fifteen; and the waist-

coat may be another twenty shillings. If Mr. Randal must have a suit' (he said 'shute'), 'my tailor would have given him one in the height of the fashion for five, the whole lot, or five-ten, and ten per cent. discount for ready cash. See now, if you wouldn't mind looking, sure my coat don't fit so bad!'

And in the heat of argument, Jimmy turned a narrow back and sloping shoulders for Grace's inspection, drawing in his waist that she might observe the artistic cut of his scarcely fashionable garments.

'Very nice indeed,' said Grace, with deep gravity. The subject was too serious to permit of her attending to (she always *perceived*) the comic side of Jimmy's argument.

'Yet I do think Randal ought to have had the clothes. Why should I go to Lady Elton's, and he be left at home? But I wish they had waited and consulted you.'

'Ah, it's other things besides balls and parties he should be thinking of. Miss Grace dear, I can speak truth to you. He is wasting his time cruel. Sure he ought to be turnin' in a guinea a week, anyhow. I'm going to speak to him this night, and you back me up like a jewel, as ye are. Faith, I wish you were the boy—ah! it's easy to see you were reared on a boy's milk. Wasn't it a foster-*brother* you had?'

'Yes. But, Jimmy, do speak to Randal; I will help you all I can.'

'An' it's not that only, but Mrs. Frere, poor dear

lady, she is as innocent as an infant. She is highly pleased because she's got the quarter's interest six weeks or two months before it's due. Where will she be when quarter-day comes round, and nothing to look to? for not a penny of this haul will be left, I'll be bound.'

'I am sure I don't know; but yet we cannot go on without money,' ejaculated Grace.

'And then,' proceeded Jimmy, 'after agreeing to pay quarterly—but whisht!' interrupting himself, 'here comes the mistress; we'll have it out after tea.'

Thereupon enter Mrs. Frere, looking serene, smiling, and so unusually bright, that poor Grace's heart sank at the idea of curtailing the short gleam of light, the little 'breathing-space,' amid the long-enduring spell of trouble and mortification beneath which she had cowered.

'I shall quite enjoy a cup of tea,' she said cheerfully, seating herself at the table; 'and what beautiful strawberries! That is a piece of extravagance for which I must really scold you, Mr. Byrne. You are too kind and thoughtful.'

'Faith! not at all, Mrs. Frere, ma'am. It is just a pleasure to me to find a tasty trifle for you, now and again.'

Then Randal and Mab came in, and tea was discussed with much cheerfulness and enjoyment.

Randal was in high spirits, which made it all the more difficult for Jimmy Byrne to approach his subject, though he was more resolute with the son than with the mother.

Tea over, Grace waited with some trepidation for the beginning of the passage-of-arms. She saw that Jimmy was nerving himself for the fray, by the little tugs he gave to the breast of his coat, the clearing of his throat, and swallowing of imaginary lumps therein.

At last, with a sudden clearing of his countenance, as if a happy thought had struck him, he exclaimed:

'Would you mind coming out for a stroll, Mr. Randall, down by Holland Park? It is three weeks and more since I saw a tree or a blade of grass.'

'By all means. I am your man. Will *you* come, Grace?'

'No, thank you,' she replied discreetly.

'And I am going to draw in my new book,' said Mab.

When the gentlemen had departed, Grace gently opened to her mother the probable object of Jimmy's desire for a stroll, and begged her not to be influenced by Randal's dreams of literary fame. Of course, while she spoke, Mrs. Frere thought Grace's reasoning unanswerable, and quite agreed with her; but a quarter of an hour after, she would speak out of her thoughts, and revert to the pain of knowing that dear Randal, with his high aspirations and exceptional abilities, should be chained to a desk—all the necessity of the case forgotten, and only the unconquerable disgust remembered.

The walk and talk must have been long, for Randal and his companion did not return till the

shades of evening were closing in, and both looked as if the exercise had not been cheering.

'It is awfully hot and choky. Mother, I should like a glass of beer, if it is not too extravagant—eh, Jimmy?'

'Ah, Mr. Randal, it's not a glass of beer that does the mischief—no, nor two.'

Having quaffed the desired beverage, Randal, addressing Grace, exclaimed:

'Here's Jimmy Byrne been bullying me to no end about laziness, and attempting impossibilities, and heaven knows what! Perhaps I ought to tackle to and earn some filthy lucre, but it is deuced hard not to be able to get any work in one's own line. However, you shall not say I am obstinate, I'll take anything you can get for me, except a clerkship in the Frere firm. I will *not* sit with a pen behind my ear in a place where Max is master.'

'Then you see, Mr. Randal, there's the fifty——'

'Now you may just save your breath, Jimmy. It is the one thing I cannot do—not for—even for my mother.'

'Heaven forbid I should demand such a sacrifice!' exclaimed Mrs. Frere, rather hysterically. 'Indeed, when you are ready to renounce your own wishes so nobly, it would be base to expect more.'

'Very true, faith! very true!' ejaculated Byrne; 'but, ahem! you see the question is, where will we find such another offer? Mr. Randal's writing is not exactly a business hand, and, don't ye know, it's not every one can read it. Suppose now, while

we are trying to find something that will please you, you practise a clerk's hand.'

'Please me! do you think anything of the kind *you* mean would please me?'

'But do, dear Randal, take Mr. Byrne's advice; try and prepare yourself for anything that may offer—you have so much time!'

'Oh! you are always ready to preach, Miss Grace; how would you like to be obliged to sit at a desk yourself all day long?'

'I wish to heaven I could! it, or anything, rather than sit here consuming our small income, and helpless to add anything to it. I wish I were in your place, Randal!' cried Grace earnestly, and clasping her hands.

'That is all very fine,' began Randal, sullenly, when his sister interrupted him.

'I will tell you what I can do, mother dear. That Mr. Darnell has something to do with some office in the city, and he seems very frank and good-natured; I will ask him to help us, for I too would rather Randal was not under Uncle Frere.'

'Darnell!' repeated Jimmy Byrne; 'is he anything to Sir Henry Darnell, the great ship-owner?'

'His nephew—his favourite nephew, Lady Elton says.'

'Whew!' whistled Jimmy in delighted astonishment, and then asked pardon; 'why, he is the man that *can* do it. They have more than twenty or thirty clerks in their office, and this is the heir! old Sir Henry never married. I thought he was a bit

of a swell when I come in this evening, but I didn't think it was young Mr. Darnell.'

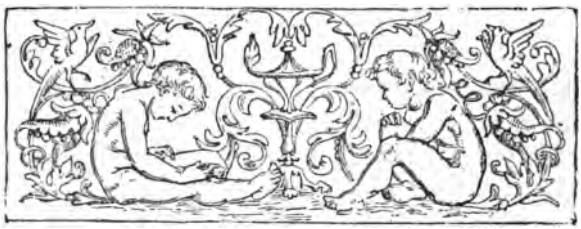
'He seems a friendly sort of person,' said Grace carelessly; 'and at all events I can ask Lady Elton to mention Randal to him.'

'Better do it yourself, Miss Grace dear—better do it yourself,' cried Byrne, rising and taking his hat.

'Anyway, Mr. Randal,' he continued, 'will you come to me in the office in my own room to-morrow about one, and we'll settle about the writing and one or two other matters we were speaking of?'

And Grace's heart felt lighter and more hopeful as she heard Randal say readily:

'I will, Jimmy—I will be with you a little before one.'



CHAPTER XI.

ALTHOUGH Grace hardly expected that Mr. Darnell could succeed in arranging the proposed dinner at Richmond, it seemed so out of the ordinary routine of their lives, his project was crowned with success.

Lady Elton at once agreed to be of the party, and Mrs. Frere's faint objections were overruled.

It was a beautiful day, and Grace enjoyed it more than any other she had yet passed in London. For she was not alone in her enjoyment: her mother, who seemed quite herself, Mab, Randal—all were there to share her pleasure. So she was unvisited by those stabs of self-reproach which frequently pierced her when the thought of mother and Mab alone and uncheered came across her heart. How nice it was to be all together! How thankful she was that a press of business had prevented Max from joining them!

Lady Elton arrived in good time in the open carriage which in summer replaced her brougham, accompanied by an elderly and excessively-polite gentleman of doubtful nationality—a Pole or a Hungarian, given to humane and patriotic schemes —much decorated, and possessing the gift of tongues.

Immediately after, Mr. Darnell dashed up in a mail-phaeton, drawn by a pair of showy chestnuts.

He proposed to drive Grace and Randal, and, on her entreaty to be of the party, he very good-humouredly agreed to take Mab also.

They started in excellent spirits, Darnell the gayest of the party; everything seemed coming to his hand. His contentment reached its height when, having cleared the more crowded part of the road, Grace, with some hesitation, asked if she might be allowed to take the reins:

'Oh, you can handle the ribbons, can you?' Darnell exclaimed. 'These chestnuts are not so easy to manage.'

'I think I can, if you will let me try.'

'Certainly, Miss Frere. Here, you had better take my seat. Hold on a bit, Miss Mabel. There you are. You must keep the off one up to the collar—he never pulls fair.'

'So I see,' said Grace, gathering up the reins in workwomanlike style, and keeping the chestnuts at a steady trot.

'Gad! I see you can do it,' cried Darnell, delighted; 'you gave that victoria the go-by in capital style.'

'May I keep them?' asked Grace presently, glancing at the reins.

'That you shall—all the way!'

When at length they drew up at the Star and Garter, and Darnell assisted her to descend, Grace, looking straight into his eyes with her frankest, sweetest expression, said, 'Thank you very much for the pleasure you have so kindly given me.' He seemed for the first time really to know the full value of wealth: had it not earned for him this charming recognition?

The dinner was very successful. Lady Elton was at her best, the Polish-Hungarian instructive, Mrs. Frere kindly and complacent, Mab quiet and content.

At Grace's request the feast was somewhat shorn of its proportions to permit an evening ramble in the park, which she and Mabel profoundly enjoyed. Darnell was their companion, while Mrs. Frere paired off with the Polish colonel, and Lady Elton with Randal.

Before leaving the hotel Grace had found a moment for consultation with Lady Elton.

'Do you think there would be any use in asking Mr. Darnell to help Randal in finding something to do?'

'Yes, I daresay he could help him effectually.'

'Will you speak to him, then, dear Lady Elton?'

'Who, me? I think you had much better speak to him yourself,' returned that lady, drily.

Grace noticed something, she knew not what, in Lady Elton's words not quite like her ordinary

tone; but the only idea suggested by it was that her ladyship thought her young friend ought not to trouble her with a trifle she might herself accomplish. For to Grace it seemed a very light matter to ask one young man to help another, where it did not involve pecuniary aid.

Yet she was surprised to find that the absolute asking was not so easy as she expected. More than once she revolved how she should begin, and could not plan it. At last Darnell, who had gone to assist Mab in gathering a big bunch of ferns, returned to her side, and Grace, speaking out of the fulness of her heart, began:

'You are very good-natured, Mr. Darnell, so good-natured that I am tempted to ask you something—something I want very much.'

'I am sure I would do anything for you, Miss Frere—anything I could,' returned Darnell, with a look of such unmistakable admiration that Grace, blinded as she was by preoccupied feelings, felt startled and disturbed. There was a pause, for she could not find words.

'Well, what is it?' said Darnell, with a self-satisfied smirk. He fancied his fair companion was struck mute by her sense of his power and veiled tenderness.

'You see there is Randal, poor fellow!' she began hastily; 'he has nothing to do, and he wants to be at work. He does not like to go to Uncle Frere's. Do you think you could find anything for him, or recommend him anywhere? He is really very bright and clever.'

'Oh!' said Darnell (a long-drawn 'oh'). 'He wants to go into an office, I suppose? It is rather uphill work; still there are capital chances to be met with in trade. I don't know that I can do much for him. At any rate, I shall be most happy to do my best. Would he like to go abroad? There are some good appointments to be had in China and Japan; but he must have some business training first.'

'Abroad!' cried Grace, to whose vivid imagination the word conjured up visions of oriental wealth —'Barbaric pearl and gold. 'Oh, I do not know how my mother could ever part with him. But I am sure he would be delighted to go. I should, were I a man; and I often wish I were.'

'Thank God you are not,' said Darnell, piously, while he thought to himself how convenient it would be to push a brother-in-law's fortunes, and at the same time put him in remote but honourable exile. 'Well, Miss Frere, I will see what's to be done; and you may be sure I will do my best for your brother'—a slight emphasis on 'your.'

'Thank you so very much,' cried Grace, smiling on him with such sunny eyes and sweet tremulous lips, that poor Darnell felt inclined to go down on his knees then and there on a sharp gravelled walk, and declare his utter and complete subjugation. 'I feel we may trust you.'

'You may indeed, Miss Frere! You must feel sure I would do a good deal to serve anyone belonging to you.'

After this, the ramble through the park progressed most successfully. Darnell described his last visit to the moors, and how he had lost his way in a thunderstorm. And Grace was drawn on to speak of Dungar.

Darnell exhibited much interest in the details of life in the West, stated his conviction that it must have been awfully jolly there, and openly expressed his envy of Max Frere's experiences.

Something in his companion's frank friendliness took the wind out of the wide-spread sails of compliment and flattering insinuation, which he endeavoured to set. Nevertheless, he felt delightfully at ease, and the determination to secure this charming *naïve* creature for a wife grew clearer and clearer as he listened to her bright unaffected talk, and met her kindly, honest glance.

'What had Max Frere been about to let a girl like this escape him? But he was right. It was not good for cousins to marry, and he was heartily glad Max had the sense to see it.'

A moonlight drive home concluded a day which Grace did not hesitate to tell Mr. Darnell was the happiest she had spent in London.

'I think you are an ungrateful girl,' said Lady Elton, with a smile. 'I, too, have done my best to amuse you.'

'You have, indeed you have; and I am so pleased to be with you: but to-day we were all together. It was delightful!'

Darnell was silent—he dared not trust himself to speak; and in the general leave-taking it was not

noticed. He was the last to go, and at parting pressed Grace's hand as he said:

'You may trust me; I will do the best I can for your brother, Miss Frere.'

'Thank you a thousand times! Good-night.'

'Is he not good-natured?' she exclaimed when the door was safely shut upon them. 'But I wish he would not shake hands so hard; he has squeezed my ring into my finger.' And she drew off a little old-fashioned pearl and diamond ring—her only bit of jewellery. 'I am sure he will find something for you, Randal; and then, dear boy, you will work and learn the secret of making money, so that you may have leisure to write beautiful books.'

'You talk to me as if I was a baby, Grace,' returned Randal, rather offended. 'How unjustly things are divided in this world! There is that Darnell; what has he done to have wealth and power? while I, who have twice his capacity for enjoyment, and am more of a gentleman into the bargain, haven't a sixpence I can call my own, or——'

'I must say, Randal,' interrupted Mrs. Frere, 'I think he is very much to be liked, and quite a gentleman.' She spoke emphatically, and kissed Grace at the end of the little speech, as though it were a special compliment to her.

The day after Darnell's dinner, Lady Elton went to Brighton to visit an old friend, and it was three days before Grace saw her again; during which time Darnell called, but the whole party were out. They had gone with their good friend Jimmy

Byrne on an expedition to Hampstead, where Mab revelled in the freedom of the open heath, while the wide view, stretching away to a delicious dim blue distance, charmed Grace.

This, and a couple of following weeks, were the best and brightest of their London sojourn.

'The gentleman, miss,' said Sarah, opening the door one afternoon, nearly a fortnight after the Richmond dinner; and enter Mr. Darnell, smiling, radiant, and wonderfully at ease. Grace had met him several times in the interim, and had grown to look upon him as a familiar acquaintance, albeit not quite approving his style or appearance.

'Well, Miss Frere,' he began, as soon as the first salutations were over, and he had taken a seat beside Mrs. Frere, 'I am happy to say I have been able to keep my promise about your brother.'

'Indeed!' cried Grace.

'Yes; a friend of mine, who has a large concern in the city, will take him on for six months, just to see what he can do. It is a Colonial brokers' firm—Cartwright and Co.—so if he is sharp and looks about him he may get a chance of a berth abroad. It is really a better house to be in than Freres'; they are all in one grove, and not so likely to push a young fellow on.'

'Oh, thank you, Mr. Darnell; you have done us such a piece of service! Hasn't he, mother dear?'

'I cannot say how very much obliged we feel,' said Mrs. Frere, warmly.

'Not at all. Don't mention it,' said Darnell; 'I am too happy to be of any use. Of course there

will be no pay at first, but by-and-by, when he has learned something, he will have a salary. And, Mrs. Frere, if your son will breakfast with me to-morrow, about 9·30, I will go with him, and introduce him to Cartwright.'

Both Mrs. Frere and Grace thanked him heartily, and promised punctuality in Randal's name.

'I had nearly forgotten this,' resumed Darnell, drawing forth a note. 'Lady Elton desired me to give you this, and you are to be sure to come.'

Grace read the note, and looked up with sparkling eyes.

'Oh, mother dear!' she exclaimed, 'a ball! Lady Elton wants to take me to a ball. She wishes me to go in to-morrow to talk it over.'

'A ball, Grace! I am afraid——' began mamma.

'Come, now, Mrs. Frere, you must not object. I quite count on meeting Miss Frere at this ball,' said Darnell, with an air of proprietorship.

'We shall see about it,' said Grace, not wishing to discuss the question then; and Mab coming in with the draught-board, Darnell proposed to play with her, and thus managed to prolong his visit beyond reasonable limits.

Though it was with a sullen brow and reluctant step that Randal started to keep the appointment made for him by his mother and sister with Mr. Darnell, he offered no objection. Unpractical and utterly inexperienced as he was, he felt he must not throw away this chance, or at any rate that he must let the chance reject him. Scarce two months in London had already shown him that

editors will not entrust the writing of leading articles to unfledged boys, and that the highest genius may not be ripe enough at nineteen or twenty to suit the ideas of publishers. On the whole, Randal's heart was not bad ; his head was easily inflated, his character was weak and capricious, and his judgment—nil.

His mother blessed him tenderly, Mab threw an old shoe after him, while Grace ran downstairs to open the door, and give him a parting kiss. An unusual proceeding on her part, for there was no great amount of sympathy between her and her brother.

'Come straight back again, Randal,' she said. 'Just call on Jimmy Byrne as you pass—you will pass near his office ?—and ask him to come up to tea.'

Randal nodded gloomily, and departed.

The morning passed heavily, even anxiously. Grace wished to keep her appointment with Lady Elton, and yet felt it impossible to leave the house in ignorance of Randal's news.

At last, as she stood ready in hat and walking garb, waiting for the carriage which was to be sent for her, Randal drove up in a hansom.

One glance at his face was sufficient. It was radiant compared to its aspect when he started.

'Well, dear boy !'

'Well, mother ! that Darnell is a regular trump ! We had a splendid breakfast, and then away we went in a cab to the office—Corbett Chambers—a grand place—rows of clerks writing away for their lives—lots of polished mahogany and brght brass.

We went through into Cartwright's private room; it is fitted up like a nobleman's—Turkey carpet, leather chairs, maps of all parts of the world against the walls; and Cartwright himself—a jolly old fellow—shook me by the hand, said he understood I wanted some insight into business, that he hoped I would pick up a fair amount of knowledge in his little place. If I liked to begin on Monday they would find a desk for me; with that, he spoke down a tube, and a regular fine gentleman—a deuced deal better-looking than the master or Darnell either—came in, and bowed as if we were all princes of the blood. He was introduced as the head clerk, and told to look after me. "I suppose," says Mr. Cartwright, "you want to know something of the China trade with a view to joining your cousin's firm. They do nothing in that line now, but I am told that young Frere is a devilish sharp young fellow, and very ambitious—wants to embrace all branches." Of course I denied any connection over the way, and so on. The upshot is, I am to begin work on Monday. Do you know, I do not believe it will be half bad, the people all seem so monstrous civil; but I think it's partly owing to Darnell, he appears to be quite a great gun.'

'My dearest boy, I am so delighted to see you so pleased! I feel sure that beginning in such a good spirit, you will prosper.'

'What capital news, Randal! I wish I could stay at home and talk to you a little!'

'Here is the carriage, Grace,' cried Mab from the window.

'And I must not forget I called on Jimmy, but he was out, so I just left a line for him,' concluded Randal.

'Quite right,' cried Grace, as she hurried away. 'I will certainly come back to tea.'

It was a damp, drizzling day, and Lady Elton was very easily affected by weather; which perhaps accounted for an unusual tinge of gravity in her look and manner, although she was as kind as ever.

'I did not send for you as soon as I intended,' she said, coming to meet her young guest; 'I was prevented. But what is the matter? Have you found a pot of gold, as the people do in your Irish fairy tales? You look so bright. Come and eat some luncheon, and tell me all about it,' and she drew her to the table.

'Oh, Lady Elton!' cried Grace, 'I have wonderfully good news. That good kind Mr. Darnell has persuaded one of the great city men to take Randal into his counting-house or office; and Randal went there with him this morning, and has just now returned quite pleased. He is to begin on Monday really to work; is it not delightful!'

'That good kind Mr. Darnell,' repeated Lady Elton; 'why, child, a short time ago you seemed hardly to notice him. But this is really very good news.'

'Oh, Lady Elton! of course, at first, I did not mind Mr. Darnell much; he is not very remarkable. But when he is so kind and takes so much trouble for Randal—a stranger who is nothing to

him—I cannot help feeling grateful; and I really like him, he is so good-humoured and——' She paused suddenly in her eulogium.

'Yes,' replied Lady Elton in a dry tone, 'he is quite disinterested. I am glad, very glad you appreciate him; and am quite charmed that he has succeeded in putting Pegasus to draw the plough. I wonder if the London mill will ever grind Randal into utility? Now to our own affairs; you are of course coming to this ball with me?'

'Indeed, Lady Elton, I do not think I can or ought!' began Grace. And thereupon a very animated dispute arose between the two friends—Grace pointing out the impossibility of her affording herself a new dress, and her extreme reluctance to owe it to Lady Elton's bounty; the elder lady insisting on her own right to please herself, and spend her money as she liked, and ending by asking her if she would like Max Frere to think she moped at home to avoid meeting him? Whereupon Grace fired up:

'What he thinks is nothing to me,' she cried; 'I am surprised such an idea ever crossed your mind, Lady Elton! I never dreamed he would be at this ball, nor does his going or staying affect me; but I do not like to feel myself sinking from a friend to a pensioner on you.'

'My dear, what misplaced pride! Child, I am a lonely old woman: let me cheat myself for an hour into believing you are my daughter, for whom I am providing her first ball toilette. Let me guide your first steps in this wilderness of a world; and when

you are wiser and able to stand alone, you will thank me. Grace, I want to save you from the direst misfortune that can befall a woman.'

'And what is that?' asked Grace, bewildered.

'Hopeless, obscure poverty!'

'Ah, I fear even you, clever and wise as you are, cannot avert that,' returned Grace, with a smile; 'and though it is very disagreeable, I can imagine worse things.'

'Your imagination is a mere magic-lantern that distorts reality; but you interest me greatly. I wonder how your life will run, for you have a troublesome spirit, child. Nevertheless, you will come with me to the ball; and now we will go and choose your dress and all the etceteras.'

'Ah, Lady Elton, who could withstand you? I will do whatever you wish.'

'That is a wide promise, but I will keep you to it,' said Lady Elton, laughing, as she rang for the carriage; and while she went to put on her bonnet, Grace stood in a painful reverie. What could have suggested that sting of Lady Elton's anent Max? She was certain that she never by word or look betrayed the secret of her feeling for that cruelly-fascinating cousin whose name still exercised a power over her which she hated, yet could not withstand. Pride and a certain half-unconscious strength enabled her to suppress all outward signs of emotion with wonderful success for one so young; but she knew what a thrill of pain the mere sound of his name struck through her heart, how wildly her pulses throbbed at the sight of him,

even while she most bitterly despised herself for such weakness. Because all through this deep-rooted passion and tenderness she felt that she could never love, and trust, and believe in him again as she had done, even if he sought her, even if she yielded to the charm of his voice, and look, and manner. Grace's own most distinct virtue was loyalty, and the absence of it in another was at once unaccountable and unpardonable to her.

'I am quite ready,' said Lady Elton, breaking in upon her thoughts; 'so come along. We have plenty to do.'

The succeeding hours flew pleasantly by. Having yielded to her kind friend's wishes in the matter of dress, Grace threw herself heartily into the charming occupation of choosing the hundred and one requisites for a ball toilette.

Nor did Lady Elton show less eagerness and pleasure. To that lonely woman this sudden acquisition of a fresh living interest was like a renewal of youth. She threw herself into the new friendship with the utmost ardour, and laid down the future of her young *protégée* on lines rigidly traced out according to her ladyship's notions of what was best and most suitable, which it would be treason in Grace or anyone else to doubt.

'You must have some ornaments,' said Lady Elton, speaking apparently out of deep thought. 'Yours is not merely the simple, girlish style; you can bear a good deal of dress.'

They had finished their shopping and were drawing towards Camden Hill, for Grace had

resolutely insisted on returning, as she promised, to tea.

'My mother has a handsome set of pearls—very good ones, I believe—and of course I can have them.'

'No, no! I know what an old-fashioned suit of pearls is. Better (as you wish to have some indication of mourning in your dress) wear jet—that sparkling Paris jet, I mean.'

'Yes, that would be very nice; only I haven't any.'

'But I have. However, there is time enough to settle all that; the ball is more than a fortnight off.'

Arrived at Albert Crescent, Lady Elton said she would come in and shake hands with Mrs. Frere and Randal.

They found the family party assembled, with the addition of Jimmy Byrne, and just about to sit down to their evening meal, for it was almost seven o'clock.

The fragrant odour of the tea and Mrs. Frere's kindly invitation was more than Lady Elton could withstand; and a very merry party they were. Jimmy, too simple and real to be shy or embarrassed, though perfectly unobtrusive, was evidently a source of great amusement and curiosity to Lady Elton, who drew him out with infinite tact. Randal's good fortune and the exceeding friendliness of Mr. Darnell were discussed—Grace's triumphs at the ball laughingly predicted. Mrs Frere grew quite animated as the conviction that

such children as hers must be destined to high fortunes grew upon her under the genial influence of the hour, and the consciousness that a decent remnant of the Dungar agent's last remittance was still in her desk. Mabel settled a Sunday expedition; and Randal ventured to accept an invitation to Lady Elton's ensuing 'Saturday,' having faith in the renowned Macleland's punctuality.

CHAPTER XII.

RANDAL'S satisfaction with his new employment continued almost unabated for the first ten days. It was no doubt monotonous and mechanical, but on the whole less oppressive than he expected.

The day before the ball, he had returned in high spirits. Mr. Cartwright had sent for him into his private room to show him a French letter, which that worthy Briton could not read. The firm had little or no Continental business, and therefore did not require their clerks to be linguists. Randal, who was never disposed to hide his light under a bushel, had mentioned to the manager that he had lived in France at one time, and he was therefore sent for to decipher this epistle. It was from a Dutch house in Japan, and promised an important increase of business. Mr. Cartwright was consequently highly pleased with everything, his new *employé* included, especially as he very readily turned the carefully composed answer into French. Of course

he was ignorant of the French equivalents for technical commercial terms, but so also was his employer; and his translation was considered a masterpiece.

Need it be said that a superb edifice was raised by the mother's imagination on this slender foundation, or that Grace set out in excellent spirits to dine with Lady Elton, at whose house she was to dress?

The ball was like all other London balls, save that it was given in an unusually large house.

There were flowers in great profusion, liveried flunkeys, and a regiment of hired waiters; a softly lighted conservatory, with inviting sofas; a crowd on the staircase, a mob in the ball-room; splendid toilettes, and brilliant jewels—all that one sees in fifty other ball-rooms in the course of the season. But to Grace it was dazzling and fairy-like.

Before she reached the festive scene she had been a little ashamed of her own elation at the sight of the image reflected by her glass, on this, the first occasion on which she was dressed in full evening array—when she saw her round, rich figure draped in gauzy white, her neck and arms showing well from the contrast of her black ornaments, and her bright brown hair crowned by a starry coronet of the same sparkling jet. If mother and Mab could only see her! that was her one regret. Nothing seemed quite complete to her in which they did not share. But when she found herself surrounded by girls in infinitely more splendid and striking attire, of more practised style and manner, she felt dwarfed into nothingness.

'I suppose you can dance?' said Lady Elton, as they issued from the tea-room. 'I never thought of it before.'

'Oh yes! our last governess danced beautifully, and we always danced at Dungar in the winter evenings; but perhaps London dancing is different.'

'I do not imagine it is of much consequence to-night; it seems a fearful crowd.'

'Ah, here is Mr. Darnell!' exclaimed Grace, delighted to see a familiar face in this crowd of strangers—a delight visible in her speaking face.

'You are late, Lady Elton!' he exclaimed. 'I have been looking for you this half-hour. May I have the honour of the next valse, Miss Frere?' And he took her card to write his name.

A struggle up the stairs ensued, and after being presented to the hostess, Grace accepted Darnell's arm, and entered the ball-room; but already she was noticed as something new and fresh—an acquaintance of Darnell's, too—and three more names were inscribed upon her card before she began a fruitless attempt to dance in a dense crowd.

'Is it not maddening?' she exclaimed to her partner, as they came to a stand-still, after fighting their way once round the room. 'Such delightful music! I never danced to a band before, and not to have room enough is too bad.' And she looked upon the struggling crowd with a slight pout on her red lips.

'They will clear off soon, at least a good many,' returned Darnell. 'There are two more balls on

to-night, to my knowledge; and several beside, I daresay.'

'Then let us go back to Lady Elton. It is *too* much to stand here and listen to the music.'

Darnell laughed, and turned away with her.

'Your first ball, Miss Frere?'

'The very first.'

'I am proud to be your first partner at your first ball. You look stunning. By Jove, you do!'

'Do I?' exclaimed Grace, much amused at the expression, which was quite new to her. 'I have not deprived you of the power of speech, at all events.'

'No; it is quite the other way.'

'Is Lady Mary Langford here to-night?'

'I fancy not. This is not a swell house, though a very good one; and she does not know many outside her own set, I imagine. Lady Elton, you know, is different from everyone else. You meet all sorts at her "evenings."'

On reaching the place where they had left her, no Lady Elton was to be seen. However, Grace was quite content to stay with Darnell; she was accustomed to him, and his admiration, both 'uttered and unexpressed,' amused her; and, besides satisfying an undeniable need of her genial and sympathetic nature, soothed the *amour propre* which had been so sorely bruised.

With thoughtless and very innocent coquetry, Grace turned aside his compliments, and met his attempts at sentiment with jest and laughter, till the victim's feelings reached 'white heat.'

Meantime the ball progressed. Grace struggled through two more dances, with partners introduced to her by Darnell; and, as he predicted, the ball-room began to thin.

'Shall we try again?' said Darnell to Grace, who had found Lady Elton, and was sitting beside her.

'Ah, it is only a quadrille,' he added, as he caught the sound of the music.

'Never mind,' cried Grace, 'it is something to dance, if you do not object.'

'Object to dance with you?' said Darnell, 'that's not very likely;' and offering his arm, he led her off with a radiant face.

Lady Elton looked after them, an expression of entire content on her countenance. The next moment, Max Frere came through a door leading into the ball-room, and addressed her:

'I have been looking for you. They told me you were downstairs.'

'I went down for a cup of tea.'

'So you have brought Grace Frere with you?' he continued, after a pause, during which he seemed lost in thought. 'I saw her dancing with Darnell.'

'Yes; I assure you I feel quite proud of my *protégée*. Does she not look well?'

'She does' (emphatically). 'Darnell seems far gone. I think you have managed very well.'

'You give me too much credit. I have not managed at all, but they seem to like each other. However, as *you* know, that may mean everything or nothing.'

'Like each other,' repeated Max, heeding only the first part of the speech; 'do you mean to say Grace likes, in the sense of loving, a fellow like that? Why, he has not the capacity of an average groom.'

'I do not know much about grooms,' said Lady Elton, 'but I know young Darnell is a fair enough average specimen of "golden youth," and man enough to follow the dictates of his heart; besides, young creatures like Grace generally respond to the first man who makes love to them.'

'True,' muttered Max.

'An inconvenient tendency in general, but it might answer in this case,' continued Lady Elton; 'not that I admit either has any serious thoughts of the other.'

'No—very probably. Matrimony is desperately serious. I suppose I ought to ask Grace for a waltz?'

'Don't trouble yourself,' returned Lady Elton, with a slight elevation of the brow; 'she has plenty of cavaliers.'

Max looked at his aunt with a half-cynical smile, and left her to go in search of Grace.

The quadrille over, Darnell led his partner into the conservatory.

'Sit down and rest awhile here,' he said, as they reached a sofa behind which a graceful figure of a nymph held a lamp. 'There, you look like a Flora or one of these old goddesses yourself—'pon my soul you do, Miss Frere! there's something about your head——'

'An old goddess?' interrupted Grace, laughing, 'there could not be such a thing. The immortal gods must have been for ever young.'

'At any rate, you look as if you could never be old; I wish you would not chaff a fellow so much. Just listen to me now, for I am in earnest, desperately.'

'Grace, you must give me a waltz! will you not?'

Grace started quickly, and turning towards the voice, beheld Max Frere.

Max—tall, *svelte*, his dark keen intelligent face and deep glowing eyes looking darker and deeper than ever. His peculiar smile, half-sweet, half-mocking, curved his lips as he spoke; and his voice! —how it brought back to her Dungar and its lost happiness—the scenes of her dawning life—the solemn joy of her first burst into full womanhood —all stood out clear before her, as a scene is suddenly called out of the blackness of a dark night by a quick bright flash of lightning; while Darnell, red, rugged, hearty, devoted, was utterly forgotten.

A waltz with Max was what she had not dreamed of. True or false or fickle, she *would* have one with him—just one; and during it she would forget everything, save that he was all 'her fancy once painted him,' strong and wise and noble, a little contemptuous to the world in general, but tender, impassioned, devoted to herself! Why should he not be all this yet? Why should she not prove that she was still charming? Her heart beat, and a strange icy thrill struck through her veins.

'Ah, Max! I did not know you were here.'

She looked at him, straight into his eyes, with a glance so bright and soft and candid, that something of the old expression of deep almost greedy admiration came back to his face.

'But, Miss Frere, I was just going to ask you for this waltz!' put in Darnell, eagerly.

'Unfortunately you did not speak in time,' returned Max, coolly, as he offered his arm to his cousin. 'Come, Grace, we are losing precious minutes!' and they were soon whirling to the delightful music of one of Gung'l's waltzes. The first batch of supper-eaters having descended, 'like reapers,' to a harvest of tongue, turkey, and *paté de Strasbourg*, there was space enough to permit of dancing with enjoyment; and Grace enjoyed it with a fulness of delight that gave perceptible though indefinable grace and sparkle to face and figure, step and carriage.

Max danced well, but he seemed heavy compared to his partner. He felt the influence of her spirit, and looking steadily at her in the first pause of the dance, he said in a low voice:

'Were I a painter, and wished to depict the Spirit of the Ball, I would ask you to sit—no—to dance to me. Why, Grace, you are like a breath of the fresh wild west wind, caught and imprisoned in muslin or gauze; only you should not have these black things about you.'

'Yes, yes, I ought. The west wind sometimes—often brings storm and showers, and other evils, or is compelled to bear them.'

'Where did we dance together last, Grace?'

'In the drawing-room, at Dungar, while my mother played. Ah, Max! don't remind me of Dungar; let me enjoy this one evening. If you only knew how I long to return there!'

'It *is* hard lines for you, Grace. You ought to have a brighter destiny; but I fancy "the winter of your discontent" will not last long. Come, we are wasting time—another round.'

In the next interval of rest Max was colder and less complimentary.

'So you have found a berth for Randal? perhaps you will make something of him. You are just the sort of girl to retrieve the fortunes of the family.'

'Me! Why, what can I possibly do? If you could show *how*, I would gladly do anything. Ah, Max, the dear mother droops in that dreary lodging;' and the graceful bosom heaved visibly with a heavy sigh. 'But I will not be sad to-night. Yes; Randal has been very fortunate. And was it not kind of Mr. Darnell to take so much trouble for us strangers? Do you know, he sometimes comes all the way out to see us; and even plays draughts with Mabel, as you used.'

'Yes; I don't doubt he is devilish friendly!' said Max, with a fierce impatience that startled his companion.

This sudden change in her cousin's manner she accounted for by supposing that he imagined there was a covert reproach in her allusion to his games with Mabel; and as she never intended or would

have deigned to send so paltry a shaft, she hastened to efface the impression.

'Oh, he has plenty of time, you know; and is his own master. I suppose he has nothing better to do.'

'Grace, you puzzle me a little; I sometimes wonder if I quite understand you. But they will soon stop playing. One more turn; I fancy it will be a long time before I dance with you again.'

'Indeed!'

'Are you sorry?' almost tenderly.

'I do not know,' said Grace, with a sudden movement of distrust.

'Well, *I* do.'

He pressed her to him for an instant as he spoke. And once more they made a tour of the room, pausing near where Darnell stood, with a scowl on his broad, simple face, holding Grace's fan.

'Ah, Darnell,' said Max, in his usual easy tone, 'I shall restore my cousin to your care; for I am going on to another party, and have not time to look for Lady Elton. Cousins need not stand on ceremony—eh, Grace? Good-night,' and he was gone.

Gone, also, the momentary intoxication—the sudden dazzling gleam of pleasure. Grace was vaguely conscious of going down to supper, of having a variety of good things put on her plate, and its being taken away again; of dancing with sundry men, who all looked distractingly alike, with hair parted down the middle, and buttonhole bouquets, who said the same sort of things; she

was aware of a sort of dreary satisfaction in taking refuge with Mr. Darnell, of a sense of infinite relief when Lady Elton said they must go home; of still greater comfort when she took her seat in the dark, cool carriage. When Mr. Darnell said in a tone, the peculiar significance of which she did not notice, that he would see her the next morning, she only replied: 'Oh yes! I hope so;' whereat Lady Elton laughed outright.

'Well, child! did you enjoy the ball?'

'Yes, dear Lady Elton! so much that I cannot talk about it; and oh, I am so tired! But it was very beautiful.'

'Something I do not understand has gone wrong,' thought Lady Elton, but she wisely kept silence.

Grace came to breakfast the next morning looking paler and more wearied than could be accounted for by the moderate amount of dancing she had accomplished. Her eyes, too, were heavy, with a dark shade beneath them.

'You do not look as if you had slept well, child,' said Lady Elton, looking at her keenly.

'I did not,' returned Grace; 'the music haunted me. How charming it was! What a pity there was such a crowd! I long to have a nice free dance. But how beautiful the dresses were!' She spoke easily, and plunged into a discussion of the people and small events of the ball, with sufficient interest and animation.

Yet her hostess watched her with close but well-veiled scrutiny. Her quick, sympathetic perception detected a discordant, indefinable something under

the ordinary tone assumed by her young favourite; and though Grace was candour itself, Lady Elton had already observed that when she chose to drop a veil over her heart, it was not to be lifted.

'What became of Max Frere?' asked Lady Elton, suddenly. 'He went away to look for you, and I saw no more of him.'

'He went to another party, but I had a very good waltz with him first,' replied Grace, quietly, while she stooped to pick up her napkin, which had fallen.

'He dances well, I believe; indeed, he does most things well. And sometimes I like him very much, but, at times I do not. What is it about him that repels one?'

'I do not know. We all liked him at Dungar.'

'And do you like him in London?'

'We do not see enough of him here to know,' returned Grace; and added, with a smile, 'Everything is different here, so it is well to leave Dungar likings at Dungar.'

'Very sensible. Quite right,' said Lady Elton; and taking up a morning paper, she read aloud a short crisp leader on the prospects of the French Republic. Grace listened attentively, as she proved by some remarks, and then Lady Elton said:

'I am obliged to go out this morning, dear; but I shall return to luncheon, and drive you home after——'

'Then you do not want me to go out with you now?' asked Grace, smiling.

'No,' replied Lady Elton, looking sharply at

her. 'It is a secret expedition; besides——' she hesitated, and closed her lips, as if to suppress unspoken words.

'Oh, I do not mind, dear Lady Elton. It is always delightful to me to sit in your beautiful room and read.'

'Very well. Why, Grace,' looking at the clock, 'it is twenty minutes to eleven, and I have to go to Islington, an unexplored northern region, of which you are entirely ignorant. You will find all the magazines in my morning-room; so *au revoir.*' Lady Elton rose and went to dress. Grace sauntered into the study, and to the balcony, whence she returned, and throwing herself into a luxurious *chaise longue*, took up one of the more learned periodicals, and tried to read a paper on 'Tree and Serpent Worship.' Presently Lady Elton looked in, with her bonnet and lace cloak on: 'I am going, but shall not be long.'

Grace blew her a kiss, and then settled herself to think. All was still—not silent—for an undercurrent of tone, the roar of the everlasting ebb and flow of London's mighty human tide, stirred the air; but it was subdued and soothing.

Grace had certainly not slept well. She had fought a good fight in the silent night-watches. She had understood Max, when after his slight, seemingly irrepressible betrayal of tenderness, he had handed her over to another, rather than curtail by five minutes the time he intended for a fresh scene of pleasure, and probably for Lady Mary. She must never delude herself again; Max Frere

was possessed of some talisman, against which her simple charms were powerless. She must put him away out of her life—away back with other sweet and precious things for memory to embalm, but which could breathe, and move, and live again—never more. She did not feel angry, or indignant, or disdainful; only utterly disenchanted, as though a strong light had been held against some dissolving view, and shown the meagre crooked lines, the paltry ugliness, which lurked beneath the grace and beauty of the ostensible picture. She was not bitter: reasons of which she knew nothing might influence Max. But be they what they might, *he* must from henceforth cease to exist for her. Love—sweet, sunny, youthful love—had fled from her; she could not conceive its ever springing to life again. But she had her home dear ones to think of, and care for; she would live for them, work for them, be their guardian, and——

'If you please, 'm, would you see Mr. Darnell?' said the pliant Luigi, who had entered unperceived, and now offered a card upon a salver.

'Mr. Darnell!' said Grace, a little bewildered. 'Does he know Lady Elton is out?'

'He does, but asked if mademoiselle would receive——'

'Oh yes, of course,' she returned.

And thereupon enter Darnell, in most accurate morning costume, with a moss-rose in his buttonhole. He looked exceedingly uncomfortable, and grasped the hand offered him by Grace, with painful energy.

'I am sorry Lady Elton is out,' said Grace with much composure, and motioning him to sit down, while she took her place on a sofa.

'Oh—Lady Elton! I did not want to see her—a—I hope you are all right after the ball, Miss Frere?'

'Quite well, thank you. It was very nice. I never saw anything so beautiful before.'

'You will see many a better one, I daresay,' said Darnell, recovering himself a little. 'But do you know, Miss Frere, you are not looking all right by any means. I suppose it is rather cool to tell you so; but—but—I care too much not to say what I think.'

'Then do not care so much, and say pretty things!' cried Grace, laughing, and a little puzzled by his tone.

'I can't help it, you see,' returned Darnell; and a pause ensued, during which he rapped his teeth reflectively with the top of his cane. 'Don't you think Max Frere an intrusive duffer?' he exclaimed at last, 'coming after us in that way into the conservatory?'

'No, I do not; he wanted to dance with me, and he dances very well.'

'But,' cried Darnell, drawing closer to her, with a certain desperate resolve in his air, '*I* wanted to say something very particular to you—very particular indeed.'

'Did you?' said Grace, alarmed, a faint light beginning to dawn upon her, and suggesting the prudence of running away.

'Yes, indeed I did—something very important

to myself, at any rate; and I fancy, Miss Frere, you know what it is. You must see—you must understand that I—that I—have formed a very great attachment to you—in short, am over head and ears in love—there! it is quite a relief to get it off my mind.'

An appalling silence. Grace looked gravely at him out of her great serious eyes, her clasped hands falling in her lap with a despairing gesture.

'I wish you would say something,' urged poor Darnell. 'You see I am quite my own master, and whatever my uncle may think, he cannot take away my share of the business; and that's not bad. Besides, at his age, it is not likely he would alter his will, though he does want me to marry money or rank. *I* don't care the snuff of a candle, if you don't.'

Grace, a little dazed by the suddenness of this speech, and also puzzled by its incoherent rapidity, did not at once reply.

'Do speak to me,' repeated Darnell, imploringly.

'But I don't know what to say,' she returned, taking the first words that came; 'I am so astonished!'

'Come now,' cried Darnell, who having broken the ice, was braver than he had himself anticipated. 'You don't mean to say you did not see I intended to propose for you?'

'I saw nothing of the kind. I never thought about it.'

'Then you don't care a straw for me, or you would!' said he, in a tone of mortification which touched her.

'Indeed I do! I like you very much. We all like you; and it is very good of you to care for me'—the colour began to rise in her cheek—'very, very good; but—Mr. Darnell, I don't think I am at all in love with you.'

'Oh! if you are not sure about it, it's not so bad. I protest I have love enough for two, if you'll only venture; that is, try me—you know what I mean.'

'Ah, Mr. Darnell, there is no "trying" in marriage—it is for always; and how can you wish to marry a person you know so little about? I might not be a bit what you would like when you know me better——'

'Nonsense!' cried Darnell; 'I never loved anyone before—I mean so much. I have never been able to get you out of my head since the day I met you in the Park; yet I have always been so ashamed of having spoken to you——'

'Oh, indeed!' Grace tried to interrupt him, but he rushed on with his self-imposed exculpation:

'I am quite sure it gave you a wrong impression of me. You think I am fast, and I can tell you I am a saint compared to other fellows: your cousin Max Frere, for instance. If I had a home and a wife I loved, you'd see how I would stick to it. It's hard lines if all the comfort and style I could give her, can't get me the woman I want.'

The thought was vulgar, but the emotion which made his voice husky was real.

'Indeed, I am sure you are good and nice,' cried Grace, greatly touched, and giving him her hand with friendly frankness. 'It grieves me to—

to pain you, but I must tell you the truth. Besides, with my dear mother, and Mab, and Randal too, to take care of, I do not see how I could marry anyone.'

'Oh, for that matter,' said Darnell, holding her hand tight in both of his, 'your brother is in a fair way to get on; and—and as you are not as rich as you ought to be, perhaps Mrs. Frere will do better with one less on her hands.'

'My mother do better without me? That is all you know. Pray, let my hand go; you hurt me.'

'I tell you what, Miss Frere,' exclaimed Darnell, brightening, for he had been terribly cast down by this persistent refusal, 'just take time, and think about it; that is, if—if there isn't any other fellow. Oh, Miss Frere, don't say you care about any other fellow!'

'No!' said Grace, firmly, though she turned a little pale, and she believed she spoke truth, so disenchanted had she felt that morning.

'That's right. Now I won't give up hope. So you'll promise me to think about it—eh, Miss Frere? A young lady is none the worse for knowing her own value. But remember, I do not take "no" for an answer this time.'

'I think you had better, Mr. Darnell. I am quite sure it would be better for me not to marry, and——'

Now don't, Miss Frere—don't. You take time to consider. Talk to Lady Elton, she is a good friend of mine. Let me come and see you now and then, and—and you will find I am not such a bad fellow.'

'Very well,' returned Grace, incautiously growing anxious to get rid of him. 'But I don't think it will be any use; and then, perhaps *you* may think better of it too.'

This was added with a sweet arch smile, and little friendly nod which seemed to poor Darnell distractingly charming, but which to a more experienced man would have been infinitely discouraging.

'I suppose I ought to go,' said Darnell, with a longing look at his inamorata.

'Yes, I think so,' returned Grace, with terrible frankness.

'You are very cruel, Miss Frere.'

'Oh, don't talk in that way, Mr. Darnell; let us be friends, at all events.'

'Certainly! till—till we are something else,' exclaimed Darnell, quite proud of this happy hit.

'Good-morning,' said Grace, rising.

'Good-morning. Do you return to Albert Crescent to-day?'

'Yes.'

'May I come and see you to-morrow?'

'No, no; the day after, if you like.'

'If I like! Well, good-bye for the present.'

At last she was rid of him; and strange to say, for the half-hour that intervened before Lady Elton's return, she scarce gave him a thought. She sat as in a dream, and lived over again her whole life—her childish days in France, her early girlhood in Ireland; she thought deeply of their position in London, of their gloomy future, of how

they were to exist on an income which, even in their present narrow mode of life, was decidedly deficient; of Mab's extraordinary ignorance, of the necessity of doing more for that child than she had hitherto done.

In the midst of these sweet and bitter reflections, Lady Elton returned; and then they were summoned to an early luncheon, as Grace was anxious to return home.

Lady Elton was unusually silent during the repast, occasionally looking at Grace with inquiring eyes.

When Luigi had placed the sweets before his mistress and departed, Grace began, with much composure:

'Mr. Darnell called while you were out, Lady Elton.'

'Yes; and what then?'

'Well, you will hardly believe it—he asked me to marry him!'

'Yes, I quite believe it; I have expected this *éclaircissement*.'

'Have you?' cried Grace, opening her eyes. 'You know everything.'

'I certainly know more than you do; but Grace, I cannot believe that you would have been so blind to what was coming if your heart had not been filled with a dominant feeling for another.'

Grace blushed crimson, and her brows contracted.

'There,' continued Lady Elton, 'I do not want to force any confidence; but of this I am certain, that a better and more disinterested offer could not be made to any girl. Pray what was your answer?'

'I told him I did not love him, and did not want to marry anyone.'

'That would be all right enough if you were independent. But how do you propose to solve the problem of existence? Why, child, it is the choice, not only between bread and water and paté de Périgord, but between the sordidness of miserable shabby everyday penury, and the ease and refinement and beauty which wealth can purchase! Poverty grows more and more of an evil as the world advances.'

'For all that, I do not think I could marry Mr. Darnell.'

'Tell me how you parted,' said Lady Elton, as if forcing herself to be patient.

'Oh! we agreed to be very good friends, and I promised to think it over—not that it will be much use—and he said he would come and see us.'

'Ah, that is not so bad! Of course, Grace, ignorant as you are of the world, you must be aware that you have committed yourself to a good deal.'

'Have I?' cried Grace, alarmed. 'At any rate, I have not promised to marry him!'

'No—but you——' Lady Elton checked herself; second thoughts are best. Perhaps it would be wiser to let her young favourite drift unconsciously to the consummation for which she so devoutly wished.

'You see I was sorry for him. He is so kind, and seemed so cut up, that I would have said nearly anything to comfort him; but I told him it was no use.'

'"She who deliberates is lost,"' quoted Lady

Elton, with a smile. 'Believe me, Darnell could pick and choose in many very good families.'

'Then it was very stupid of him to want me, of whom he knows so little.'

'"Curious fool, be still!
Is human love the growth of human will?"'

returned Lady Elton, laughing. 'Your mother will be quite interested in your first conquest.'

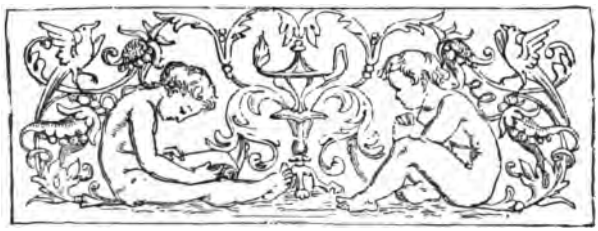
'Oh, dear Lady Elton,' cried Grace, earnestly, 'do not say anything to her; she cannot help talking, and then Mab gets to know everything. We never have such a thing as a secret among us, and Mab would ask the most dreadful questions.'

'I think you might trust your mother in this, Grace, and I think you must. This is a very serious matter. You cannot keep poor Darnell in uncertainty on so vital a question.'

'I do not wish to do so,' replied Grace, in a low but resolute voice. 'I wanted him to accept my decision to-day.'

'Well, well! do not let us quarrel, dear; though I confess I am greatly in favour of your accepting so excellent an offer, and indeed everyone would think with me. Max Frere was saying to me only last night, how nice it would be if you married Darnell, or something to that effect.'

'Max!' escaped from Grace's lips unconsciously, as she remembered how suddenly he had consigned her to Darnell's care, and left her the night before; but she forced herself to say meditatively, in a tone that Lady Elton quite misunderstood, 'Yes, I suppose it would be a very good marriage.'



CHAPTER XIII.

IN the matter of mental values there is no standard. Each has his own weights and measures, by which, had he the choice, his neighbour would no doubt decline to be tried.

Thus Grace Frere, unmoved herself by the feelings which agitated Darnell, preoccupied and heedless, forgot that he considered himself on trial, and imagined that little occasional displays of indifference (*when* she remembered to show them) would suffice to warn him of her intentions.

The days slipped past, not too agreeably. As the small supply of ready-cash sank lower and lower, Mrs. Frere's cheerfulness kept at a corresponding level; while Randal's first sunny view of mercantile pursuits was frequently clouded over by the 'crotchets of that fellow Brown, the manager,' about his writing. It took Grace and Jimmy Byrne infinite trouble, and an enormous exercise of tact, to induce him to practise his pen-

manship, in order to acquire something like legibility and a clerkly hand.

Meanwhile, Mab's education troubled Grace terribly. She felt that the child was running to seed for want of a little culture, which, so far as she could, she was most anxious to impart. But to get Mab to 'say lessons' was indeed an herculean labour: first to make her sit down, then to induce her to learn 'Grace's way'—which was never her own—to make a subject clear to a mind determined not to receive it—all this was a sore trial of patience; but when to it was added the visible nervous annoyance of the mother—visible though unexpressed—and gradually accumulating during the lesson, till utterance could no longer be restrained:

'Don't you think, dear Grace, that will do for to-day? Mabel seems to me a little feverish, and I fear you have not quite the knack of fixing attention.'

Mab's education was, perhaps, the only point on which Mrs. Frere doubted her eldest daughter's infallibility.

When at the last Mrs. Frere 'spake with her tongue,' poor Grace would give up in despair; and often, it must be admitted, threw the books, maps, and slate together with more violence and impatience than is becoming in a heroine: but human nature is very imperfect, and Mab *could* be maddening. Yet she was a curious mixture. One day—a warm, oppressive June day—when Grace had striven to be more than unusually patient and ex-

planatory, while Mab had brought up a huge reserve force of wilfulness and impenetrability to resist the attack, Grace's self-control had suddenly broken down under the pressure of great provocation, and she had administered sundry sharp slaps on the little contemptuous shoulders so expressively uplifted — chastisement no sooner administered than heartily repented of. 'She is such a little thing, and so backward, I ought not to have touched her; for I know it only makes her worse,' thought Grace, hastily putting away the books and copies, which were strewn on the table. Then she stole upstairs to her own little room, and sitting by the dressing-table, indulged in a rare fit of crying.

She had had more than one trial that morning. Randal had reproached her before he started for forcing him into that 'cursed treadmill' of an office, which produced nothing, and would probably lead to nothing, but the cost of omnibuses to and fro.

'Why don't you urge Darnell to get me something better? He would do it you know, only for your confounded pride!'

Some words had fallen from Mrs. Frere which startled her daughter into the knowledge that she in some vague way counted on her (Grace's) marriage to restore the family fortunes; and with the knowledge came the fear that she had, through a sort of indolent thoughtlessness, been deceiving every one; that she must rouse herself, and act honestly and boldly. As she pondered these things, her thoughts were sad enough; but Max had no

share in them. Her warm deep family affection was a spring of wholesome strength. Chiefly she wished she could marry Darnell; and then she tried to think what real benefit this marriage would bring to her dear ones. She could not see that it would do much. How could her mother and Mab live on a stranger's bounty? and how could they live at *all* without her? Then all her novel-reading tended to prove that such marriages seldom turned out as they promised. Nor would it be fair to Mr. Darnell. And at eighteen, how could she condemn herself to an uncongenial life away from the beloved, helpless mother, and Mab?—dear, provoking, incorrigible Mab, whom from the bottom of her heart she loved—slaps notwithstanding.

Her tears were falling fast over a picture conjured up by her imagination of mother and Mab alone in a little house, with no one to cheer the former and suggest pleasant thoughts to her, or even save her from the attacks of the latter, whose troublesome moods were not to be averted, when the door was pushed open, and a small figure, with very much-disordered hair, stole into the room, and crept up to where her sister sat.

'Gracie dear! Why are you crying, Gracie?'

The next instant she was on her sister's knee, and clasped in her arms, while her own hot, grubby little hands were reaching round her neck.

'I am tired, dear, and—and—I am sorry I slapped you, darling; but oh, Mab, you *are* provoking!'

'Yes, I know; but, Gracie dear, I cannot help it,

though I love you. You don't think I do, but I do.' A storm of kisses. 'Why do you try and teach me, Grace? It is not one bit of use. I can't learn. What is the good of it? It only makes me ever so hot and uncomfortable, and you *so* cross! Perhaps I may like lessons when I am older, but I can tell you I shall not learn them till I do.'

'But Mab, you would not wish to be like a street child that has no one to teach it anything?'

'I shouldn't mind,' returned Mab, with much candour.

'I assure you, you will be ashamed *one* day, Mab.'

'It is a long way off,' said Mab, philosophically. 'You would be such a nice dear Gracie, if you didn't bother about lessons. Perhaps when it is cooler I might learn a little; but I tell you what'—with an air of making a great concession—'I will listen if you like to read to me, for Miss Timbs has given me a piece of flannel to make a petticoat for my big doll, and you can help now and then.'

'Why not draw, dearest, instead? You like drawing?'

'Yes; but my doll wants a flannel petticoat, and—oh, I forgot! I was to tell you that Mr. Darnell is downstairs.'

'Well, I cannot see him, Mab; I have a dreadful headache. Say,'—and she rose, putting Mab aside, and throwing herself on her bed—'say I am lying down, and cannot speak to anyone.'

Mab nodded, and was trotting off, when Grace called her back:

'And you *do* love me, Mab?'

'Yes, I *do*!' A long, sweet, loving kiss.

Grace lay still, consoled with the delightful consciousness of complete reconciliation, and resolved to enjoy the rest she needed.

Consequently, Darnell was fain to content himself with a somewhat jerky conversation with Mrs. Frere, and felt very much put out and irritated by Grace's obstinate refusal to appear. He had grown so accustomed to find her always kindly, good-humoured, easy, that he began to look upon her as his own property—virtually, though tacitly, engaged to him. It was impossible, after a fortnight of constant friendly intercourse, that she did not intend to marry him. He had even accepted some chaff from a friend or two, who had noticed his devoted attentions at the ball, with a self-satisfied conscious smirk.

He tried to convey to Mrs. Frere that he felt somewhat injured, and succeeded in making her very uncomfortable; then he started off to pour his troubles into Lady Elton's sympathetic ear, for he had taken her into his confidence at an early stage of the affair, and justly considered her his strongest *point d'appui*.'

Lady Elton was sincerely anxious to bring about a marriage which she considered so advantageous for Grace. Her ladyship's view of that sacred connection was not exalted.

'We make a terrible mistake,' she was wont to say to those with whom she dared to air her opinions, 'in striving to mix up love and marriage.

The French are really much more sensible. If people would but recognise that love—real love—is a state of exaltation, like the inspiration of a grand poem, or a masterpiece of art, which *must* burn itself out, and which lasts only in proportion to the degree of friendship it is capable of evolving! Very few need this, or can give it; and most have home affections—a sense of duty, of interest, of self-respect. These, and the absence of temptation, make by far the larger proportion of family-life pure; but in France there are compensating friendships, and sympathetic affinities, which we dare not permit in England: our animalism is too strong. We have no notion of love that can be satisfied with a milk diet, of mutual comprehension, of mutual interest, and occasional meetings of friendship dashed with the salt of imaginative tenderness—a delicate happiness of which the commonplace necessities of every-day married life are utterly destructive.'

To which exposition, or something like it, wherewith, in one of their many conversations, Lady Elton favoured Grace, that young lady replied rather bluntly:

'I cannot believe the generality of people are so worthless that a little trouble and worry about common things will wear out their affections. I am sure we have had all sorts of trouble since dear grandpapa died, and I believe we are twice as fond of each other.'

'You! yes; but that is not being in love! Child, unless they are exceptional characters, men

almost always behave worst and most falsely to the women they love—yes, really love!'

'What is the use of living if one believes such things?' cried Grace, passionately.

'I am a wretch to talk this treason to you!' said Lady Elton, tenderly. 'And very silly, too, for I only make you uncomfortable, and do not convince you one bit.'

With these opinions deeply and bitterly impressed upon her warm, impassioned, but strongly suppressed nature, Lady Elton was an ardent advocate of Darnell, and to her he now confided his griefs.

He found her carriage at the door, and herself prepared for a round of visits. After excusing himself for his intrusion, and being encouraged to proceed, he broke out with:

'Don't you think it deuced strange that Miss Frere would not see me?'

'Was she at home?'

'Of course she was. She had a headache, they said, and was lying down.'

'Well, I think that is quite explanation enough. You could not expect her to come down and receive you when she was suffering!'

'Oh, she wasn't so bad! She had been teaching that imp of a sister of hers—such a sharp little beggar as it is; she makes me die of laughing sometimes—and it looked as if she wanted to shirk seeing me. I think, considering the terms we are on, she might have seen *me*. I would get out of my coffin if she asked for me.'

'You are a *preux chevalier*, Mr. Darnell,' said

Lady Elton, with a flattering smile; 'but a young lady's view of things is rather different. You know I never misled you with any idea of her being in love with you; she is so young and inexperienced, she does not know what love is: but I quite believe she is to be *won*. And it is not given to every man to have the first of his wife's heart. But you really must have a little more patience; do not startle the game. Let her glide into liking you——'

'She is a long time about it!' growled Darnell.

'Long, my dear Mr. Darnell! Why, it is only a fortnight since the ball. Come, now, be guided by me.'

'Yes, but it is rather hard to be hanging on like this, not knowing how matters are going. I say, Lady Elton, I am so uncertain and miserable, I declare to heaven I will go straight out to-morrow and ask her to make up her mind—if she will take me or leave me!'

'Do not!' cried Lady Elton. 'There are half-a-dozen good reasons why it would be better to wait. It is so difficult even to see her alone in that miserable lodging of theirs. She shall come here next Saturday and stay till Monday. Come in on Sunday morning, and settle everything with her.'

'Settle everything!' repeated Darnell, turning red and radiant. 'Do you think there is a good chance for me then?'

'I believe,' said Lady Elton, oracularly, 'Grace Frere likes you better than she thinks.'

She rose as she spoke, which movement Darnell accepted as a dismissal.

'Ah, Lady Elton!' he exclaimed, 'you understand everyone and everything; and I am sure I can never forget your kindness and sympathy. I feel as if I shall owe all the happiness of my life to you!'

He shook hands warmly and departed.

'I hope he *may* owe me his happiness,' thought Lady Elton, looking after him. 'I must speak seriously to Grace; it is too bad to keep the poor fellow on the stretch, in a state of uncertainty on a question of such vital importance to him. What an odd mixture of romance and common sense, strength and weakness, that girl is! She is open as daylight in most matters; but she can also be silent—and her silence respecting Max Frere is a little suspicious. Now Max Frere's self is a very "Moloch"—a devouring demon! The more a wife loved him, the more miserable he would make her. No *good* woman would ever influence him!'

Her visits over, Lady Elton drove to Camden Hill, and found the party sitting down to tea: Grace considerably better, and busily employed cutting brown bread-and-butter; Randal, somewhat gloomy, sitting apart and reading one of the weekly papers, chiefly remarkable for its bitter libels, clothed in the language of philosophic impartiality.

All brightened at the appearance of their 'guide, philosopher, and friend,' who sat down with them, and exerted her power of amusing and cheering with no small effect. She mentioned Darnell's visit and report of Grace's headache, but in a pleasant, piquant fashion (she had some days since taken Mrs. Frere into her confidence, and found a

hearty ally in that lady). She drew Randal into conversation, and her appreciative remarks and replies chased the gloom from his brow; and she ended by making Grace promise to dine and sleep at her house on the next day but one, which would be Saturday.

'I wonder if there is anyone else in the world who would take all this trouble for people without a claim, without a blood-tie?' began Grace, warmly embracing Lady Elton as she accompanied her to the door.

'I am sure I cannot tell,' interrupted the latter, smiling, 'nor can I account for the attraction you have exercised over me. You provoking puss! to help you in any way is a pleasure to me. If you wish to show me gratitude, accept my guidance.'

'I am sure I do, dear Lady Elton!'

'I hope and expect you *will*, but I am not *sure*.'

A hearty kiss, and she was gone.

The ensuing Saturday Lady Elton's reception was particularly successful. The literary and artistic world was well represented; the fashionables were not so numerous. There was a good deal of music, music of no mean order; and Grace was charmed to listen to some very brilliant conversation, which gave a fresh impetus to the current of her ideas.

The faithful Darnell, of course, came early, and Grace received him so kindly, and expressed her regret at not having been able to see him when he last called, with such friendly frankness, that the

worthy young citizen was immensely comforted and encouraged.

'I think it is all right,' he whispered to Lady Elton, as the guests were departing. 'What a brick of a girl she is! I'll just tell her I will look in to-morrow, before I go.'

'No, Mr. Darnell! take my advice, say nothing about it. Come in by all means, but take her by surprise. You will then see her real feelings.'

Darnell, reduced to silence by the glowing anticipations thus suggested, squeezed the speaker's hand, and, after a confused good-night to Grace, departed.

It was a splendid night. The day had been at once blazing and sultry—a foretaste of July, now close at hand; but at night-fall came a sudden heavy shower, and then a faint breeze had sprung up. It now came in at the window of the study, bringing with it the perfume of the mignonette and heliotrope with which the balcony was filled.

'Take away the lights, Luigi,' said Lady Elton, sinking back in a low easy-chair, when the company were all gone. 'It is only twelve, Grace! Let us sit and talk awhile in this lovely light; the air, too, is delicious.'

'Yes! it would be a sin to go to bed without enjoying it.'

There was a pause. Grace had drawn a small ottoman to the window, and placed herself where the moonlight fell upon her graceful throat and head. Lady Elton's eyes rested on her with kindly admiration.

'What a strange notion it seems,' began Grace,

meditatively. 'I mean what that gentleman with the long grey beard said to-night, that all society, and institutions, and laws, and everything originated in the mutual attraction of male and female for each other; do you believe it?'

'Yes, with considerable reservations.'

'Who is he, Lady Elton? He seems to have studied and to understand everything.'

'He is a Professor Vanhooten, an American; a very clever fellow certainly, with remarkable faith in himself, if in nothing else.'

'What heaps of things there are that I never dreamt of, to know and to learn!'

'I wish to heaven, child, you would learn to know your own mind!' said Lady Elton, with sudden animation.

Grace looked at her in great surprise.

'Do you not see,' resumed her friend, 'that you are treating Mr. Darnell abominably?'

'No, I do not!' returned Grace, stoutly.

'Why, child! you let him haunt you, spend his days with you, load you with favours, consider himself sure of you; and yet I believe you have not decided to accept him. But if you do not, you will behave very ill.'

'You surely exaggerate things, Lady Elton,' said Grace, dismayed, and turning pale. 'I told him we should be glad to see him if he liked to come, but that I did not think it would be any use.'

'Well, of course letting him come at all was decided encouragement. If you felt you could not marry him, why not refuse at once?'

'Because he would not let me. But if it was so likely to deceive him, why did you not warn me?'

'Why!' began Lady Elton, with an unusual expression of anger, but checked herself, and resumed in a carefully modulated voice, 'because I credited you with more common-sense, and superiority to sentimental rubbish, than to suppose you did not finally intend to accept him. Dearest Grace! just look at your position—your mother's—Mab's. What a deliverance such a marriage would be! What a friend to gain for Randal! If I thought you had any prior attachment, I would not urge you so strongly. But really, Darnell is by no means a bad looking young man, and it will be no sacrifice of youth to age. You will mould him to what you like. You may collect a charming circle round you, and show that stiff, contemptuous uncle of yours there is that in you which he cannot keep in obscurity. Then your dear mother! her heart is set on this marriage. You surely would not deprive her of the only gleam of light that can give brightness to her declining years.'

'Don't, Lady Elton—don't!' cried Grace, covering her face with her hands.

The pain expressed in her voice startled her companion, who was silent for a few moments, and then resumed:

'To say nothing of the cruelty and injustice to poor Darnell, who loves you most truly, or he would not set his heart on such a disadvantageous match.'

'I do not see that it is disadvantageous,' cried

Grace, looking up straight into the speaker's eyes. 'I am as well, and better born than he is, as well nurtured, as well educated; and if I have no money, he has plenty. I don't see that he makes any sacrifice.'

'Society would take a different view of it,' said Lady Elton.

'Oh! I don't care about that, or anything else on my own account,' cried Grace, in deep distress. 'I want to do what is best and right, and I don't want to grieve Mr. Darnell either. I like him very well in a way, but to marry him! Oh, Lady Elton, I don't think if we were married he would care much for my mother, and I think he could be rough and cross. I cannot feel to trust him. I believe I could sooner make up my mind to marry that man with the grey beard and the queer notions. I could listen to him talking all day, but Mr. Darnell is—very stupid.'

'My dear Grace, husbands are rarely amusing; and if they were, wives would not think so. All these ideas about sympathy and companionship are far-fetched, and nearly impossible.'

'But you said the other day that nothing was so delightful as the sympathetic companionship of an accomplished man. Does marriage destroy sympathy?'

'Very often; but gives solid compensations.'

For nearly another hour did Lady Elton set forth the merits of Darnell, the delights of the position within Grace's grasp, the duty she owed to her family, the hundred and one advantages to

be gained by such a marriage, till she began to produce an effect upon her listener.

Grace's affection for Lady Elton was warm, her faith in her friend's wisdom and rectitude unbounded.

Perhaps she was selfish in thus rejecting the good fortune offered her; perhaps her instinctive half-distrust of Mr. Darnell was a stupid prejudice; perhaps Lady Elton was right, and the more she knew him and got used to him, the better she would like him.

'I see you are the sensible girl I always believed you were,' said Lady Elton at length, rising, and striking a match to light her bedroom candle. 'Reflect upon all I have said, and do not insult an honest man who loves you, by throwing him over after exhibiting him as your *fiancé*.'

'But I did not!'

'Everyone in the room to-night considered him engaged to you. Believe me, when you have accepted him, you will be much happier. Now, Grace, before we separate for the night, promise me you will not refuse.'

'I will think about it, dearest, kindest Lady Elton! and—and—I believe I ought to marry him!'

'Enough!' cried Lady Elton, enchanted. 'You are not the girl to shrink from doing what you *ought*. Good-night—God bless you!'

'Now,' she thought, as Grace, her long eyelashes heavy with unshed tears, left her, 'let Darnell strike upon this half-melted metal to-morrow, and what between surprise and preparation, it will be an accomplished fact. I think—I am sure I am

doing right: it would be madness to miss such a chance.'

Grace lay long awake, while her lively imagination depicted in the most gloomy colours the future, take which road she might through its threatening shadows. If she rejected what Lady Elton represented as fair fortune for her dear ones and herself, what a weight would be upon her conscience; to what just reproaches would she not leave herself open—self-reproaches, too—the bitterest of all! And if she accepted Darnell, to what life-long loneliness—or worse, irritating accompaniment, not companionship—she would condemn herself; isolated in spirit, yet never free; separated perhaps from those she loved by a dozen invisible barriers! Oh, better a thousand times work with them—struggle, starve, unfettered by claims and duties she could never fulfil! Then her distrust of Darnell suggested gruesome visions of possible unkindness and estrangement; and so in the short darkness of the summer night her fancy piled up images of woe, till she sobbed herself to sleep.

'Do you want particularly to go to church this morning, Grace?' asked Lady Elton, after their late breakfast the next morning. She had avoided all allusion to their conversation of the night before, but watching her young friend narrowly, thought she traced symptoms of a mental conflict.

'No. There is scarcely time, and I can go this evening with my mother and Mab.'

'Very well! as I have some letters to write,

rather difficult letters, I shall write in my own special room, and leave you in the company I know you like. There are some excellent papers in the *Westminster Review.* And, dear child! I do not wish to force your confidence in any way, but have you thought of all I said last night?'

'I have,' returned Grace, with a low sigh.

'And do you not think I am right?'

'I believe you are.'

'Then you will act accordingly?'

'Yes—if Mr. Darnell persists.'

'Which of course he will. I feel sure, then, of your future; it will be free from the carking cares of poverty which degrade and debase.'

'They need not,' said Grace; but Lady Elton did not stop to listen: she swept quickly from the room, and Grace somewhat listlessly took up a *Review.*

Meantime Lady Elton seated herself at her writing-table, and set forth pen and paper. Yet her letter did not progress; she seemed a little on the watch, slightly restless.

At length Luigi entered:

'Mr. Darnell, miladi.'

'Ah, where have you put him?'

'He is in the study, miladi, with Miss Frere.'

'My compliments! I beg him to excuse me: I have letters of importance to answer.' Luigi disappeared.

'I think all will go well,' she mused, as she dipped her pen in the ink. Then glancing at a large old-fashioned, highly ornamented watch, which hung on a rococo stand beside her, she

smiled. 'I will note the time occupied by a modern declaration. Having broken the ice before, he is already within the intrenchments. All must go well. I have brought her into the right frame of mind: he has only to go in and win. Foolish child! Poverty is bad for everyone, but it is annihilation for a woman, who never can rise out of it without a man's help. How unfortunate it is that one cannot put the real bare truths of life before a young creature whose whole future depends upon her recognition of them! Yet if one did, would not the knowledge kill out youth? And youth, with its woes, and wilfulness, and mistakes, is priceless.'

She wrote on for awhile, then again glanced at the watch; nearly half an hour had elapsed. 'All goes well, no doubt,' she thought, and applied herself to her writing with renewed interest for perhaps ten or fifteen minutes; then she was startled by the distant violent shutting to of a door, which shook the house. Before she ceased to conjecture what could have caused the unwonted sound, Grace came into the room and walked straight up to her writing-table—Grace with crimson cheeks and moist glowing eyes.

'Well, my love,' began Lady Elton, blandly, 'I suppose I am to congratulate the future——'

'I do not know what you will say to me,' cried Grace, interrupting her with a somewhat excited voice. 'But—but, I fear I have been rather rude and abrupt; and he is gone away in a rage.'

CHAPTER XIV.

AN awful silence ensued. Lady Elton's face grew set and hard, yet she mastered her rising anger until she should get at the root of the matter.

'You mean to tell me you have definitively rejected Mr. Darnell?'

'Yes, quite! he will never speak to me again.'

'I certainly cannot congratulate you on your fixity of purpose,' said Lady Elton, bitterly. 'It is scarcely an hour since you confessed that it was your *duty* to marry Mr. Darnell.'

'I know,' cried Grace, 'and I did think I ought. So he talked and talked—oh, a great deal of nonsense! I tried to like him and think it nice, and I had begun to smile and say how good I thought him, when all of a sudden he attempted to throw his arms round me' (the crimson cheeks became a shade more crimson); 'and then, Lady Elton, I knew I could not, dare not marry him. I thrust him away rather roughly, and told him straight out

I could not, and would not have anything to do with him! He was awfully angry, and spoke so rudely that I said if he could not remember I was a lady, he had better go away. And he did, slamming the door in such a fury—did you not hear it?'

Lady Elton made no reply. She walked away down the room and back again in silence. Then she said in a tone Grace had not heard from her before:

'I never anticipated such a finale. I consider that you have utterly, perhaps intentionally, deceived me. You have not been candid; there is some preference, some concealed preference which interferes with Darnell. Come, I will give you one more chance of fortune, and my friendship—let me try to bring Darnell back; it might be done.'

'I would do nearly anything for your friendship, Lady Elton,' returned Grace, the colour fading from her cheeks, and her heart beating audibly, 'but this, I will *not!* I am ashamed of having been so nearly persuaded against my own instinct, but now I will change no more.'

Lady Elton rang the bell. 'As you will,' she said in a low, concentrated voice; 'but you will also excuse me if I decline in future to interfere in your affairs.' (To Luigi, who appeared in answer to the bell: 'Miss Frere will want a cab in a quarter of an hour.' Luigi bowed, and retired. 'As you have made up *your* mind, and I have made up *mine*, we need waste no words; the sooner we separate the better. You have cruelly

disappointed me. I thought after the care and affection I have lavished on you, that you would be guided by me—that you would have had faith in my experience and judgment. As it is'—an expressive break—'I presume you will be ready to return home in a few minutes?'

'What!' cried Grace, who had been almost stunned by the stern earnestness of Lady Elton's manner. 'Are you going to turn me from your house because, in a matter so vital to me, I dare to follow the impulse of my own feelings? Lady Elton, you are not just! I know I have behaved badly—that unintentionally I have misled you; but—I do *not* deserve this!' Great tears rolled down her cheeks, yet her voice, though slightly shaken, was still distinct. 'Has no girl before me disappointed the projects of her elders—aye, and proved herself right in the end?' she went on, with increasing warmth. 'Surely your own youth is not so far off that you cannot feel its promptings still! Did you never yield to your own impulse?'

'Yes!' said Lady Elton, turning fiercely on her, 'and have ever since cursed the day I did. Had I at your age, and later, had such a friend as you have in me, I should have listened to her, and been saved. Do not speak to me any more; I cannot bear to hear or see you at present. Go—leave me!'

'You may be severe and unjust,' exclaimed Grace; 'but I shall always love you, and think of you with gratitude and pleasure; and—and—I *will* kiss you before I go.'

So saying, in spite of Lady Elton's surprised

resistance, she embraced her vehemently, covering her brow and cheek with kisses, then darted away to her own room to prepare for her departure.

That return home in disgrace, and at variance with her warmly loved and profoundly admired friend, was nearly the bitterest and most vivid of Grace's varied memories in after-years. It was difficult, too, to face her mother.

Grace dreaded the unspoken reproach of her sad, simple, downcast face infinitely more than Lady Elton's worst words. Mrs. Frere had in truth built largely on her marriage with Darnell. To her somewhat primitive ideas, innocent as she was of any notion that women—gentlewomen—could be independent and self-supporting, a rich husband was the only deliverer by which a girl could be lifted out of the slough of despond, from the mire and clay of poverty, to the rock of wealth and importance. She had also a vague opinion that if a husband was easy-tempered and generous, there was no further need of higher qualifications. Darnell promised to fulfil these requirements—besides, he was fairly good-looking for a *bon parti*—and what more could Grace want?

It was an infinite relief to find Jimmy Byrne already installed, and the cloth laid for dinner. A respite was thus secured. If Jimmy would only take Mab and Randal out to walk, and leave her alone with her mother, it would be an enormous help.

After a hasty greeting Grace ran upstairs to

remove her bonnet, and also what traces of tears remained. But tears with Grace were rare, and came usually in a short thunder-shower. Even on this terrible occasion they had soon passed away; and the drive to Albert Crescent, with the window of the cab open, had left but few signs; only a heightened colour which made her eyes sparkle, and evoked an exclamation from Jimmy Byrne.

'Ah, Miss Grace, I'm sure the Dungar roses *can* bloom in London, in spite of the smoke!'

'Oh, I am flushed; it is very warm to-day!'

'And had you a pleasant party yesterday?' asked Mrs. Frere, with a curious lingering look; she fancied her daughter had something to communicate which she would not impart before the general public.

'Yes, charming. There were a number of clever people, foreigners and Americans.'

'Was Darnell there?' asked Randal.

'Oh yes, of course; he always is.'

'He is an elegant young man,' remarked Jimmy, with profound approbation. 'I'm told Sir Henry Darnell has bought a beautiful place for him near Leatherhead.'

'Some of the fellows in our office seem to think I am an intimate friend of his,' said Randal; 'they have asked me no end of questions about him. It is confoundedly snobbish, but his acquaintance seems a sort of patent of nobility.'

'It is a mighty influential firm, faith!' said Byrne.

'By the way, mother,' resumed Randal, 'one of our fellows gives a little dinner at Greenwich to-

day, and asked me—seven o'clock, I believe—you won't mind if I go as soon as the cloth is removed.'

'No, dear Randal; only I hope they are nice people for you to associate with.'

'Oh, nice enough! very jolly. Their "h's" get misplaced sometimes, but they are uncommon civil; evidently see that I am a touch above them, and treat me with great respect; there is no use in giving one's self airs——'

'No, certainly not!' said Mrs. Frere.

Grace did not speak, though she felt an instinctive dislike and distrust towards the society thus described.

'I say!' cried Randal, who had been examining his purse, 'could you give me ten bob, mother? These buses run away with such a heap of money.'

'Ten shillings!' repeated Mrs. Frere, evidently upset by the request.

'Ten shillings, Mr. Randal!' exclaimed Jimmy. 'Ah, how is a lady to have change of a Sunday morning? I have a nate little gold bit here, Mrs. Frere, ma'am, and Mr. Randal can bring it to me any time he is passing by the office.'

'You are really very obliging, Mr. Byrne; but, Randal, don't you think you might make five do?'

'It all comes to the same, mother dear; I shall want the balance for buses.'

'I am sure,' said Mrs. Frere to Byrne, 'I hope they will soon give Randal some salary, for we are nearly ruined with omnibuses and luncheons.'

'We might put up a sandwich for him every day,' said Grace.

'Oh, that looks so deuced shabby!' cried Randal. 'Why, the poorest chap among the clerks goes to a bar for luncheon.'

'Well, Mr. Randal, you'll excuse *me*, sir, but I'd just not be too ready to go along with those clerks of Cartwright's; some of them are a trifle unsteady. We do business for the principal, and our young men give rather a queer account of them.'

'Then, Randal dear, do not go to this dinner; keep away,' said Grace.

'Oh, that is impossible! I promised faithfully, and Wilkins depends on me for "Molly Carew;" they say I sing it equal to any of the music-hall fellows.'

'On a Sunday!' cried Mrs. Frere, aghast.

'Why, where did they hear you?' asked Grace.

'The night I went to supper with Anderson; when I did not come home till after one.'

There was silence after this, broken only by a portentous 'hem' from Jimmy Byrne; till Randal rose, bid them 'good-bye,' pocketed the half-sovereign offered him by the family friend, and left the room.

'Here, Mab, Randal has dropped his handkerchief; take it to him, dear.'

'Why should I take him his handkerchief?'

'Do, dear. Do it because mamma asks you, Mabel.'

'He might come for it himself,' returned Mab, rising reluctantly to obey her mother's behest.

'Will you do me a great favour, Jimmy?' cried Grace, as soon as the little rebel was out of hearing

(she had long ago discarded the formality of 'Mr. Byrne,' which Mrs. Frere never dropped). 'Will you take Mab out for a walk? She is always so pleased to go with you.'

'Indeed, an' I will, Miss Grace dear; in an hour, if that is time enough. It is so thundering hot just now.'

'To be sure, whenever you like. Here she comes, you ask her yourself.'

The hour that intervened, though shortened by Mabel's impatience, seemed appallingly long to Grace; but at last she was alone with her mother, in the quiet room which she had put straight, and darkened into comfortable coolness. Then Mrs. Frere's gentle question, 'What have you to tell me, Grace?' drew out, in a broken *staccato* fashion, the impending revelation.

A very bad half-hour indeed ensued. At first poor disappointed Mrs. Frere strove to be composed and high-minded, while the lace lappets of her cap quivered with the violent beating of her heart.

'Of course, dear—of course if you feel you cannot give him that affection which you ought, you were right to refuse; but oh, Grace, were you not too hasty? What an excellent marriage for you, and what a cru—u—el disappointment!' and the dam of resolution was carried away in a burst of sobs. 'I do not blame you, dear, but as you care for no one else, don't you think you might in time have come to love poor Mr. Darnell? I am sure I see nothing but misery and poverty before us. I

have only five pounds left, and there are four weeks due to the butcher. Then Lady Elton will never forgive you, and she was our only friend. How unfortunate it is that you could not like him. It would have put everything straight.'

'I cannot see that. We could not all have lived upon Mr. Darnell. He might have helped Randal, but otherwise he would have only taken me away; and what could you do without me? I think it must be dreadful to marry a man so much richer than your own people. Every want of theirs would seem a reproach to you; and yet how bitter to see them mere encumbrances to one's husband! Oh, mother dear, do not be angry with me! I am so unhappy!'

'Angry with you! No, my own Gracie!' cried Mrs. Frere, her true heart touched by this unwonted confession from the generally self-sufficing daughter, whose equable spirits sometimes suggested to the more excitable, timid mother, want of feeling. 'Angry with you? You who do everything for me! Only if you could have married Mr. Darnell, dear, I might have known some rest in the end of my days; but God's will be done! He gave and He has taken away,' she said, brokenly, with an instinctive recurrence to the formulas of religious consolation, as a South African would murmur a medicine fetish; and again she covered her face and wept.

Grace soothed her with loving tenderness, and spoke hopeful words which almost deceived herself. She pointed out the true wealth of their family

affection, their small needs, of the economies that improved knowledge and extended experience would enable them to make of the fair hopes opening to Randal in his new employ.

'I dare say they will turn him away when they know you have rejected Mr. Darnell!' ejaculated Mrs. Frere.

'Oh, mother, that is too absurd! and then you must try and make it up with Lady Elton. Though I am awfully angry with her for turning against me, and being unjust and unkind, she *has* been wonderfully good to us.'

'What can I do or say, Grace? no one minds me, and I am afraid she thinks you deceived her.'

'But I did not; I could not help myself, no more than the water can help rippling when the wind blows over it.'

'That is nonsense, Grace, if you had really made up your mind!'

'I thought I had, indeed I did! Come, mother dear, let us compose a letter to Lady Elton; I feel quite lost and broken-hearted at the idea of a real quarrel with her. I never loved anyone so much —after *you* all. It is a pleasure to me to look at her and hear her talk.'

Mrs. Frere shook her head and shed more tears. Then Grace brought her writing materials, but her mother, after spoiling a few sheets of note-paper, declared she was too nervous to think clearly; so Grace seized the pen herself, and poured forth her genuine feelings in an ardent unstudied letter, worth a dozen concocted epistles. And then Mrs.

Frere said her head ached so severely that she would go and lie down. Grace must make her excuses to Mr. Byrne; which Grace did, and if the truth be told, passed a more cheerful evening than she had dared to hope for, in the society of the kindly little man. They talked of Dungar and its dear lost master—of some of Jimmy's remarkable experiences in the great office of Steenson and Gregg, which he related with point and humour. However, though carefully suppressing any sign of having perceived it, Jimmy did perceive that something unusual and unpleasant had occurred, and so took his leave early. Thus the unhappy day ended; and Grace, having administered a final cup of tea to her mother, and smoothed the coverlet over the restless though sleeping Mab, reflected as she extinguished her candle, that bad as all had been, how infinitely worse was the ill she had escaped—a positive engagement to Mr. Darnell!

Come what might of poverty and struggle, she was free—free to work and to endure for those she loved, unencumbered by the awful weight of distasteful duties. But Grace might have saved her eloquence, and her tear-bedewed epistle to Lady Elton. The mid-day post brought Mrs. Frere a letter from that lady—a terribly distinct and decided letter. She expressed her utter disappointment and disenchantment very freely—spoke of the heartless conduct of Grace to Mr. Darnell, and her own shame thereat—of her regret at this unpleasantness separating her from Mrs. Frere (whom she held blameless), because in her present frame of

mind personal contact would certainly embitter and perpetuate the indignation which perhaps time and absence would enable her to overcome. With this object, and also to avoid gossip, she was resolved to go to Paris, ostensibly to meet a Russian friend whose arrival there was announced ; that she would probably not return to London till late in the autumn, and then only to pass through ; finally, that she would leave town on the following Wednesday.

'The day after to-morrow!' cried Mrs. Frere, laying down the letter.

An icy feeling of despair fell upon Grace as she finished this cruel letter—a sense of helplessness and desertion—a sudden fear of the future and its ungauged difficulties—the dawning of painful doubt as to whether she had done well in yielding to her own impulses, when a friend, wise, experienced, kind as Lady Elton, could condemn her so severely —a consciousness that she had estranged a powerful ally for her friendless family. Who had they now to stand by them in the wide world of London but little Jimmy Byrne? For a bitter hour she took in, in its fulness, the horror of desolation she had brought upon them.

But she dared not breathe her fears to her mother. Dearly as she loved her, she never dreamed of looking to her for help. She would not be so cruel as to crush a nature so tender, so simple, so fragile, with the weight of her own reasonable anticipations. Grace could give help and protection too, without their frequent accompaniment of

contempt. Hers was the true chivalry which can be loving and loyal to the weakness that leans upon it, so the courage she simulated came to her in reality.

Dark clouds never hang long on the horizon of youth; to them the unknown is almost always bright, even when the brightness is fitful. A sense of wrong, of being unjustly treated, helped to sustain her; and then when she re-read the letter, hope began to clear away a tiny blue space in the clouded sky.

'See, dear mother! Lady Elton evidently intends to try and conquer her anger and be friends again; and when she has time to think, she will see she has been unjust to me. We must leave her alone, and say nothing to Randal.'

'Oh, we must, Grace! he will suspect something. I—I did speak to him this morning. You were not in the room when he came in to breakfast, so I told him.'

'I wish you could have avoided it. He was dreadfully late. When did he come in last night?'

'I am sure I do not know,' said the mother, evasively. 'I told him he had better not speak to you about it.'

'What did he say himself?'

'Oh! he was very much astonished that Mr. Darnell wished to marry you, and thought you terribly foolish to refuse.'

There the matter ended. Both Grace and Mrs. Frere avoided the vexed subject of Mr. Darnell.

With the amazing adaptability of nature, the shipwrecked family settled into their new routine, no longer enlivened by glimpses of the gay world; and Grace tried hard not to regret them, not to feel at times how bitter it was to be cut off by inexorable circumstance, through no fault of her own, from the amusements, society, and surroundings properly belonging to her age and station. She did her best to teach and bear with Mab, sometimes with success, which cheered her; sometimes with signal failure, which depressed and irritated. Randal was tolerably satisfactory and content. He had had more letters to translate and answer, and was promised pay and a regular engagement at the end of three months from the time of his entering the office. As yet, then, there was no sign of that dismissal, in revenge for Grace's rejection of Darnell, which Mrs. Frere anticipated.

Some little gleams of pleasure lightened the dull atmosphere of the month which followed Lady Elton's departure: an expedition to Hampton Court in which Mrs. Frere joined, and a visit to the theatre in which she did not, both under the guidance of the indefatigable Jimmy.

Meantime, Uncle Frere and Max made no sign. In spite of every attempt to cheer and please her, Mrs. Frere was persistently downcast, despairing, and miserable. Grace observed, too, that her melancholy was on the increase, and began to fear she was, or would be, seriously ill.

At last matters culminated.

One morning, at breakfast, Mrs. Frere found a

letter with the Dublin postmark, at one side of her plate, and an ominous-looking open paper with Miss Timbs's compliments at the other. It was a polite request for the quarter's rent, due the day before, as Miss Timbs was herself pressed for money.

Poor Mrs. Frere grew very red; she opened her letter with a trembling hand. It was short, and apparently not very satisfactory. Mrs. Frere laid it down, and began stirring her tea round and round and round, unconsciously.

'Why, "mummy," you are not eating your breakfast and not minding what you are about, just like me,' cried Mab.

Grace looked up, and saw big tears on her mother's cheek.

'If you have finished, Mab, will you run upstairs and dust the mother's room for her?'

'No, I won't!' said Mab; 'you want to get rid of me, and I want to stay with my mummy, because she is unhappy. Why are you crying, mother dear? there's a big tear just dropped into your cup;' and Mab hastened to wipe her mother's face with a much-tumbled handkerchief.

'Oh, there is no use in concealing anything now!' sobbed Mrs. Frere, clasping the child to her. 'My poor helpless darling! we shall all have to go to prison. I foresaw this, and I wrote to your Aunt d'Arcy. She thought she could help me, and now she is disappointed: she cannot send me one farthing. And nothing coming till September! while this dreadful bill, and the butcher's and other little

things—why, it will take thirty pounds to pay them all.'

'But, dear mother, have you nothing left?' exclaimed Grace, appalled by this revelation.

She had never thought of inquiring into the state of their finances, nor noticed that her mother had been unusually reserved about them, an inadvertence for which she reproached herself, while Mab declared with tears her intention of scratching any gaoler's eyes out who attempted to touch her mother.

'Left!' repeated Mrs. Frere, in a broken voice; 'I have seventeen sh—shillings and fourpence halfpenny, and Randal has had two or three half-sovereigns from Mr. Byrne. What are we to do, Grace? what *are* we to do?'

'We must think quietly and do the best we can,' said poor Grace, trying to speak with composure, while she trembled all over. 'Let us go up to your room where we can speak more safely, and I will send away the breakfast-things.'

'Very well,' said Mrs. Frere, rising with the obedience of a frightened child. 'Oh, Grace dear, there is no help for it!' she exclaimed, when they reached the haven indicated, and all three clung together on a rickety sofa which Miss Timbs had with much pomp added to the scanty furniture on their becoming quarterly tenants. 'I must apply to your Uncle Frere.'

'Mother, no! let us try anything and everything first. If we could only see Jimmy Byrne! He is so busy now, one of the other chief clerks is away; but

let me go in with Mab and send up a little note to ask if he can come out this evening.'

'What, go to an office alone! Suppose you met anyone you knew?'

'Mother dear, who knows us—me? and in such an emergency we must not stick at trifles. Yes, Mab and I will go in at once to Jimmy, and you might tell Miss Timbs that we will pay her next Monday. But mother, please promise me, no application to Uncle Frere until we have tried *everything* else.'

After a little further discussion, many embraces, and not a few tears, the programme was adopted, with the slight alteration of shifting the task of communicating with Miss Timbs to Grace's shoulders.

That excellent woman received the announcement of probable delay in the payment of her rent with scarcely veiled dissatisfaction.

'Well, 'm,' she said, addressing Mrs. Frere, although Grace was the speaker, 'I hope it *will* be convenient for you to settle on Monday; for I have waited, if you will excuse my saying so, three months already.'

'I shall be most happy to pay you before if I receive the money,' said poor Mrs. Frere, limply.

'Anyhow, on Monday, certing,' returned Miss Timbs, taking a sharp, quick survey of the room; and pouncing on a small tray and a duster left behind by the delinquent Sarah, she walked off, condemnation in every footfall.

'She does not seem pleased,' said Mrs. Frere to Grace, when she was out of hearing.

'Not very; but she will be all right when we can pay her, and three or four days cannot matter much.'

It was a long hot journey to Finsbury Square, and when it was accomplished they found Jimmy absent. He had been sent down to the country to attend to some business consequent on the death of an old country gentleman client; but he was expected at the office next morning.

Grace almost dreaded to meet her mother with such a tale to unfold. But, to her relief, a change for the better seemed to have passed over Mrs. Frere. Her eyes showed signs of much weeping, but her voice and manner were less despairing—indeed, were almost cheerful. Mrs. Frere could not dissemble—she was far too deficient in the requisite self-control; and Grace, knowing her extreme timidity and tendency to exaggerate difficulties into horrors, felt certain that something had occurred to give her mother fresh hope and courage.

'Teli me, dearest mother, has anything happened? You seem more at ease than when we went out.'

'Nothing, Grace! I have just been thinking, how the wind is tempered to the shorn lamb!'

'And you have kept your word to me? You have not written to Uncle Frere?'

'I have not, indeed! Am I in the habit of breaking my word to you, Grace?'

'No—no; but I am sure you would like to write to Uncle Frere, and if we must—we must. However, pray let it be a last resource.'

'It is most unfortunate that Mr. Byrne is away,' said Mrs. Frere, as if willing to change the subject, 'and *so* unusual.'

To this Grace assented; and then Mrs. Frere settled calmly to her needlework, and even took an interest in the novel which Grace proposed to read aloud, with a view to drawing her mother's thoughts from the contemplation of painful matters which contemplation could not mend. For circumstance and a certain instinctive power of observation had early initiated Grace Frere into the art of ministering to a mind not diseased, but disquieted and 'sore smitten.' This unwonted fortitude suggested ideas of extraneous aid surreptitiously invoked; but Grace, after one thrill of delight at the idea of some unexpected romantic reconciliation with Lady Elton, dismissed the subject from her thoughts, thankful to accept the respite thus afforded her.

Randal took the news of their being left financially high and dry with much equanimity.

'When Jimmy comes he will advise something,' he said. 'Anyhow, mother, you always have Uncle Frere under your lee; and I don't see why Grace should be so shocked about applying to him. Why, he is the nearest relation we have in the world, and we have cost him nothing as yet! I think he and Max have behaved deucedly shabby. How long did Max stay at Dungar? Months, by George! and he has never called here but once.'

'However, Randal, Uncle Frere would have given you immediate employment, and——'

'Well, I preferred getting it through my own merits—at least, by my friends. By the way, mother, I am to begin on the 1st of August at twenty-one shillings a week. What do you think of that?'

'You must pay for your own omnibus and luncheon then!' cried Mabel.

'If we can only get through this awful—— crisis,' said Mrs. Frere, after hesitating for a word, 'I have no doubt we shall get on.'

'I wish *I* could do anything,' said Grace, musingly, and in a tone of deep depression.

'The only thing you can do, you won't,' returned Randal, carelessly, yet with a touch of bitterness in his voice.

Grace flushed angrily, but glancing at Mab, resolutely closed the lips that had already opened to utter an angry retort. And Randal, with the facility of his easy nature, passed to other topics, and related how much some sarcastic lines he had written on old Brown, the manager, had been admired by his brother clerks.

Next morning's second delivery brought a line from the faithful Jimmy, promising to be with them that evening, but not till eight o'clock.

'Thank heaven! we shall see dear old Jimmy to-night,' cried Grace, looking up. 'Why, what have *you* got, mother?' she continued, catching sight of Mrs. Frere reading a note with a radiant face.

'There!' she replied triumphantly; 'I always

said Max was a well-disposed, well-bred young man. After you went out yesterday, I thought of writing to him, as you could not object to *that*, for he must have plenty of money; and here, he sends me a cheque for fifty pounds, with such a nice note. Read it, dear! you will be quite pleased! You see, after all, I *can* do something.'

CHAPTER XV.

THE enigma of Mrs. Frere's cheerfulness was solved. 'Mother!' was all Grace could utter, and then she stood still and silent for a couple of seconds, the blood surging up to her head, her heart beating to suffocation, her hands icy cold, her whole being suddenly crushed with an overwhelming sense of defeat and humiliation. Alms from Max! and begged for by her own mother! This was a depth of degradation she had never anticipated. With a confused whirl of memory, a short agony of contrast between past and present, she went down into hell for one of those mystic moments which are ages of experience and instants of time! Then, with a strong effort, she drew herself together, and cried in a tone the anguish of which struck Mrs. Frere as incomprehensible.

'Mother! how could you do it? Why, it is a thousand times worse than asking my uncle. Max, who has treated us so consistently as poor relations

—mere unnecessary items!—to ask Max! Oh, I would have starved first! How—how can we ever repay him!'

She sat down, and leaning her elbows on the table, covered her face with her hands.

'But Grace,' said Mrs. Frere, half frightened by the emotion her daughter exhibited, 'do read the note; you will see there is really nothing to trouble yourself about: nothing can be kinder and nicer.'

Grace held out her hand, took it with a shuddering reluctant touch, and read:

'MY DEAR AUNT,

'I have just come in, and found yours. I am very happy to meet your wishes, and as you do not name any sum, enclose a cheque for fifty pounds—the amount, I think, my father ought to have sent you, as Randal has fulfilled the condition of finding employment, though not in our house. However, I I shall not mention the matter, as you wish it kept between us. Pray do not trouble yourself about repayment. I am very pleased to be of use to you, and return, in some small degree, the kindness for which I am your debtor. Very glad to hear Randal is doing well. Love to Grace.

'Yours very sincerely,

'MAXWELL FRERE.'

Grace let the note fall, and kept silence.

'You see, dear,' urged Mrs. Frere, after a short pause, 'we need not trouble about paying it back. It is quite true, I am sure, what Max says about

his being pleased to help us, and so it ought to be. He is our nearest relative; we have always been very kind to him; and he has plenty of money. I do not see why you should distress yourself so much.'

'Don't you?' said Grace, rising and coming over to the window, out of which she gazed vacantly; 'I cannot explain it to you, then. If I shrank from confessing to Uncle Frere that we mismanaged things and got into debt, it is a thousand times worse to put ourselves under the feet of his son, who throws us help as one gives broken meat to a beggar whom you feed on the door-step, but will not admit within your home! He was like a son and a brother to us at Dungar. Why not give us a little time, a little interest *here*, where we are so alone? Oh, mother! send it back! If you care for me—if you would save me the bitterest mortification—let me send it back! We must repay it one day. Why not make whatever sacrifice is to be made at once? I have been thinking so hard, and surely among your lace and trinkets there is something to sell—something we can do without; but I feel as if it would suffocate me—as if my whole life would have a bitter taste if this horrid thing is not sent back.'

'Send it back, Grace!' repeated Mrs. Frere, almost stunned by the passionate vehemence with which Grace poured out this appeal. 'What is to become of us if I do?'

A long tearful argument ensued, which ended, of course, by the stronger will prevailing; though

Grace by no means succeeded in convincing her mother—she only forced her into most reluctant submission; but as a kind of protest, she positively refused to be instrumental in such a distinct rebellion against the will of Providence. On Grace's head be it—Grace must write the note in which the cheque was to be enclosed. With some pride in even this slight resistance, Mrs. Frere, in deep grief and displeasure, retired to her own room with Mab, and her Bible, from the pages of which she no doubt drew some of the consolation that is the reward of simple, unhesitating faith.'

Mab, who came in for too much of the scene above described, was furious against Grace for contradicting 'mummy,' and making her cry.

'Just like your conceit!' she said. 'Mother knows everything much better than you; if I were her I should box your ears.' And she never passed her sister in her many excursions into the sitting-room to get her work, or drawing-book, or beloved doll, without pulling her hair, or giving her a knock with her small elbows—assaults which Grace bore with much patience, till at length one of Mab's sudden attacks sent a huge blot from the pen to the paper her sister was writing upon, when she at last broke out with:

'Go away, Mab! you are an ill-natured, disagreeable little monkey! You cannot understand what is the matter. Do you suppose I do not love the mother better than you do?'

Mab made an audacious grimace and ran away.

Then Grace settled really to the difficult task of

writing to Max. After several attempts, she was at last fain to be content with the following:

'DEAR MAX,

'I am so sorry my mother troubled you with our affairs! You know how nervous and easily frightened she is; and if her purse is not quite full, she thinks she must go to prison. I hope, however, that we can manage quite well without trespassing on you, and therefore return the enclosed cheque, with many thanks to you for sending it so promptly. My mother desires her love; and I am,

'Yours very truly,

'GRACE FRERE.'

Then she went out and posted it herself, returnning to the house with a wonderful sense of relief, though still sore at the idea of her mother having placed herself thus at the feet of her foe.

It seemed a very long weary day of waiting till the time of Jimmy Byrne's promised visit came.

Mrs. Frere was inconsolable, and would eat no dinner, to her daughter's infinite distress; while she assumed a tone of hopeless resignation, as to martyrdom incurred in a good cause.

'Do not trouble about me, Grace,' she said, when urged to eat, or coaxed and soothed. 'I am but an encumbrance—a useless burden; I see it more and more every day. Even the small services which I could render are rejected and undervalued. No one, I believe, except my poor Mabel, would miss

me; but for her sake, I should not care how soon it may be God's will to take me!'

'Dearest mother, how can you say such things!' Grace would reply. 'You are cruel to me. You know how desolate we all should be without you; and I am sure Randal would be as much vexed as I if you had kept that cheque. Let us say no more; and depend upon it, Jimmy Byrne will suggest something.'

'What can he suggest, unless he can get us money?'

And so on, *da capo.*

With all his generosity and goodness, Jimmy Byrne was yet too human to resist an emphatic '*I told you so*,' when Grace unfolded the state of affairs, as they sat in a committee of ways and means over some iced claret-cup, compounded by Randal for the refreshment of their guest and himself.

'I told you so!—didn't I now, Miss Grace?—when your dear mamma' (Jimmy would not call her 'mother' on any account) 'was so pleased to get the cash from Ireland, the rainy day was sure to come, for all the putting off. And it's a brute I am for reminding you of it! Now, what we have to do is—to see what's to be done;' and Jimmy, drawing his coat-tails from beneath him with a sudden jerk, pulled his chair to the table resolutely, and with a cheerful countenance. 'I suppose, Mrs. Frere, ma'am, you want between thirty and forty pounds to put you straight, and carry you on till the next gale (*i.e.* quarter's rent) comes in?'

'Forty?—yes; but where on earth shall we get it, and how can we repay it?' said Mrs. Frere, despairingly.

'The fellows in our office seem to get money quite easily,' said Randal, with an air of superior experience. 'They draw bills on each other—at least some of them—and then some one else cashes them; and by-and-by they are renewed, and so on, and they needn't pay for ever so long.'

'Lord presarve us!' cried Jimmy, in tones of profound horror. 'Mr. Randal, don't you be led away by them reckless blāguards—if you'll pardon the word, Mrs. Frere. Them bills is just a spider's web, and the creatures that's caught in them has their blood sucked out till they drop, disgraced, and—and bedivilled, into an early grave! Have nothing to do with them, Mr. Randal—don't let 'em touch ye, or ye'll sup sorrow!' and the moisture stood in the speaker's honest black eyes, his earnestness giving force to his short pathetic face, with its shaggy eyebrows, and wide, rugged mouth so kindly, nay, almost tender, in the expression of its down-curved corners.

'Oh, I can take care of myself!' returned Randal, carelessly. 'But let us go on; how can we get this forty pounds?'

'Ahem! You see, Mrs. Frere, ma'am, I have been on the whole a successful man in my small way; and I need not tell you, ma'am, who I have to thank for it. Then my poor mother has been dead these six years and more—besides my father's brother that was bedridden for twelve years, but

was wonderful hearty, and knitted stockings to the last.'

Here Jimmy paused; and Grace, who was listening breathlessly, wondered what possible connection there could be between his late mother, his bedridden uncle, and their present necessities.

'So you see, ma'am, that for years I have had no call upon me, and I have saved a trifle—faith, a snug trifle!—and I'm sure I will let you have forty pound with all the pleasure in life! and a proud man I am to be of any use to your father's daughter.'

'But, Jimmy dear!——' began Grace.

'Oh, Mr. Byrne!' broke in Mrs. Frere, with a little tinge of bitterness, 'there is no use in speaking to Grace; her pride is quite unreasonable."

'But, Miss Grace jewil!' cried Jimmy, growing very Irish in his eagerness, 'sure, you might as well pay me five per cent. as a stranger. I'd take a regular acknowledgment, and Mr. Randal here should be security—and sure, Miss Grace, you wouldn't be so unkind——'

'Oh no, Jimmy!' cried Grace, taking his hand, 'it is not that; but shifting the debt from one to another will do no good. Why should we rob such a friend as you? Just listen to me, and look at these. I know my mother will forgive me for taking them; but could we not get some money for these?' she opened a purple velvet case, and displayed her mother's pearl necklace, brooch and ear-rings.

'What!' Mrs. Frere almost shrieked. 'My

pearls! Your dear father's first gift! Oh, Grace! I never thought you could propose such a thing—it seems like sacrilege. No! I cannot—cannot part with them!'

Grace with a slight gesture of despair sat down in silence, while Mrs. Frere sobbed; and Randal exclaimed:

'You are too hard on the mother.'

'Faith! they are beauties,' said Jimmy, covering his distress at this scene by affecting a critical and admiring examination of the jewels.

'Everything must go,' ejaculated Mrs. Frere; 'even what I have held most sacred.'

'See now, Miss Grace! What's the use of breaking your dear mamma's heart when I am ready and willing to let her have what she wants?' urged Jimmy Byrne.

'But, mother!' cried Grace, clasping her hands in earnest imploring, 'just think how dreadful it would be to take Jimmy's money and not be able to pay him, which we never could do unless you sold the pearls—they *must* go sooner or later. Do you think my dear father would not rather you made use of them than let them lie in their cases? All I entreat is that you will not take Jimmy's money, or anyone's money. Help me to persuade her,' she concluded, turning to Byrne and taking his hand, looking into his face with a constraining expression in her soft, speaking eyes.

'Ahem! Miss Grace dear, there's no denying you!' returned the devoted Jimmy. 'Look here now, Mrs. Frere, ma'am: it's not that all I have

isn't at your service, but how *can* we vex Miss Grace when she's that good, and so thoughtful and kind! If you wouldn't mind—a—a—employing a "relative," we might meet the case in every pint.' He paused and looked deprecatingly at his revered hostess.

'A relative,' repeated Mrs. Frere. 'That was my idea; but Grace would not hear of it.'

'You mean Uncle Frere; well, I would rather not, if possible,' said Randal.

'I would not mind it so much if we were not in debt,' remarked Grace.

'True for you, Miss Grace; but you see, ma'am, the "uncle" I mean is a different sort of an uncle. Surely you must have heard of parties that advance money on personal effects?'

'Of course,' cried Randal; 'pawnbrokers.'

'Just so—only none of the common sort. Then you see, Mrs. Frere, you would not have to part with the property at all. It would be kept safe, and when you could pay back the loan the pearls would be there ready for you, so long as you kept up the interest regular.'

'There, dearest!' said Grace, twining her arm through her mother's; 'that is not so bad. It would not hurt you to let them go for a little while, or even a long while when it would be such a help.'

'Not hurt me to let what is so precious to me go into the hands of some common wretch, who smokes and—and——'

'Not at all, Mrs. Frere, ma'am. These are most

respectable men—fit to be churchwardens, faith!' interrupted Byrne.

After some more discussion, it dawned upon Mrs. Frere that it would be a noble sacrifice to give up her pearls for her children; so embracing them with smiles and tears, she became the most eager of the party to dispose of the treasured gift. The question of value then arose.

'I know they cost upwards of a hundred, or a hundred and fifty pounds,' said Mrs. Frere, contemplating her pearls with loving looks.

'Ahem! let us say a hundred,' replied Byrne. 'Now such valuable things as these would always fetch nearly what they are worth; but I wouldn't advise more than fifty or sixty being raised on them; that will take you nicely on till the next quarter comes in.'

'Well,' cried Randal, 'if you come to that, I don't see why we should not get a hundred. There are several things I want—real necessaries, you know.'

'Yes,' added Mrs. Frere; 'and I want a good many important trifles for the girls, that I do not very well see how we can do without; and then it is essential that Mab should have a piano, or she will lose all her music.'

'By all means, dear old boy!' said Randal, slapping Byrne on the shoulder cheerfully; 'let us say a hundred.'

'Perhaps, Mrs. Frere, ma'am, it might be as well to remember that it is easier to pay back sixty than a hundred—not to mention interest, which comes heavy.'

'I never can understand about interest; what is it?' asked Grace.

'It's the rent you pay for the use of the money,' said Jimmy, who stoutly resisted the increased vote, backed by Grace; and with much argument, and some show of temper from Randal, succeeded in fixing the proposed subsidy at seventy pounds.

This conclusion was not arrived at till far into the night, and Byrne then took his leave.

'How can I ever thank you enough?' whispered Grace, as she followed him to the door. 'You do not know what a deliverance you have wrought for me—*me* especially! Come and see me often, Jimmy dear, and advise me. I am so ignorant about all useful things; and oh! how hard it is to make money last out!'

'It is so, Miss Grace; and the only way to do it, my heart!—oh, sure, I make too bold to call you so!—the only way to do it is to part it, and keep every bit for its own use: try for that, Miss Grace dear.'

'I will, Jimmy—I will; but mine are not the only fingers to dip into the purse.'

'True for you; you must just do the best you can. Good-night, and God bless you! Sure, all this is too hard for you!'

'Why worse than for the rest? I must take my share.'

'Good-night, me darling young lady!'

If poverty has many pains, it has also a joy wealth can never know: the heavenly sense of relief brought by sudden deliverance from pressing necessities.

Grace mounted to her bedroom that night as though she trod on air. She had been doubly delivered : all danger of an application to Max was at an end—at any rate, removed into the dim distance which youth calls 'never;' and Miss Timbs, whose countenance since yesterday morning had been dark and dreadful—more dreadful than an opposing park of artillery, or the widening leak in a sinking ship, or anything else horrible and appalling—Miss Timbs was robbed of all her terrors.

Randal, who had least felt the family difficulties, was the least elated, though he went to bed very cheerfully, proposing ere they parted to have an open carriage the next day and drive to Hampstead Heath, just to freshen themselves up after these worries, as they were going to be flush of cash. Mrs. Frere was radiant. They were not only delivered out of all their troubles ; but the deliverance was due to the sacrifice of her pearls. All the time Grace was assisting her to undress, she was planning the purchase of some new clothes and a change of mourning for her dear girls ; she gave few thoughts to self.

Grace listened, but committed herself to no reply, so they kissed each other tenderly and parted for the night, utterly and completely reconciled, though Mrs. Frere had said, half in jest but more in earnest, 'Ah, Grace ! if you had not turned off poor Mr. Darnell, we should not have had this terrible trial to go through.'

'I don't see that, mother ! I am sure it

would have been worse to ask him than any one else.'

With tears of gratitude, Grace, in the solitude of her own little chamber, poured forth thanks to God for her freedom from any engagement to Mr. Darnell, and her emancipation from Max Frere's benefits.

If money cannot give health, affection, and capability to enjoy—the three essentials of a happy life—the want of it neutralises all: the real want. I do not mean that riches are necessary to the full enjoyment of the above excellent gifts, but a certain ease of circumstance sufficient to ensure independence.

The effect of a comparatively full purse on the little party in Albert Crescent was magical. Mrs. Frere cast her terrors to the wind, and once more believed that the future hid bright fortunes behind its dim mantle. Miss Timbs' fading faith in the solvency of her tenants, whose 'carriage visitors' had suddenly and mysteriously forsaken them, revived and blossomed forth into smiles and civility. Randal seemed content, though indifferent, as became a philosopher and poet, to the ebb or flow of 'filthy lucre;' even Mab was gay and triumphant, for she was to have a new dress and her hat re-trimmed. But Grace, though deeply thankful aud infinitely relieved, was the gravest of the party, as she felt that she must in future take the responsibility of their finances on herself, and that if possible without offending her mother,

whose tender loving nature was yet not quite free from that troublesome manifestation of deficient reason known as 'huffiness.'

To make a certain fixed sum suffice for their weekly wants, in spite of Mrs. Frere's suggestions and Miss Timbs's scarcely veiled contempt, was a hard task for inexperience; and Grace was very inexperienced—nay more, naturally open-handed. Nor can it be denied that the first three or four weeks of her management things were uncomfortable, not to say scanty; that Randal complained bitterly, and eat more expensive luncheons in revenge; that Mrs. Frere sighed, and observed that she feared it would be so; or, worst of all, that Grace occasionally lost her temper with the whole party. But nature had bestowed on her one great gift—the philosopher's stone of social life—that without which neither empires or households can be properly ruled—'tact.'

Whatever the discontent above, it was impossible to work against Miss Timbs below; so, following historical precedent, Grace, by a sort of instinctive intuitive statecraft, turned her into an ally by treating her as one. She told Miss Timbs how she wished to learn housekeeping on the most economical principles; that in order to keep straight she must not exceed a certain outlay—simply and honestly asking the keen landlady to help her. And she did. The rough justice of her very English nature was touched, and though she sometimes treated the young student of economy with a

familiarity more friendly than flattering, she proved on the whole a useful assistant.

Like all young reformers, Grace was too eager. In her faithful adherence to the advice of her 'guide, philosopher, and friend,' Jimmy Byrne, she nervously strove to avoid every outlay that could possibly be avoided, and made herself perfectly miserable over accounts which would not add up or balance, and hunting after shillings which could not be accounted for.

How hot and tired she grew while endeavouring to make a new frock for Mab! She had entered enthusiastically into the project, after a profound calculation, by which she proved to herself that making would be half the cost; and told Mrs. Frere that it could not be difficult, as she had a pattern in Mab's present garment. But she little knew the task she undertook; she almost wept over her own mistakes and the amount of material thereby wasted, not to mention Mab's rebellion against being 'tried on' on an average three times a day. But she persevered gallantly, and at length produced a very wearable dress, the first of many an after-effort.

'Will you come out with us, Grace?' asked Mrs. Frere, one evening, some ten days after the events detailed in the last chapter. 'Mab wants a walk, and I said I would take her.'

No, dear,' said Grace. 'I have this flounce to sew on, and my work will be finished; then I shall be free.'

Very well; I am sure it has been a great under-

taking, and you have done it so nicely,' returned Mrs. Frere, looking round the bedroom where Grace had established herself, and which was strewn with shred and patches.

So mother and Mab departed, and Grace worked on. She had almost accomplished the last stitch when the servant entered.

'If you please, miss, there's a gentleman below wants to see you.'

'A gentleman!' cried Grace, alarmed. 'Not Mr. Darnell, Sarah?'

'No, miss; a strange gentleman.'

'Are you sure he did not ask for Mr. Frere—for my brother?'

'No, miss; he asked for you, when I said Mrs. Frere was out.'

'I will come directly.'

As Sarah retired, Grace smoothed her hair, after a hasty putting to rights of her toilette by shaking off the threads which clung to her dress, and fastening on a fresh white frill. Then she went down, prepared to meet some friend of Randal's, while wondering why that young gentleman had not come in; opened the sitting-room door, and found herself face to face with Max Frere.

The encounter was so unexpected that it is no figure of speech to say that it took her breath away. With a flash of memory their last *tête-à-tête* interview came back to her, when with passionate tenderness he had held her to his heart, and made her promise not to flirt with the 'parson's grandson' in his absence—and now!

She grew pale with intense feeling—a strange fear of being alone with her cousin—a dread lest he should insult her with any apology or excuse for his conduct.

She looked thinner and more colourless, he thought, than formerly; but her eyes seemed larger and darker from the contrast, and an expression of gravity stilled her face into unusual earnestness.

She stopped just inside the door, silent for half a second, and then, in a tone of utter natural astonishment, exclaimed:

'Max!'

'Are you so surprised to see me?' said he, advancing to meet her, a faint tinge of colour passing over his sallow cheek at the unintentional, evidently unintentional, reproach of her surprise.

'Yes, rather surprised,' she returned, collecting herself, and putting her hand in his for an instant. 'I am very sorry my mother is out. Will you sit down, Max?'

'I tried to get here earlier,' said Max, taking a chair, while Grace placed herself opposite in her mother's usual seat; 'but it is almost impossible to escape from the office. I wanted to come every day for the last week,' continued Max, looking very straight at his cousin, whose composure was returning, and who met his eyes steadily.

'I am sure it is hard to get away,' she said quietly, and there was an awkward pause.

'Grace,' exclaimed Max, and an indefinable something in his voice brought the roses to her cheek again, 'I am more fortunate than I hoped

to be in finding you alone, for I want you to explain various matters which puzzle me.'

'What are they?' asked Grace.

'First: why did you return my cheque? have you utterly renounced me—us—that you will not accept help from your nearest relatives?'

'I have not renounced you, but why should we take your money, or anyone's money (which must always be an unpleasant thing to do), when we do not want it?'

'Then how the deuce did you manage without it? for my aunt wrote rather a hopeless account of matters.'

'Did she?' exclaimed Grace, flushing crimson with anger and mortification. 'She wrote without my knowledge, you may be sure.'

'I *am* sure,' said Max, emphatically. 'But that does not account for your being able to do without the cheque.'

'You may therefore conclude that we have resources of which you are ignorant, and which my mother forgot,' returned Grace, with a brief sweet smile.

'That means, you decline to tell me?'

'This much I may say—that we have incurred *no* obligation. Your money has been returned,' she added, laughing, 'so you cannot expect to see the play.'

Max looked at her gravely, almost sternly, for a minute without speaking, and then said:

'I understand. The world is developing you wonderfully, Grace!'

'Yes, my education is evidently going to be very thorough,' she returned, bravely checking a little sob that rose in her throat.

'Well, number one is disposed of. Now for mystery number two. I heard the day before yesterday, that Darnell had started with Everard, and some other fellows, in a yacht to cruise along the coast of Norway. Why did you let him go? or why did you send him away? Come, have patience! I speak to you confidentially, because I interest myself in your affairs—more than you would perhaps believe. Grace, you have flung away fortune if you have rejected Darnell.'

Grace could not reply, so paralysed was she by the audacity of this speech. Was it possible that Max had forgotten—clean forgotten—what was indelibly stamped upon *her* memory? After an instant's pause, he went on:

'I credited you with the wisdom of compromise! I thought you would have grasped the solid ingredients of life, even if you were forced to forego a dream or two, as I have done. I did not think a nature like yours could be weakly sentimental.'

'Do not waste your thoughts on what you cannot understand,' said Grace, quivering with indignation, the very intensity of which gave her strength to present an unbroken front to the foe; 'our ideas of what is necessary to life are totally dissimilar. I have already most of the ingredients *I* consider solid. Of course it is very mortifying to be considered weakly sentimental by *you*, but not unbearable.'

'Of course a ready retort comes to you as naturally as breath to your lips; yet, Grace, for old friendship's sake, tell me why you refused Darnell?'

'Who told you he asked me?'

'The thing is self-evident: not only his disappearance from the scene, but Lady Elton's. Moreover she said to me the night before she left Paris, that my Irish relatives were a stiff-necked generation.'

'Did she say that?' cried Grace, deeply wounded, the tears springing to her eyes, and even hanging on her long lashes till they visibly fell on the handkerchief she would not raise to catch them.

Max's eyes dwelt on her with a glow in their dark depths which she did not heed.

'"Alas! how light a cause may move!"' he quoted ironically. 'I thought you were superior to the opinion of others?'

'Of people generally, yes; but I love Lady Elton, and it cuts me to the heart to hear that she spoke slightingly of us. Why should I be ashamed of acknowledging it?'

'But her opinion is not unfounded, Grace?'

'Perhaps not.'

A pause.

'Grace,' said Max, in low soft tones, raising his eyes suddenly to hers, '*why* did you refuse Darnell? He is not a bad sort of fellow for a *bon parti*. Come, Grace, I want you to confide in me—to talk of the future.'

Another pause, while his eyes rested on her with

a curious expression, as if he wanted to tame some wild creature by the power of his glance.

It was not without effect, though she did not lower hers. Her lips trembled and parted as if to utter some hasty reply; but she closed them resolutely and remained silent, a half smile indicating some change of thought. After waiting for her to speak, Max resumed:

'Do you think, because I yield to the omnipotence of circumstances, I am not interested in you?'

'Will you be so good as not to trouble yourself about my affairs—matrimonial or monetary,' cried Grace; 'and I shall feel much more grateful than for any help you can give me.'

There was an angry sparkle in her eyes as she spoke. Max sat in silence, tapping the carpet with his stick.

'If you have anything more disagreeable to say, say it and have done,' exclaimed Grace, at last.

'Are you then content, Grace, to settle down to the sordid insignificance of poverty—to a life of monotonous routine—with scarce a pleasure or a break; to spend your mental powers in calculating how to make both ends meet; to see your beauty (to most men you are beautiful, Grace) fading in obscurity, bestowed perhaps on some underbred companion clerk of your brother's? Think of such a destiny, Grace, compared with——'

'It is horrible!' she interrupted, and starting from her seat she walked hastily to the fireplace, and surveyed herself in the glass. 'Don't suppose all

this is not horrible to me! I love ease, and pleasure and dress. You don't know how delightful it is to hear you say I am handsome! I understand all you say; but can *you* understand that there is something more—a something, the want of which nothing else, not all the pleasure and grandeur in the world could make up for, and that is home—a place to come back to and rest in—where you have other selves to share everything with you. You don't understand this, Max; you never had a home! It is no blame or merit to me; I cannot help it. I could no more take my mother and Mab and Randal out of my heart and live, contented with finery, knowing *they* were poor, than I could take the blood out of my veins! It would be like covering one arm with bracelets and gems, and cutting the other off.'

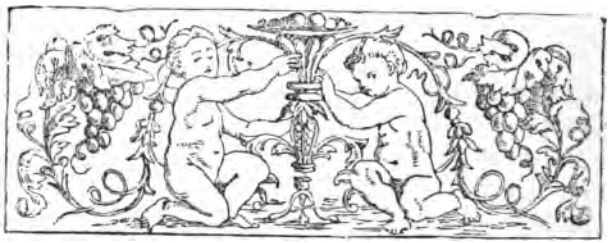
Max leant his elbow on the table, and resting his chin on his hand, gazed at her with reluctant admiration.

'Do you mean to say you will never marry because your mother and sister are poor?'

'No,' cried Grace, too much in earnest to mince matters or fence. 'If I ever meet a kind, good man that will be a son and a brother to them; and if I feel sure they have all they really want, I shall marry, I daresay.'

'Would not Darnell have fulfilled all these conditions?'

'No; could I even like him! And I tell you, Max, I *dare* not marry a man I did not love. I suppose it is very wicked; but I know if I were



CHAPTER XVI.

WEEK succeeded week after this interview, with a monotony rarely broken; yet though sometimes a little weary and cast down, Grace, on the whole, kept her courage and spirits. The conversation with her cousin had completed her disenchantment, while the reluctant admission of his parting words soothed her self-esteem—and wounds to self-esteem are ever the hardest to heal. She was not unhappy; she was too fully employed to mope, though the employment was far from congenial. To battle against the irrepressible tendency of mother and Randal to throw away money on non-essentials; to fight against a similar weakness in herself—yielded to occasionally, and bitterly repented of; to struggle through Mab's lessons practising included (for they had ventured to hire a piano); to help Mrs. Frere in needlework; to manage Miss Timbs; to keep the family accounts square, and endure contemptuous reproaches for

her stinginess from Randal without answering bitterly—an effort not always successful—this is but an outline of her avocations during the long weeks between early July and the first days of September.

She was not without her compensations, however. Sometimes Mab had a rare fit of attention, which woke Grace's hopes; often she enjoyed an hour's practice herself, according to the instructions she could remember, for she had a hearty natural love of music, and pined for advantages it was not her destiny to enjoy. Often Jimmy Byrne brought her a thoughtful, suggestive volume of history or essays, or a new magazine from a public library to which the little man subscribed; and often, too, a bright entrancing novel, which she could read to her mother, and which carried her out of the dull present into the stirring realms of passion, poetry, and adventure. Sometimes there was a delightful expedition with Jimmy Byrne and Randal to the theatre (upper boxes). Then there were moments of purest pleasure when alone with her mother, or when bidding her good-night Mrs. Frere would whisper a few tender words expressive of her reliance on her daughter: 'What should we do without you, Grace? You are everything to us, darling!'

It was not an unbearable life after all, though Grace hoped it would not go on unbrokenly for *very* long. Sometimes she could not believe that for a brief interval she had fluttered in the world of gaiety and fashion—of pleasure and wealthy idle-

ness. It seemed a dream, less real than the pictures conjured up by her vivid imagination whenever she sat or walked or worked alone; stories through which she lived as distinctly as if they were facts of memory: and in them it must be admitted she often triumphed over Max—triumphed materially—the only kind of triumph Max could feel. How to raise herself from her present obscurity, with this object, often exercised her thoughts; and these reflections always depressed her, for she ever reached the same conclusion, that half-educated, untrained and inexperienced, she could but do the very humble work belonging to 'that state to which it had pleased God to call her.'

Of Darnell she scarcely thought at all; she never faltered in her sense of satisfaction at having refused him, even when her domestic troubles were at the worst. On the whole, it was a peaceful period had it not been for Randal, who had latterly become so popular among his office-mates, that he was very often out till late—not to say early—and availed himself of the piano to learn sundry songs and choruses. The fact of his receiving a weekly stipend made him exceedingly independent, though he was not unfrequently driven to apply to his mother for a subsidy.

One ray of exterior joy came to illuminate the 'even tenor of their way.'

The morning's post, one dull day in August, brought a foreign letter to Mrs. Frere. It was from Lady Elton, dated Wiesbaden; and though

carefully veiled, conveyed an unspoken regret for their estrangement and an avowed desire to hear of their present condition and prospects. She asked for an immediate answer, as she was on the point of leaving with some friends for the Engadine.

This letter was the most delightful event that could have occurred, in the opinion of Grace and Mrs. Frere. To answer it was a charming task, performed conjointly by mother and daughter.

Lady Elton spoke also of her probable return to London after Christmas, which was a new though remote hope. To be reconciled to her friend and benefactress was the acme of Grace's desires at present, and here was a prospect of that consummation.

It was Sunday, the second day after the receipt of this welcome epistle; and Jimmy Byrne had come up, as he often did, to share the family dinner in Albert Crescent, to take counsel with Grace, and enjoy a talk with her. The little man was bright and observant, nor quite uncultivated; for he often solaced his lonely evenings with books as well as newspapers, in which he was deeply read, having a true Hibernian love of politics.

Dinner was over, and they had been discussing the news of the day, when Jimmy Byrne suddenly said:

'Mrs. Frere, ma'am! if I might inquire, hadn't the master some relations by the name of Costello?'

'Yes, Mr. Byrne; my mother's name was Costello —Costello of Dargan Abbey.'

'Just so, ma'am! Well, you see, this Squire Blundell, that died about two or three months back —you remember, Miss Grace, I was sent away to look after the papers and valuables—he has left, among other bequests, two thousand pounds in Indian railway debentures to a Count Costello of the Austrian army, his old friend and comrade. I wonder, now, if it's any relation of yours, ma'am?'

'Very possibly,' returned Mrs. Frere, with faintly awakened interest. 'What is his name—his Christian name?'

'Denis—Denis, Count Costello; and a very old gentleman he must be, for the man that's gone was over eighty.'

'Why, Mr. Byrne,' cried Mrs. Frere, now quite roused, 'he must be my own uncle!'

'You don't say so!' exclaimed Jimmy, with some excitement; 'sure, he is a general, and grand cross of something or other, and a great man entirely.'

'Is he the officer grandpapa used to tell such stories about, when they were together in Vienna?' asked Grace.

'Yes, dear; but we have lost sight of him for years. We did not know where to address the news of my dear father's death to him. He married —oh, forty or forty-five years ago, and is, I believe, more German than English.'

'Irish, you mean!' said Randal.

'And where is the count, my uncle, now?' asked Mrs. Frere.

'Well, I don't remember the name of the place,' returned Jimmy; 'but I can find out for you. I know there have been letters from him, and he wants to take his money over to Germany, which is just madness.'

'Do find out his present address for me,' said Mrs. Frere. 'I should like to hear from him again. I remember his visiting Dungar a couple of years before I was married. He was a splendid-looking man then, and so bright and gay, though he had not long lost his wife.'

'Ah, it's little they care for wives over there!' said Jimmy, with the vague distrust of foreign morals natural to an untravelled islander.

'I wonder if he could get me into the Austrian service,' cried Randal, eagerly.

'The Austrian service! God forbid!' cried Jimmy. 'You had a deal better stick to the service you are in.'

'Why did this great-uncle of ours go into the Austrian service then? He must have been better off than I am.'

'I do not know that, Randal,' replied his mother. 'The Dargan estate was wofully encumbered; there was next to nothing for younger children: and remember that fifty years ago it was the habit of the Irish Catholic gentry to put their younger sons in the French and Austrian service. The Costellos were all Catholics.'

'I should like to see him,' said Grace, musingly 'I fancy him quite a hero of romance.'

'Had he any children?' asked Byrne.

'As well as I remember, several; but it must be nearly twenty years since I heard anything of him,' said Mrs. Frere.

'I was thinking,' continued Jimmy, whose worldliness was of the simplest, 'it would only be natural if he was to adopt you, Mrs. Frere, and Mr. Randal, and the young ladies; for if he is a count and a general, I suppose he has a fine property over there: but of course, if he has a family, that is another matter.'

'Indeed, Mr. Byrne,' returned Mrs. Frere, smiling, 'I fear the Austrian service is a very poor one; probably this legacy will seem riches to him. I am afraid there are no golden chances before us.'

'More's the pity,' cried Jimmy, and the subject dropped; but to Grace the conversation suggested a fine field for castle-building, which was her chief recreation.

Grand and wide were the structures she raised on the airy foundation of fancy. Sometimes a sudden accession of fortune through some unexpected channel enabled her to revisit Dungar in splendour, and even tempt the present possessor to cut off the entail, and sell the beloved place to her; sometimes she developed a voice, genius, art-power that would raise her to prominence and prosperity. Now she imagined her Austrian grand-uncle a model of all that was generous; pictured the possibility of his having, say, a married daughter, also charming and genial; she invites Grace to Vienna, and launches her into the most brilliant society of that delightful capital; there she meets Max, and is able to assist

him socially—she would acquire German in a few months; she would display that new riding-habit—poor dear grandpapa's last gift—filched from more pressing claims upon his last loan. People rode in Vienna, and appreciated good riding; perhaps she might be presented to the empress. The Costello and De Burgh blood would entitle her to——

'Gracie dear,' said Mab—down came Grace to the narrow realities of Albert Crescent, and beheld Mab standing, one little rosy foot quite bare on the dark carpet, and holding out a stocking—'there is *such* a big hole in the heel; would you mind sewing it up before I go out? Miss Timbs is going to Covent Garden for fruit to make jam, and she is going to take me with her. We will bring it back on the top of the omnibus. Don't you think I might sit there too?'

'Oh, Mab! why will you not look at your stockings before you put them on, and bring them to me if they want mending? Have you no others?'

'None without holes,' returned Mab, shaking her head.

So having made her sister presentable, Grace devoted the remainder of the afternoon to an energetic repairing of numerous small stockings, which, however, was no impediment to a dioramic succession of mental pictures which helped the time away while the busy fingers plied the needle.

August was now nearly over, and the weather beautiful and fresh—a change doubly welcome, for the first half of the month had been dull and rainy. Although the streets had that deserted look which

London, in spite of its multitude of inhabitants, presents in the 'out-of-season' period, Mrs. Frere and her daughter did not feel it, for their walks were always in search of fields and trees, or what apologies for them they could find.

Randal was not well. He had caught cold, and had a bad cough. He was feverish too, and his mother and Grace persuaded him to stay at home for two days, a seclusion he bore very impatiently. He was the least healthy of Mrs. Frere's children —the least constitutionally strong; and he had grown visibly paler and thinner since their residence in London. His spirits were variable also, and subject to frequent depression. At times he looked on himself as a blighted genius, doomed to an early grave; at others, when he had achieved some little social triumph among his fellow-clerks, with whom he was very popular, he would be radiant, brimful of hope and brightest anticipations. 'There must be something in me, mother!' he would remark; 'or those fellows—honest well-meaning chaps, with plenty of sense—would not be so ready to applaud all I say!'

He had been very rebellious on the second day of his imprisonment, having finished a thrilling tale of Miss Braddon's, and not liking the volume just chosen by his sister to replace it.

'Where is Jimmy Byrne?' he asked querulously, as Grace, in hat and scarf, stood beside the easy-chair wherein he lounged. 'The little beggar has not been near us for a week past; he always has something to say.'

'There is a note on the table for my mother,' replied Grace; 'and I think the writing looks like his.'

'Let us open it!' cried Randal.

'No, no! Mother and Mab will soon be back; they have only gone round by Holland Park, and——'

'Nonsense, Grace! the mother would not mind! Why, we have no secrets! Hand, it over like a good girl.'

'Indeed I will not!'

'Then I will take it myself!' and Randal, darting from his seat, pounced upon the note.

'I am sure it is not right, Randal!'

'On my head be it!' he cried, laughing; and tearing open the envelope, he read:

'DEAR MADAM,

'I have been that busy I have not had time to run up to the Crescent, and I hoped Mr. Randal might call. Who do you think walked into the office late this afternoon? General Count Costello himself, no less! I was sent for to bring some papers about the late Mr. Blundell's investments, and so soon as he heard me speak, "You are a countryman of mine!" says he. "I am so," says I. "Where do you come from?" "A place called Dungar," says I. With that he nearly shook my hand off, and asked no end of questions. And I just write to beg and pray of Mr. Randal to go and call upon him—Charing Cross Hotel, No. 153—as soon as ever you get this; he (the general) is just dying to see some of his own people from the old country.

I hope to call round to-morrow evening, but not before eight.

'Your respectful and obedient servant,

'J. BYRNE.'

'By Jupiter! there's a transformation scene for you, Grace! I will dress and be off this moment. What o'clock is it?'

'Nearly one. But you must wait till after dinner, till my mother comes in. An hour or two later will make very little difference; you will not find the count—he will be sure to be out.'

'At any rate I will get ready, and be off directly we have dined. Why, Grace, this is a bit of romance!'

And Randal vanished into his room, quite restored to health and vigour by this wonderful piece of intelligence.

Mrs. Frere was less excited than her children on reading Jimmy's note; her imagination had faded somewhat in the storms of time and change. However, she was pleased at the idea of seeing any of her kin, and wrote a very amiable note, begging the stranger uncle to give them an early day, and to name which would suit him best.

Armed with this and his card as credentials, Randal started, as soon as he could escape from his mother's entreaties to eat more, to drink another glass of wine, etc.; and the remainder of the day passed as usual, but for a little variation in the conversation consequent on Mrs. Frere's intermittent queries and suggestions. 'I suppose, if my uncle comes to dinner, he will give some little

notice, so that we may be prepared?' or, 'Should the count come, Grace, you will strain a point, dear, and let us have a nice little dinner?' or, 'You know, Grace, the man downstairs is away for his holiday; I think Miss Timbs would let us have his room to dine in, if you asked her.'

Then Mab of course had a hundred questions to put, of the most searching character; and was so bent on receiving satisfactory replies, that it was almost impossible to make her go through her afternoon practising. At the end of each scale or exercise she would swing round on the piano-stool, with: 'But, Grace,' or, 'But, mother, why has this uncle never come to see us before?' or, 'Do you think our uncle has ever killed a man — really killed one himself in a battle?' 'Will he speak English?' etc., etc.

Randal returned in a couple of hours, looking very pale and weary. He had not found Count Costello, nor Jimmy Byrne, at whose office he had also called. Mr. Byrne had gone out with the count, and was not expected back that day.

'Then he will come on here in the evening, and tell us everything,' observed Grace.

And then Randal settled himself to read; the shades of night began to close in, tea was served, and Grace, with much tact, persuaded Mab to retire at eight o'clock, as she particularly wished that observant young person not to be present during Jimmy Byrne's visit. To this end she accompanied her upstairs, undertaking to brush her hair and help her to undress.

This process was proceeding, when a loud ring of the front-door bell attracted Mab's attention.

'That's a runaway,' she said: 'Miss Timbs is nearly driven crazy with them. She caught one boy, though, yesterday; she was at——'

'Hush, Mab!' cried Grace, pausing, with the brush uplifted in her hand. Feet were heard coming upstairs to the drawing-room; no doubt Jimmy Byrne. Grace recommenced brushing with redoubled vigour, longing to run down and hear the news, and Mab recommenced:

'She was at the side-door taking in the milk when the ring came, so she darted up the steps and knocked him on the head with the tin measure. Was it not fun? I wish I had been there!'

A sudden knock at the door, and Randal's voice said:

'Grace, you must dress Mab again, and come down quick! Here is Count Costello come with Jimmy Byrne!'

'Is it possible?' cried Grace, hastily tying up Mab's abundant locks, hurrying on her frock, and arraying her to the best advantage. 'There now, Mab, go on downstairs; I will come directly.'

Mab, nothing loath, started off. Grace, having made a rapid inspection of her own toilette and added an improving touch or two, followed quickly.

When she came into the sitting-room she was a little dazzled, for Randal had lit all three gas-burners in honour of the visit. Mrs. Frere was in her usual chair, Randal and Jimmy Byrne were standing at the other side of the table, and opposite

the door sat an old gentleman, holding both Mab's hands, while she stood between his knees. As Grace came into the full light he looked up, putting Mab away, and rising suddenly, stood facing her. A fine figure, very tall and very thin, but large; a once-powerful frame, still grand in age; a well-set head, with plentiful grey hair, cut in military fashion; thick, nearly white eyebrows, over-hanging large dark eyes that looked absolutely black from contrast; long grey moustache, an aquiline face, and stern soldierly aspect; the slightly-bowed legs and peculiar step, as if the *sabretache* was always knocking against his left heel (which Grace afterwards observed), betrayed the old trooper. She paused, colouring under the dark piercing eyes which seventy-five years had not yet robbed of all their fire. But the count, making a step forward, said, with a slight quiver in his voice and a surprised air:

'Who—who is this?' yet holding out his hand while he spoke.

'My eldest daughter, Grace,' replied Mrs. Frere.

'Grace—did you say Grace?' repeated the old man, laying the other hand over hers which she had given him; then he murmured something in German which no one understood, and exclaimed in as genuine an Irish accent as if he had never left his native country, 'My dear child, you are like a bit—faith, a bright bit!—of my old life given back to me. God bless you, my child!' He drew her to him, and kissed her brow with a kind of solemnity very touching to his young grand-niece, who thought

the still muscular, gnarled hand trembled as it lay upon her shoulder. 'How did you come to call her Grace?' he continued, holding her away and gazing with a yearning expression in his deep eyes.

'It was a fancy of my dear father's,' returned Mrs. Frere; 'she was his favourite grand-child. He named her after a Grace Costello, about whom there is a story of her riding some immense distance in an incredibly short time, to warn some outlaws and give them time to escape.'

'Ay, I know!' returned the count; 'and she is like another Grace Costello—a cousin of ours—did you ever see her?—but no; she must have left Ireland before you were born—as like as if she herself stood before me!'

The old man sat down, and for a moment seemed lost in thought; then rousing himself, he began to ask questions—endless questions—many of which Mrs. Frere was unable to answer: they related to people and circumstances passed away and forgotten before her time.

The count was deeply distressed to hear the fallen fortunes of his niece, and greatly astonished. But he said little, evidently restrained by a feeling of delicacy; though Mrs. Frere poured forth her tale of woe with little reserve, in spite of Grace's occasional efforts to check her.

Then Grace, in her character of housekeeper, with a sweet smile and blush, asked if her uncle had dined.

'Yes, my jewil,' he returned. 'After dragging my friend here'—a condescending wave of the

hand to Jimmy—'all over the town, we went back to the hotel to dinner, and there I found this young gentleman's card'—a nod and smile to Randal—'and your note, my dear niece. I was so overjoyed to find one of my own kin ready and anxious to welcome the old stranger, that I could not resist accompanying Mr. Byrne to see you at once.'

'At any rate, uncle, have a glass of wine after your drive out here,' said Mrs. Frere, seeing that Grace, by some occult process, had conjured up glasses, biscuits, and a bottle of Bordeaux.

To this the count readily assented, and drank to their future friendship, chinking glasses rather noisily. Then he drank Jimmy Byrne's health, then success to Randal, and so grew exceedingly friendly and communicative.

He told how his eldest son had married a Hungarian heiress, and lived on his estate; and his second son had a distant command in Croatia. That he himself had for the last eight or nine years resided with his widowed daughter, who had married a Saxon *Gutsbesitzer*, or gentleman farmer, and who managed the property during her son's minority. That she had two daughters, good and love-worthy maidens; and that life was very tranquil and happy in the remote valley near the Bohemian frontier. Still it was evident that the journey to London, the sudden glimpse of the living world, had been a great delight to the hale old man, in whose nearly exhausted life still lingered a sparkle of that 'eternal boyhood' which death only can extinguish in an Irishman's nature.

They talked far into the night, Count Costello occasionally breaking off to address Grace, 'Let me hear your voice, darling! it takes me back five-and-forty years;' or, 'Look at me, jewil! Mein Gott! I see another's eyes in yours.'

At last Count Costello ordered Jimmy Byrne to fetch him a cab—declared he was keeping the ladies up too late—kiseed Mrs. Frere's hand and Grace's brow—set his heels together—made a magnificent bow, and departed.

The exclamations, observations, and discussions which ensued may be imagined.

In truth, the appearance on the scene of the Austrian grand-uncle made a great and important change in the life of the Albert Crescent recluses. The old man quite revelled in the fresh delight of playing the generous friend to his new-found relatives. He gave them frequent dinners at his hotel and elsewhere; he engaged Mrs. Frere and Grace in long shopping expeditions, to select presents for his daughter and his grandchildren. He took advantage of this opportunity to make many useful gifts to Mrs. Frere and Grace. In short, the gallant veteran, finding that a half year's dividend had accrued since the death of his friend the testator. thoroughly enjoyed the unusual pleasure of having what seemed to him a large sum of money at his disposal. But London is a costly place; and at the end of a fortnight he began to talk of returning to his Saxon home.

In the close and friendly intercourse with Grace, which sprang up quickly and naturally, the kindly

old man soon acquired a full and complete knowledge of the skeletons hidden in the recesses of her thoughtful heart, which by some strange sympathetic attraction was drawn to reveal its hopes and fears to the pleasant, light-hearted old soldier, whose experience and worldly wisdom was yet so curiously streaked with simplicity and tenderness.

A wonderful friendship had sprung up between him and Grace, and though she did not feel the same reliance on his judgment as on Jimmy Byrne's, she was nevertheless immensely cheered and encouraged by the acquisition of one more warm friend.

It was with a certain sinking of the heart she looked forward to the approaching separation from her grand-uncle. London would seem doubly desolate when he was gone. Ah, if Uncle Frere had been like him, how different their lives might be!

'Here is a note from the count,' said Mrs. Frere, one afternoon, as Grace came into the room after ascending from a domestic consultation with Miss Timbs. 'He says he will sup with us at seven, as he has a communication of some importance to make. I wonder what it can be! At any rate, dear, let us have something nice for supper. Could you manage a lobster mayonnaise, or a dressed crab? your uncle enjoys a little fish.'

'I will see about it, mother dear. We have some nice cold beef and salad, and the count is so fond of salad;' and Grace hurried away to prepare for the coming guest.

It was a wet, wild evening, and Count Costello arrived in a cab, accompanied by Jimmy Byrne.

The count was looking remarkably well in a fashionable suit of London-made garments, and had an air of scarcely veiled importance. After an interchange of greetings, Count Costello took his seat, and glancing round, remarked:

'Your boy has not come in yet, my dear niece?'

'No; he is often late on Wednesdays. It is a foreign-post day, I believe.'

'Ha! I should prefer his presence, as I want to hold a family council. But as he is detained, I shall proceed without him,' said the count, drawing a letter from his pocket and handing it to Mrs. Frere. 'Let me beg your attention to this letter from my daughter, Frau Alvsleben, which reached me only this morning.'

'From my cousin!' exclaimed Mrs. Frere, in some surprise, 'and in French.'

'Yes, my daughter can speak a little English, but to write it is beyond her. Read, my dear niece, read!'

The letter was somewhat formal, but very kind, and contained an invitation for Grace to accompany the count on his journey back, and pass a couple of months with her Saxon relatives, who would do all in their power to amuse and interest her. Mrs. Frere handed the letter to Grace, observing:

'Madame Alvsleben is most kind and hospitable, but we have you to thank, dear uncle, for this tempting proposal.'

To Grace, a whole volume of new and delightful possibilities seemed to open, as she glanced through the letter. A visit to Germany! a total and complete escape from Max Frere's patronage and interference! It would be too delightful! But mother and Mab—how could she leave them?

'Well, what does my jewil say?' asked the count, who had been watching her. 'Will you start with me on Monday?'

'Oh, dear uncle, I should like it ever so much; but I do not very well see how it can be managed. I can scarcely leave the mother; and then——' She paused.

'Don't think of the cost of the journey,' said the count; 'that's my affair.'

'Here is Randal!' cried Mab; whereupon the matter in hand was explained, and the discussion proceeded.

'I don't see how we can get on without Grace,' said Randal.

'Anyhow, it's right she should get a peep of the world, after her slavin' for everyone,' remarked Jimmy Byrne; 'and where would she have such an opportunity as this, to travel under the care of a nobleman and her own blood relation?'

'True for you, Byrne! Begad! you are a sensible little fellow,' said the count.

'It would be terrible to part with her, even for a week,' said Mrs. Frere, tremulously; 'but when it would be for her good!'

'I will not go if you feel you could not do without me,' observed Grace.

'Listen to me now,' began the count, with the air of making an oration; 'I have been thinking hard what's best for you all, and I believe that you are just wasting your substance in this costly capital. Come away with both your girls, niece Frere. Life is easier and cheaper in our corner of the world. You'll get a good education for this child,' laying his hand on Mab's head; 'you'll find a simple cheerful society for yourself and Grace, and get something more than bare meat, drink, dress, and shelter. Then you'll be near your next of kin, and we will look after you.'

'It would be very nice,' said Mrs. Frere, hesitatingly; 'but I could not leave Randal.'

'Randal is a man, and must learn to take care of himself; your first duty is to your daughters,' returned the old soldier, gravely.

'Perhaps, uncle, you might get me into the Austrian service,' suggested Randal.

'No! I would not if I could, sir. You are a deuced deal better off where you are. The Austrian service is not what it used to be. My notion is this: let Grace come with me—she will pick up a little German in a month. Between us we will find good quarters for you; and then you and the child come over when all is ready, and get settled before winter. What do you say? Here's Byrne will look after Randal, who has begun to earn a trifle; and he will be twice the man he is when he hasn't his mammy to coddle him.'

An animated discussion ensued, in which Randal was the chief dissentient. Jimmy Byrne was

strongly in favour of the count's suggestion, and so was Mrs. Frere, though considerably appalled at the idea of so tremendous an undertaking.

By the time they sat down to a pretty and appetising little supper, however, the count had prevailed so far at least, that all agreed to the proposal of Grace's visit with a view to her reconnoitring the country; nay, more, that she should start with him on the following Monday.

'Once the line of march is decided, "boot and saddle!" no loitering!' cried the old soldier, highly pleased at the prospect of carrying off his favourite grand-niece, and his spirits were infectious.

Somehow, before supper was over, everyone began to consider the suggested removal to Saxony as a most happy thought. Jimmy, who never got rid of the notion that the count had a fine estate somewhere, and that 'Miss Grace' would have her share of it, forgot all selfish regrets in the hope of her prosperity. Mrs. Frere, recalling old tales of German prices, began to expect they might live on two or three hundred a year like millionaires. Mab brightened up at the prospect of living near the country; and Grace—Grace thought that propitious heaven had opened to her a direct deliverance from dulness, depression, and obscurity.

So they drank each other's health in some champagne brought by Uncle Costello, and clinked glasses and encouraged each other by pleasant fanciful suggestions, till a merrier party could not be found.

When at last Grace was alone in her little room,

she could hardly quiet herself to serious thought. Was it possible that in four days she would be starting on this suddenly projected voyage of discovery? She trembled at the idea—at the bare imagination of leaving mother and Mab unprotected. Yet she felt it was a chance for all she must not lose; and with a short but fervent prayer to God for help and guidance, she at last sank to sleep.

END OF VOL. I.

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