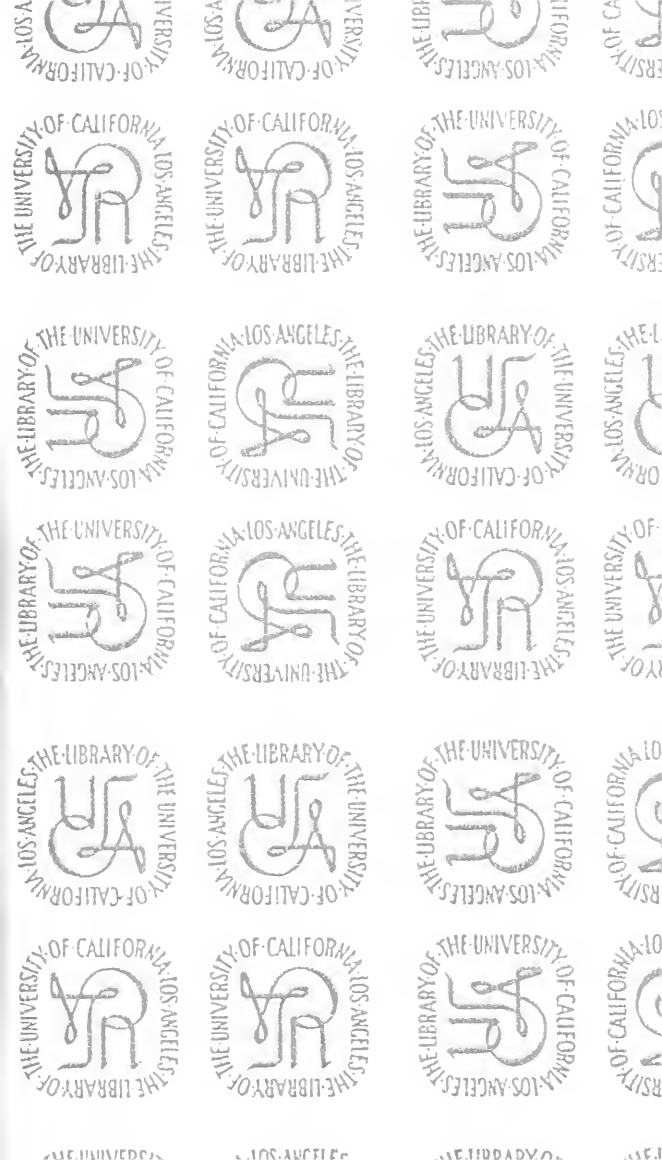


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KATHARINE ASHTON.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

“AMY HERBERT,” “THE EXPERIENCE OF LIFE,”
“READINGS PREPARATORY TO
CONFIRMATION,”

ETC. ETC.

Smell, Elizabeth Messing

“Pitch thy behaviour low; thy projects high.” — GEORGE HERBERT.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

LONGMAN, BROWN, GREEN, AND LONGMANS.

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[*The Author of this work notifies that she reserves the right of translating it.*]

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PREFACE.

It has been the Writer's object, in the following tale, to describe not so much what might or ought to be, as what actually is.

Questions constantly arise full of interest and importance, as to the best mode of meeting the necessities of the poor, and the various needs of our complex state of society. But they are full of great difficulty; and until they are determined by competent authority, it would seem safer and wiser, for women at least, to take advantage of the machinery placed within their reach, than to criticise its defects, and speculate upon the means of its improvement. District societies may be less valuable than sisterhoods. A clergyman and his wife may be able to do less than clergymen living and working together as one body. But these are not questions for general consideration; and if we wait till we are able to decide them to our full satisfaction, the opportunities of usefulness around us will have escaped—never to be recalled.

It may be desirable to state, that the character of Katharine Ashton, although in no way intended to represent any particular individual, was suggested to the Writer by the circumstances of real life.

June 1st, 1854.

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KATHARINE ASHTON.

CHAPTER I.

SOME thirty years ago there was to be seen at the lower end of the principal street, in the market town of Rilworth, in — shire, a substantial, brick, gable-ended house, standing back a little from the pavement, with an iron railing before it, and remarkable as being the only exception to the rows of shops which lined each side of the road, from the market place in the centre of the town to the turnpike gate at its entrance. In other respects the building was in no way peculiar ; it might have been the residence of the lawyer, or the doctor, or the banker ; or the retired tradesman, contented with a moderate competency, and liking better to enjoy the society of his friends in the town than to live apart in rural exclusiveness. And such, probably, had been its original destination ; but at the time to which reference has been made, the house was appropriated to a different purpose, and those who saw the troop of girls of all ages, from seven to fifteen, issuing from it about five o'clock in the evening, would at once have recognised the Gable House as a school, though they might not have known that it was commonly honoured by the title of *the* school, suggesting the idea that it was the only school in the place.

And such indeed it was, as regarded the more wealthy members of the little community of Rilworth, for the very obvious reason that no better instruction was within reach. From time immemorial it had been the custom of the Rilworth people to send their little girls to Miss Richardson's; some being glad to have their children taught French, and music, and fine work, without much expense; and others, more ambitious, considering that it was a good thing to have them well grounded in reading, and writing, and arithmetic, and kept out of the way when they were of a troublesome age, and that a year or two afterwards at a finishing school would do all that was needful to fit them for general society.

To do Miss Richardson justice, she deserved the confidence reposed in her. She was a lady by birth and in feeling, not very well informed and only moderately clever, but strictly conscientious and impartial. If the children under her care did not know as much as might have been wished, they at least learnt correctly, and were made obedient and reverent. A foundation was laid upon which a good superstructure might be raised in after years. So thought the clergyman, and the lawyer, and the banker, and the brewer, and the coal merchant, and the wealthy linendraper, and many other influential persons in Rilworth, if they thought at all; and laying aside the strict barriers of exclusiveness, they all agreed in sending their children, when young, to Miss Richardson's.

Three little girls were standing on the school steps. They were nearly of the same age, between ten and eleven, dressed very much alike, each carrying a green baize bag, filled of course with books. They seemed hurried at first; probably they had the fear of being late before them; but the clock in the

church tower pointed at five minutes to nine, and there were still some moments left for a little innocent gossip.

“How you did run! Jane,” exclaimed the tallest of the three children, tapping one of her companions on the shoulder. The speaker was a bright-eyed, black-haired, rosy-cheeked girl, who might have been termed decidedly handsome, but it was not a beauty which gave pleasure. There was an absence of mind,—a certain flippancy of manner which was repelling. “How you did run!” she repeated again; “but Kate and I vowed we would overtake you, and we did.” “My aunt was rather late for breakfast,” replied Jane. “I should have been ready in good time else; at least, no, I should not; I had forgotten to sew a string on my bonnet last night, and that kept me.” “Such a fidget! did you ever hear anything like it, Kate? Why a pin does just as well as a string any day.” “Not for my aunt, Selina,” said Jane with a smile, which gave a singular brightness to a pale and rather melancholy face, older in its expression than belonged rightly to its age. The words were addressed to Selina, but the smile was for Katharine, and it was answered by another, less brilliant, yet scarcely less attractive from the air of thoughtfulness which accompanied it. “I wonder which is most right,—to be late for school or to fasten your bonnet ribband with a pin,” said Katharine. Jane laughed. “Most wrong, you mean: I don’t suppose either of them is very wrong, but I like to do what my aunt tells me.” “And what Miss Richardson tells you too, I suppose,” exclaimed Selina: “run in, do; we shall all have forfeits if the bell rings.” She rushed into the house, almost pushing Jane before her, and beckoning to Katharine to follow; but Katharine still lingered. She stood by the

open door looking up the busy street. There was no mere curiosity in the gaze. It was practical, earnest, searching, as if she would fain satisfy herself in some great doubt or difficulty. "Yes, every body is busy," she said to herself as she closed the street door. "Certainly, but please don't think of them now, Kate. Hark! there is the bell," and Jane Sinclair's gentle hand was laid upon her arm. Katharine started, and hurried up the long passage to the little hall, where the cloaks and bonnets of the day-scholars were kept. "Go in, Jane; don't wait for me, I must be late." "No, no, you need not, there is always a minute's grace; the names are not being called over yet. Here, give me your bonnet, and let me hang it up." Selina had taken possession of the most convenient peg, and as she hastened past them to the schoolroom, she pointed to it, saying with a triumphant air, "First come, first served." "Herself first, always," muttered Katharine; but Jane made no remark, and only busied herself with contriving a place for Katharine's shawl upon an under peg in the corner. "The bell has stopped; go in, Kate, you will be just in time." Katharine hastened through the green baize door which opened into the school room; her last glance showed Jane half buried beneath a heap of shawls and cloaks, which in her hurry she had disarranged. When the list was called over, a forfeit mark was placed against the name of Jane Sinclair.

The business of the morning began: lessons were said, generally very correctly;—small portions of Pinnock's Catechisms, columns of dictionary, and multiplication tables. Selina, or, as she was commonly called by her companions, Selly Fowler, ceased to be triumphant then. She was the lowest in the class when the lessons were ended; and as she went down

and down, she cast a furtive glance upon Jane Sinclair, quietly pre-eminent at the top, and upon Katharine Ashton, who had risen three places, evidently fearing their ridicule. She need not have feared. Jane pitied her; Katharine did not think about her; she was intent upon the lessons, not upon the individuals who were repeating them. There was the same look of eager, almost troubled thought; and at times she gazed around, asking, it seemed, for help, for explanation; but it was a vain request—understood by none, least of all by the even-minded, plodding Miss Richardson, who was fulfilling to the utmost what she felt to be her duty, whilst insisting upon the lessons being repeated perfectly, exercising strict justice, and enforcing instantaneous obedience.

“Jane Sinclair’s forfeit has put her second in the chance for the prize,” was the murmur that evening in the little ante-room, as the children were putting on their bonnets and cloaks. No one seemed glad, not even the tall, proud young lady, the daughter of the great brewer, who was by Jane’s misfortune placed above her. “She was very sorry,” she said—“she would much rather they had been equal; besides, it was such a stupid way of gaining a prize, because some one else was late.” “Better that way than no way,” exclaimed Selina, as she tossed Katharine’s bonnet to her across the ante-room. The bonnet fell to the ground, for Katharine Ashton was turning away to speak to Jane. “You must let me tell Miss Richardson how it happened, Jane; it would be too bad to lose the prize when this is your last half; she will be sure to pat you up again, for it was all because you helped me.” “No good to trust to that Kate,” said Jane, with a merry laugh; “but why trouble about it? we can never help others if we won’t take a risk.” Jane tied her bonnet with

quiet unconcern, but there was a tear in Katharine Ashton's dark eye, and she walked away without uttering another word.

When the little school party, who went together to the upper end of the High Street, separated, Selina Fowler rushed like a whirlwind up the flight of steps which led to the tall house with the bright green door marked with the name of Mr. Robert Fowler, surgeon and dentist. Katharine walked slowly to the private entrance to Ashton's, the large bookseller and stationer's; and Jane pursued her way a little beyond the town, to the row of small houses standing in little gardens, one of which was the residence of her maiden aunt, and, for the present, her home.

CHAPTER II.

"MOTHER," said Katharine Ashton, as she sat at work in the parlour behind the shop, trying to make the best use of the few remaining minutes of daylight, "do you know I saw Miss Sinclair to-day, as I went up street? I think she must be going to live here for good, she has been staying here so long."

Eight years had passed since Katharine and Jane were schoolfellows. Eight years will make great changes in habits and feelings, but they are more obvious to the spectators than to the individuals concerned. It was as natural now for Katharine to speak of Miss Sinclair as it had been once to talk of Jane. "Mr. Fowler told your father, a month ago, that Mrs. Sinclair had taken the house with the

green verandah, opposite St. Peter's," replied Mrs. Ashton, without raising her eyes from the winter dress she was diligently employed in altering. "She was turning down towards St. Peter's when I saw her," continued Katharine; "I just caught one look of her face. How she is altered!—I should scarcely have known her if Selina had not pointed her out; I daresay she does not recollect me." A half sigh escaped Katharine as she said this, but it was not perceived by her mother. "Of course not, Kate, any more than you would remember her. Have you finished that seam yet?" "Yes, nearly; but, mother, do you really think I am so changed?" "Why, you are grown into a woman, child, and so is Miss Sinclair; and she has been away now—let me see—eight years; they staid here just twelve months, I think, after she left the school." "Her aunt, Miss Maurice, did—not Jane; she was sent away to some cousin, people said," replied Katharine; "and then after that we heard that Captain Sinclair was dead, and that Mrs. Sinclair was returned from India." "Ah, yes, I remember,—that was some 'time ago;" and Mrs. Ashton, having completed her task, carefully folded up her work, and began to clear the table, saying, at the same time, "Your father talked of wanting you to help him look over Lowe's account this evening, Kate, so we must have tea early."—"John promised to do that," said Katharine, "but I suppose he won't be in."—"He told me he should most likely go up to Mr. Fowler's," replied Mrs. Ashton; "it is very kind of them to take so much notice of him." Katharine did not echo the feeling; she worked on in silence—not melancholy, but thoughtful silence;—for she was not really altered. There was the change from the round-faced, awkward child of eleven, to the intelligent, keen-sighted, energetic girl of eighteen;

but the expression of the face was unaltered, and so was the mind.

Katharine Ashton was often called pretty, but that was not exactly the proper term to apply to her. There were many girls of her age in Rilworth with much more regular features. Happily for her she had never attracted notice as a child, and so she had grown up without any thought whether she was good-looking or not. Perhaps that constituted one of her chief attractions. She never troubled herself about what would be said of her; she had no self-consciousness; and no one, therefore, was afraid of wounding her vanity or giving offence. It was impossible not to be at ease with her, because she was quite at ease with herself. "Kate Ashton is such a very sensible, good-natured girl," was the general remark of mothers who were anxious for their own children, and therefore were always forming comparisons; and Mrs. Ashton herself had never advanced beyond this opinion. She was not, indeed, a person likely to wish Katharine to be anything more. She was herself a farmer's daughter, educated in the old times, when it was the custom for farmers' wives and children to make butter and cheese themselves, instead of leaving the work to servants; and her chief idea of a woman's excellence consisted in keeping regular accounts, working quickly and neatly, and making good pies and puddings. She had sent Katharine to Miss Richardson's, and she had allowed her to learn a little French and music, but it was sorely against her own judgment; in fact, she had only satisfied her conscience by considering that it was what every one did now, and that, indeed, if Katharine did not go there, she could not go any where.

Mrs. Ashton was not as ambitious as her husband, but she certainly had not as much temptation to be so. He was a great man in his way. Rilworth

was a very central town, and he was the chief bookseller and stationer in it. His shop was the common meeting-place for parties who came in from the country for a day's business. It was a charming lounge for idlers; for all the new publications were to be seen there, to say nothing of a reading-room attached to the shop, and a good circulating library. No one ever thought of driving into Rilworth without making the excuse to call at Ashton's for something, and no one ever went away without feeling considerable cordiality towards the obliging, deferential, smiling Mr. Ashton, who had a word of interest for all his customers, and every species of temptation for their taste or their needs, from the smooth octavo in clear type and broad margin, destined for the learned repose of the library, to the little magazine in its yellow paper cover, pronounced to be exactly suited for the servants' hall.

And Mr. Ashton was an important person also, beyond the limits of his shop. He was a member of the town council, and considered a great authority in all municipal questions. He was a charity commissioner, a guardian of the poor; his name was one of the foremost on the sanitary committee, the national school committee, fourth only in the list of the patrons of the mendicity society; above all, he had for many successive years filled the office of churchwarden, and had appropriated to himself a splendid pew curtained and lined in the middle aisle, exactly opposite the pulpit.

Mr. Ashton was of course a very busy man; too busy it may be thought for the success of his shop. That might or might not be. People said, that he was wealthy, and could afford it; and then he had an excellent foreman,—grave, subdued, silent, always at his post. It was a very punctual, well ordered shop; and whilst this continued, no one

was inclined to inquire whether Mr. Ashton thought it necessary thoroughly to fulfil the offices which he undertook, or whether he was contented only with the glory to be derived from them. Of his private affairs none beyond the circle of his immediate friends in the same position of life as himself knew any thing. Mrs. Ashton sat in the back parlour, and made her own dresses and mended her husband's shirts, and Katharine often worked nearly as hard as the foreman in making out accounts, and was always the person to assist in unpacking the London parcels, but in the shop she was never seen. "I won't have my daughter dancing about in the shop with long curls and a furbelowed gown," was Mr. Ashton's reply to a neighbour who once inquired why he did not make Kate more useful. "Other people would as soon fly as let their girls be at the beck and call of every idle youngster, and why am I not to be as careful of my Kate?" There might have been some pride in Mr. Ashton's determination, but it was a safe and wise one. Katharine Ashton seated at work in the back parlour, had as much simple dignity of manner as the most refined lady in the land. Almost too much to please her mother, who declared she was not a bit like other girls of her age, and people would think she was set up if she kept so quiet; but not too much to please her father, who, from a more extensive knowledge of the world, felt instinctively the value of his child's delicacy of mind, though he only appreciated it as making her look, as he said, like a lady. And this was all that was known or thought of Katharine Ashton, that she was a good, sensible, quiet girl; possibly a little inclined to be proud, but upon the whole very right-minded.

And was this all that was hidden beneath that self-possessed manner, that quick, varying ex-

pression of eye, that singular smile of inward thoughtfulness?

Katharine's history may be the best reply.

Tea was brought in by the maid-servant, and Mr. Ashton was called in from the shop. He came in with a smiling face, and stood rubbing his hands over the fire. "Colonel Forbes will have a cold drive home to-night: I can't say I envy him. Here, Kate, give me my chair, and draw the table nearer." "Has Colonel Forbes bought that book of the coloured birds?" asked Mrs. Ashton. "All but: he stickles a little at the price, but he will have it by and by; he says he shall call again to-morrow." "Seven guineas is a large price to give for one book," observed Katharine, who was seated opposite to the fire, pouring out the tea. "Not when there is a lady in the case, Kitty, my child," said Mr. Ashton with a meaning smile. "Foolish things you women make us do,—hey, wife? isn't it so?" And he stooped down and gave his wife a hearty kiss. "It is a good many years I hope since you did any foolish thing for me, Mr. Ashton, if that's what you mean," was the reply; "but what are you talking about? what has Colonel Forbes to do with a lady?"—"Why, not much in the present tense we may suppose," said Mr. Ashton, who prided himself upon being rather a grammarian, "but a good deal in the future. By the by, Kitty, his intended is an old friend of yours. I think I shall tell the Colonel so some day if he gets uppish as he is inclined to do."—"A friend of mine, father," said Katharine, "why, I never had any friend."—"I thought you chits at school made friends with every one," replied Mr. Ashton. "Didn't I use to hear you talk of Jane Sinclair?"—"Oh! yes, Miss Sinclair,—yes, I remember," and Katharine slightly blushed; "but I could not call her my friend

exactly, she was only there three quarters of a year, because her aunt was ill, and no one knew what to do with her, and I have not seen her since.”—“And she is grown a fine lady now,” said Mrs. Ashton; “they say, that Captain Sinclair had heaps of grand relations, who never did any thing for him whilst he was living; but since his death some one has left Miss Sinclair a tolerable fortune.”—“Oh! that is the reason then that they are going to live in that large house,” said Katharine. “I thought just now, mother, when you told me of it, that they must be rich; but when Miss Sinclair lived with her aunt, it was in a very poky way,—at least so Selina said.”—“Just like her, knowing every thing about every body’s affairs,” said Mr. Ashton. “Mrs. Ashton, what do you say to your son John, taking up so much with Miss Selly Fowler?”—“I think my son John must manage his own concerns,” said Mrs. Ashton. “He is only like all other young men.”—“But I don’t think Selly would make him a good wife,” observed Katharine. “She is too grand a great deal; and I know Mr. Fowler thinks it quite a condescension to ask John to the house.”—“Heigh!” exclaimed Mr. Ashton, with a whistle of surprise, “condescension, indeed! why his father was a farmer like mine, and the girl has not a penny. I wonder what he will say if it comes to a question of settlements.”—“Oh, father!” exclaimed Katharine, “you don’t mean that there can be ever anything serious between John and Selina.”—“Why not, child?”—“Why not?” Katharine’s cheek became crimson with eagerness and nervousness. “I don’t know that I can tell exactly, but I was at school with her.”—“So much the more reason for being her friend, I should think,” replied Mr. Ashton.—“Yes, if I liked her, and thought she was worth anything. But, father,

John ought to marry some one who would put him up in the world.”—“Well, Kate,” observed Mrs. Ashton, “for that matter I don’t know what John could do better. Mrs. Fowler has a cousin a clergyman, and they visit at Captain Store’s and Mr. Blgrave’s, and I know at the hunt last year Mr. Fowler was asked to dine at Sir John Keene’s.”

“But it is not sure that John will be asked too,” replied Katharine; “besides, I don’t think, mother, you quite know what I mean, and I don’t think I can explain to you.”

“And there is no time now,” remarked Mr. Ashton, “for here comes Master John himself.”

The door was thrown open rather roughly, and a young man, about three-and-twenty years of age, entered the room. He was good-looking; more so perhaps, strictly speaking, than his sister, whom he strongly resembled; but there was an air of slang about him, which was very unpleasant when contrasted with Katharine’s quiet simplicity. His black curling hair had long been allowed to remain uncut, and his whiskers were ferocious. He wore a short, sportsman-like coat, and a blue cravat, loosely tied, which displayed more of his brown throat than was quite agreeable to the eye. A strong scent of cigars accompanied him, so strong that Mrs. Ashton’s first exclamation was: “John, don’t bring any of those nasty smoking things in here.”—“Haven’t got any, mother,” replied John, seizing the first chair at hand, and seating himself at the table. “Kitty, give us a cup of tea.”—“It is rather cold, John, I am afraid.” said Katharine; “wait a few minutes, and let me make the water boil.” She stirred the fire, and lifted the heavy tea-kettle; her brother not offering to help her, but sitting with his right leg crossed over his knee, humming a tune. “Well, John,” said Mr. Ashton,

“how have you and Miss Selly been getting on to-day?”—“Selly’s a goose,” replied John, rather pettishly.—“And is this the first time you have found that out, John dear?” said Katharine, with rather a malicious smile. “I can’t think what makes you girls so envious of one another,” exclaimed John; “as soon as ever one of you has a civil word said to her, the others are all up in arms. Selly may not have such a way of keeping accounts as you have, Kate; but she’s never been bred up to it; as she said to me to-day, she’s a lady; and, as I said to her, she’s a handsome one. If you live to be a hundred, Kate, you will never be half what she is.”—“I don’t suppose I shall,” said Katharine, laughing; “when people live to be a hundred, they are generally not very remarkable for beauty. However, John, I don’t at all dispute Selina’s good looks, only,”—she stopped, prudently, most likely, —but the ostensible reason was because the water in the tea-kettle was boiling over. “Now, let me make you a bit of toast,” she said, after pouring the water into the teapot; “there will be just time whilst the tea is brewing.” John seemed mollified by the attention, and cut off the slice of bread himself to save her the trouble, remarking, as he handed it to her, that she was the best maker of toast in Rilworth. The compliment, it is to be hoped, repaid Katharine for the scorching heat of the fire before which she knelt, as her brother certainly had little mercy upon her; his appetite for toast, especially such toast as Katharine could make, was prodigious. Mr. Ashton lingered in the room for some time, half amused and half impatient; but as John applied himself to the third round, he exclaimed, “Well, John, my boy, it is to be hoped that good eating is good preparation for work: there is the last London parcel to be unpacked and sorted to-

night ; and it's high time you should begin."—"Dick Fowler and I are going to the lecture at the Institution," said John, carelessly. "Well! that's half-past seven," said his father. "and it is now a quarter past six; there will be plenty of time, if you send off all this rubbish,"—and he gave a push to the tea-tray; "Kate will read the invoice."

"I dare say I could do it all, if it was necessary," said Katharine, good-humouredly; "Susan will help me unpack."—"That foreman of mine, Dawes, ought to have been in to-night," said Mr. Ashton; "but he's engaged too, he tells me. I can't imagine what all you young men are made of, to be thinking of so many things besides your work."—"Do you want your accounts this evening, father?" said Katharine, attempting to lift a large mahogany desk, which stood on a table near the fireplace. Mr. Ashton hesitated a little—"No; I think not. I have rather a notion,—did Dick Fowler say if his father was going to the gas committee to-night, John?"—"He talked something about it, I did not exactly understand what," answered John; "but I know Mr. Fowler is up about it, for Dick told me Colonel Forbes was going to take a share."—"That reminds me"—Mr. Ashton turned quickly to his daughter—"There's a set of books, which I promised the Colonel should be sent over to him by the van to-morrow early, so mind you put them up to-night, Kitty; I will show you which they are presently." Mr. Ashton went into the shop. Mrs. Ashton said she must fetch some more work; and Katharine also lighted a candle, and was going away, when her brother pulled her back,— "Stop, Kate, I want to have five words with you." Katharine put down her candle, and went back to the fireplace. "What do you mean by always putting in such provoking words about Selly?" began

John. "Because I think them, I am afraid," replied Kate, quickly; "you know, John, she really is not worth your having except just for her pretty face."—"And the connection," said John; "you forget that, Kitty. She is a peg above us any day."—"That is just what I doubt, John," said Katharine. "My father thinks so, I know; he never would let you think of her else, because she has no money; but, somehow, I never can get out of my mind that you, and I, and all of us, are worth quite as much in the world as she is. That is pride, I dare say; it is wrong, too, I dare say. I wish I could be quite sure though that it was,"—and the dreamy, inward look peculiar to Katharine's face, passed over it for a moment. "I don't understand all that backwards and forwards work, Kitty," replied John. "I only know that Selly visits people who won't take any notice of us; and what's more, too, I know she won't have anything to say to me whilst I stand behind a counter, and that's what I want to talk to you about."—"My dear John!" and Katharine, looked distressed, for her quick mind had caught in a moment a whole train of troubles consequent upon this new idea. "Well! my dear Kate!" he patted her shoulder, and with a hesitating laugh, added, "why am I not to be a gentleman, if I can be? There's old Andrews means to give up business soon, and be as grand as the grandest."—"Where is the money to come from?" asked Katharine?—"That is another question, and a sensible one," observed John, approvingly. "You mustn't think I've not thought of that, little Kitty."—"And what are you going to do to make yourself a gentleman?" asked Kate, whilst a smile played upon her lips, which was not quite flattering to her brother's self-love. "You don't take to the notion I see, Kitty," he continued, drawing up his head, "but what is to hinder me from having a little business of my own?—a farm,

we'll say. My father would let me have the money to stock it; and Selly and I might live to ourselves quite quietly. Mr. Fowler wouldn't object to that as he would to the shop."

The movement of Katharine's foot had betrayed considerable impatience during this speech; there was a sparkle in her eye too, which indicated something very like temper. John paused, but heard no reply. "Well, Kate! child! what are you thinking of?"—"I don't know; I can't say, John."—"Won't it do?" John looked at her anxiously; he had more trust in her judgment than he would have been willing to acknowledge. "It might do if Selly was not in the question, and if she wasn't, you would never have thought of it."—"For pity's sake speak out, Kate; how can one make sense of such ins and outs?" Katharine's quick glance was quieted now, and she said calmly, "I would speak out, John, if I thought you would understand me, or if I really understood myself. I don't go with you, that you know; I don't want to be what you call a lady, or to see you what you would think a gentleman. I would rather be myself, and see you yourself; and I don't like Selly for putting you up to being different. I think it is one of her senseless notions, and I can't stand it, and it makes me cross, and I wish you had never had anything to do with her. So now perhaps I had better not give any opinion about the farm."—"Oh yes, speak up," said John, a little sulkily. Katharine still hesitated. "Well, if I must—I dare say I don't know much about such things,—but it seems to me that if people want to be farmers, they should know something about farming;" and again Katharine's smile was a very little satirical. "They can learn, I suppose," said John. "Yes; but then if a man takes a farm to learn upon, and finds he

can't learn, what is to become of him, when he has married upon the chance of succeeding?"—"That's all nonsense, Kitty, every one must have a beginning; and Selly and I could live upon as little as we chose."—"But don't you think, John," continued Katharine, "that it is a pity you did not take to this farming rather earlier, if you are so bent upon it? What was the good of all the bookkeeping, and summing, and reading you had at school, if you are going now to give it all up?"—"All that is nothing to the point, Kate; what I say is, that I can't ask Selly Fowler to marry me if I am going to stand behind a counter; and so take a farm I must, for there is nothing else to be done." Katharine took refuge in silence. "And you don't choose to talk to my father about it for me then?" said John. Katharine laughed; she could not help it. "Of course not, my dear John, what could make you think I should?"—"Why, because you are a good-natured chit, and have helped me out of difficulties before."—"There is no occasion to get into this one," replied Katharine gravely; "so if I promised to help you beforehand, it would be leading you in, not out. Seriously, John," she continued,—and she put her arm round his neck, and looked into his face with a smile of arch but winning sweetness,—“you must listen to reason for one minute. What are you to do with a farm, and what is Selly to do? She can't make butter and cheese.”—"No, indeed, I should never wish her to do so."—"Well, then," continued Katharine, "if she can't she must pay some one who can, and so she must keep farm servants and house servants, and loads of people to help her, and who is to pay for it all? You can't do it, John, really you can't. Selly is not the wife for you if you take a farm, any more than if you keep a shop. You are

not like a person who can give her plenty of money and let her sit idle all day. Your wife, John, must work.”—“She shan’t though,” said John impatiently.—“Then she must starve,” replied Katharine, with a quick laugh; “have we not all been brought up to work?”—“Yes, work as a gentleman,—that I have no objection to,” observed John; “but not behind a counter.”—“And why not? why are not people just as good behind a counter as before one?” asked Katharine. “It is so mean to care about it, like being ashamed of one’s relations. You mustn’t mind my saying so, John, but I can’t bear Selly for putting such notions into your head; and if I can’t tell why they are wrong, yet I am sure they are wrong, and mean, and low, and they make me proud. They make me long to go and stand in the shop myself, and show Selly that I am not above doing what my father does, and what my grandfather did before him.” John turned away. “I have been cross, John, I know. Please forgive me. Don’t go away without a kiss.” Katharine followed him to the door to stop him. John looked at her kindly, even respectfully. “I can’t think as you do, Kate. I don’t say it might not be better if I did.”—“You might be good for so much, John, I am sure,” continued Katharine, earnestly; “you were made to be good for a great deal: father says so often, only,”—she seemed very much afraid of proceeding, but the expression of John’s face was softer and more thoughtful,—“only if you could be one thing, what you are;—not two things, trying to be something else, or letting Selly persuade you into trying. You might be like Charlie Ronaldson, whom my father was praising so the other night, if you would.”—“What! that solemn black-looking prig, with his cropped hair and his books; no, defend me from that!”—“I think the scissors would

do good though," said Katharine, playfully. "Even George Andrews does not wear his hair as long as you do."—"By the by, George Andrews and all his party are to be at the Institute to-night," exclaimed John; "why don't you come too, Kate?" "The London parcel, and the invoice, and the books for Colonel Forbes," was Katharine's reply. John delayed, perhaps his conscience reproached him for leaving her to work alone, but he did not betray the feeling if he had it, and merely said, as he went away, "It's one of Colonel Forbes' farms that would just suit me."

Katharine began to unpack the parcel by herself. It was cold work in a back room or rather closet, without a fire, but she did not think of that, she was too busy; yet the business, upon the whole, went on slowly; her mind was not thoroughly given to it. She thought of a great many things whilst she was taking out books and putting aside the sheets of brown paper in which they were wrapped. Sometimes of her conversation with John and her anxiety for him, and of Selina Fowler and her foolish education and absurd fancies; and occasionally of more abstract subjects, but the latter were more feelings than thoughts; she scarcely realised them to herself, only they gave her rather a feeling of depression, as if there was something in her kept down, imprisoned, as if there might be some object or aim in life which she ought to have and had not. She did not exactly ask herself what use there was in unpacking books, but she wondered what was the good of reading them, what made the people write them, what made any one do any thing in fact. Many of the books were new novels; she looked into them and they amused her, but it was an unsatisfactory peep, because she did not venture to uncut the leaves. A few, however,

were for the circulating library, and these she seized upon with avidity, more for her mother than herself. Mrs. Ashton was very fond of a novel when it could be read out to her, and if they were not both very much engaged in work, Katharine often took one from the library to read aloud. She could find a good deal of amusement in the books generally, and she thought reading aloud a very agreeable way of pleasing her mother; but the novels were just as perplexing as real life. People fell in love, and after a good deal of fuss were married at last, of course, like every one else; but afterwards they went on just as before, eating, and drinking, and sleeping, and talking to the end—till death. There was no difference that Katharine could see in any rank. If the people she read of were gentlemen and ladies, they lived in country houses, and gave large parties, and the gentlemen went out hunting and shooting, and the ladies worked worsted work; but there was no more use in that, as far as Katharine could see, than there was in her own employment, kneeling down upon the floor in a back room, unpacking a parcel. She could not wish to change with them, she did not think it would make her happier—no, she was useful where she was, pleasing her father and mother, making her home cheerful. She ought to be happy, and she was happy. Yet at the very moment Katharine said this to herself, there was a painful sense of nothingness, of want of interest at her heart, which made her rush back to her work in order that she might forget it.

The box was unpacked, the books were ranged in order on the floor, ready to be carried into the shop the next morning. Only Colonel Forbes' parcel remained to be put up. Her father had left the list of books in the parlour, and Katharine went in to

fetch it. She found her mother sitting in the arm-chair, having fallen asleep over her work. The snuff of the mould candle had grown very tall, and looked really alarming in its vicinity to the yards of linen which lay upon the oil-cloth table cover. Katharine's entrance woke Mrs. Ashton. She was not very clear as to the hour, and, rubbing her eyes, inquired in a drowsy voice if it was tea-time. "Bed-time, you mean, mother," said Katharine; "it is pretty near ten—half-past nine, that is,—won't you have supper?"—"Better wait for your father; he said he shouldn't be late," replied Mrs. Ashton; and she sat up, and taking her spectacles, set to work again, as diligently as if she had never left off. "Mother," said Katharine, as she watched her, "I wish I could go on stitching and sewing as you do; I should get dreadfully tired if I had as much to do."—"Wait till you are as old as I am, Kitty, and then you won't want to be fidgeting about; when I was your age I was not half as steady as you are now."—"They are shirts, aren't they?" said Katharine, taking up the work. "A set for John," replied Mrs. Ashton, "and, by the time they are done, there will be a set wanted for your father;—plenty to do, isn't there, Kitty?"—"Plenty," replied Katharine, thoughtfully; "but one shouldn't be happy, I suppose, without it."—"No; of course not," replied Mrs. Ashton; "what were we sent into the world for except to work? Why, when I was a girl I was up at half-past four as often as not, and about in the dairy, and looking after all the farm people. My mother never bred me up to be an idle lady, any more than I have bred you up, Kate;—a good, useful girl—that's what your father and I always set our hearts upon your being."—"I wonder what Miss Sinclair is?" said Katharine, who was standing with her eyes fixed upon the list of books for Colonel Forbes. "Miss

Sinclair, Kitty ! what on earth makes you think of her?"—"Only that, I suppose, some of these books are for her," observed Katharine, smiling; "they don't seem to be much of a gentleman's choice."—"Oh! very likely; paying court," said Mrs. Ashton, with a meaning nod; "we shall see you having fine things given you some of these days, Kitty."—"Perhaps so," replied Katharine, in the tone of one who scarcely knew that she was addressed. "Jane—Miss Sinclair—was always given to reading and learning lessons at Miss Richardson's," she added; "I suppose she is much the same now."—"She has nothing else to do in the world," said Mrs. Ashton; "reading is very well for young ladies who have plenty of servants to manage everything for them."—"Jane Sinclair read when her aunt only kept one servant," observed Katharine; "and she was going to learn all kinds of things besides. I dare say she can talk French quite well now."—"Well, Kate," said Mrs. Ashton—perceiving, as she fancied, a slight amount of discontent in her daughter's voice—"and so can you talk French too. You asked that old beggar, the other day, where he came from, which was more, I am sure, than I could do."—"I am afraid my French would not help me much if I were to go to France," answered Katharine, good-humouredly; "but as I am likely to stay in England all my life, I suppose it will not much signify. Perhaps, mother, it was a pity we troubled about it when I was at Miss Richardson's; it is not likely to be any good to me."—"Your father and I liked you to learn what other girls learnt," said Mrs. Ashton; "and Matty Andrews thought so much about it—that was what put us up to giving you a few months of it."—"Matty is a fine lady," said Katharine; "I suppose French is good for fine ladies. But, mother, I don't want to be any thing but myself,—only, I

should like to be the best of myself." Mrs. Ashton stared at Katharine for a moment, through her spectacles, and then her eyes went down again to her work. The speech was mystifying, like others which she occasionally heard. Katharine knew that well. There is nothing we are sooner aware of than the fact of not being understood; and she went back into silence, or, rather, into a meditation upon Colonel Forbes' list, and very soon after returned to the back room to put up the parcel.

CHAPTER III.

THE large house with the green verandah, opposite St. Peter's church, was one of the best in Rilworth. It was so good, indeed, that it had long remained unoccupied, because no one could afford to take it; or, at least, the persons who could do so did not choose to settle in a country town. What made Mrs. Sinclair fix upon it, was not supposed to be known, though it was guessed at. The ostensible reason was, to please Jane, who had a remembrance of her childish days in the place, and thought it would be pleasant to recall them. It was an agreeable home, at any rate, for Mrs. Sinclair for a time. The contrast between what her position now was and what she had feared it would be when left with only the pension of an officer's widow, could not but be agreeable even to one who had suffered so much, and was so thoroughly unworldly. It was a great comfort to feel that economy was not always the first thing to be thought of, that it was allowable to be lavish in charity and

hospitality. It was delightful to be able to encourage Jane's generous plans, and only check them with consideration of prudence for others, not of care for herself. Mrs. Sinclair was just the person to enjoy this freedom and be thankful for it. Yet she was not looking quite happy now; she was grave, and her glance at Jane, who sat in the library, writing a long letter, was very anxious. Jane did not perceive it; she was too much engrossed in her occupation. She also was looking grave, but it was a very different gravity from her mother's; it was the thoughtfulness of one who was just beginning to view life truly and seriously, who had probably been newly awakened to a sense of its responsibilities; yet there was no anxiety in it, but rather gladness and hope, and bright confidence. Her pen moved rapidly.

"I am very happy," she wrote, "more happy than I was two months ago. Everything was confusing then, but now I am beginning to understand the future, to feel how solemn and yet how full of joy it is. At times I trouble myself with fears which you would laugh at; you have such trust in me, so much more than I can have in myself. I must one day tell you the history of my past life, not its events (for they have been very few), but its feelings. I shall think then that you will judge me truly, and be better able to make allowance for me. I never knew till now what an oppression the weight of undeserved praise might be. But I try to think that it is not praise from you but love,—and then I can bear it better; for I feel that I can return it. I know that I can see no fault in you, and so I can better bear that you should look blindly upon me. Perhaps though, it would be better if we could see each other truly. Have you any faults? I do try seriously to believe that you have

Mamma tells me I must. She says, if I dream too much now, there will some day be a sorrowful waking; but I would rather dream, I must do so, for I could not live without it, and I have no fear. Come what may, one thing can never change — our love."

So Jane Sinclair wrote two months after she had consented to be the wife of Colonel Forbes, of Maplestead. Nineteen was very young to be married; no wonder that Mrs. Sinclair looked anxious. And Jane had known so little of her future husband! Six months before they had been perfect strangers; three months before only intimate acquaintances! When Mrs. Sinclair looked back, she could scarcely trace the steps by which the engagement had been reached. She knew only that Jane had been thrown more especially into the society of Colonel Forbes at the house of a friend, when she herself was compelled to be absent, in attendance upon a dying relation, and that, on her return, the offer was made openly and honourably, and accepted timidly, but willingly. There could be no reasonable objection. Colonel Forbes had character, position, fortune, everything which in the eyes of the world could render the connection desirable. Jane said he had also deep-seated, sterling principle, and her mother saw no reason to doubt it. Yet who would not have trembled to trust the gentle, shrinking, sensitive girl of nineteen to the stern, commanding, polished man of the world, twelve years her senior?

Mrs. Sinclair begged for a delay in the engagement, but certainty was Colonel Forbes' necessity. If he could not have certainty, he would have despair, and Mrs. Sinclair yielded; more, however, to Jane's tearful eyes and pale cheeks than to the urgent demands of the Colonel. She could have

opposed his words, but she could not oppose Jane's sorrowful but dutiful submission, and the engagement was ratified, subject only to the condition, that three months should elapse before the marriage.

"Colonel Forbes will not be here to-day, Jane, I think you said," observed Mrs. Sinclair, as she watched the rapid progress of Jane's pen.—"No, not till to-morrow—to-morrow at four; he will not return from London till then. He asked if we would walk on the Maplestead Road to meet him, and I am writing to tell him we will." Mrs. Sinclair smiled. It was a very long message for such a simple announcement, three pages at least. "It is a happy thing you can write, Jane," she said; "Colonel Forbes would never have known anything about you without writing."—"No, only facts," replied Jane, and her voice had an accent of sadness. "He scolds me for it a little now; he says I am so different from my letters; but I mean to talk to him by and by, mamma, just as I do to you."—"I trust so, my child," but Mrs. Sinclair was not very confident in her tone. She dreaded Jane's timidity and reserve of manner. It would not suit all people; it might not suit Colonel Forbes. The coldness would be too like himself. Yet he must have seen through it quickly, or he would not have ventured to risk his happiness by the offer he had made. If it were only possible to search into people's hearts to know what it was which influenced them! Mrs. Sinclair need not have been perplexed upon that point. Any person who looked at Jane would have seen quite sufficient to account for the fascination she had exercised. It was not regular beauty which was her charm, but exquisite refinement. She was so slight and delicate, so graceful and quiet, one could scarcely

have desired any change except it might be a tinge of deeper colour in the pale cheek, and something of greater animation in the blue dreamy eye. Perhaps, too, some might have required more warmth of expression; for although all who knew Jane well, knew also the quickness and depth of her feelings, there were many who did not know her, and said they never could, and they were cold in manner in consequence, and frightened Jane, and threw her back more into herself, and so the evil increased. But Jane did not see its full extent yet. She had her mother to love her, and many dear friends who understood her, and one especially, who was only too willing to make her his idol, and so she lived in her own happy world, and gave no thought to what might be beyond.

“I must give up to-day, mamma, to business,” said Jane, as at length she laid down her pen, and folded up her letter. “If we are to walk to Maplestead to-morrow, I must go and see my old women this afternoon.”—“Mrs. Reeves is disconsolate at the notion of your going away, Jane,” said Mrs. Sinclair, “she thought you were going to be her right hand.”—“Not a very strong one, I am afraid,” replied Jane, laughing; “she will be badly off if she has nothing better to depend upon.”—“I suspect she has not very much,” observed Mrs. Sinclair; “there is no one scarcely living in Rilworth who can do anything. Mr. Reeves says it puts him in despair.”—“He always finds fault with Rilworth,” said Jane; “I don’t like him for that. I am sure the people are much better than he fancies; but he cannot know much about them, for he is only just come.”—“I dare say they may be good in their way,” replied Mrs. Sinclair, “only Mr. Reeves cannot get at them; and one thing every one must see—the subscriptions are miserable.”—“Colonel Forbes means to subscribe to the

Rilworth charities," said Jane. "I asked him about them the other day, and he said of course whatsoever I was interested in he should be delighted to assist; so Mr. Reeves may be happy on that point. Dear mamma, why do you look so grave?"—"Because money is so much, and does so little, my child," replied her mother; "and because living in a country town one cannot help feeling it. I wonder, Jane, what has become of all those young girls you used to talk to me about years ago."—"Yes, Kate, and Selina, and Matty," and Jane ran over a long list of names—"so odd it is to remember how one used to know all about them, and now they have passed away, quite out of one's sight. I don't like to think of that: I don't wish to forget any one I have ever been with."—"That is a young thought, Jane. Life is not long enough to remember every one."—"They were very good-natured girls, and clever, too, some of them," continued Jane, pursuing the current of her own ideas; "I should like to know what they have turned out."—"Nothing very valuable, I am afraid," said Mrs. Sinclair, "according to Mr. Reeves' account of the Sunday dress."—"Yes, that is surprising, certainly," observed Jane; "I remember now, I did see one of them last Sunday as we were going to church—Selina Fowler, and such a gay bonnet she had! flowers outside and inside! I knew her directly, because she was so exactly what she was at school; but they were not all like her, mamma. There were some very sensible, right-thinking girls; I dare say they would help Mr. Reeves, if he would ask them."—"Some of them do help him in the Sunday school, I believe," said Mrs. Sinclair, "but they are so fanciful, they do not like to be interfered with; and they are always taking offence, thinking that

some slight is intended. It must be very difficult to know what to do with them."

"Why should people think that others, especially such clergymen as Mr. Reeves, intend to be rude to them?" said Jane, thoughtfully.—"Because they are trying to move beyond their position," replied Mrs. Sinclair, "and they are conscious of it. People are always then on the *qui vive* for any neglect. What we all want to learn is the meaning of that sentence in the catechism, 'to do our duty in that state of life to which God has called us,' and not in any other."

"Then, mamma," said Jane, playfully, "I had better put on my bonnet, and go out to my old women; and so give me a kiss, and wish me good bye, and hope that they won't have dreadful tales to tell of each other, for that makes me more unhappy than anything."

CHAPTER IV.

JANE walked into High Street, and when she reached the upper end turned into a narrow lane that led into the country. Just beyond was a row of old picturesque almshouses; they formed a portion of a small district, which had been given her in charge by Mr. Reeves, the Vicar of Rilworth. Jane did not think she was doing any vast amount of good by undertaking a district. She was only a learner, and the work offered her was much less than it would have been in other parts of the town, and consisted chiefly in reading to the old women who could not go to church, and reporting special cases of sickness and distress to Mr. Reeves. Yet it was work; it

was something definite, and under rule, and Jane could better bear to hear as she was beginning to hear of sin and suffering, when she felt that, as far as in her lay, she was doing something, however slight, to relieve it.

Since her return to Rilworth she had sometimes felt that life in a country town — in any town, or large village in fact, or wherever numbers of her fellow-creatures were congregated, would be very oppressive if she were forced to sit idle. Probably she would have felt it more if her thoughts had been disengaged; but even Jane Sinclair, sincere and practical though she undoubtedly was, now and then grew dreamy when she dwelt upon the bright future of a married life.

She had paid her visits, and was just leaving the last cottage beyond the almshouses, when a wide heavy cart drove down the lane, and prevented her from crossing the road as she had intended. She stood for a moment at the cottage door, where two little boys about four and five years of age were playing. They had no occasion to run, but of course they did, just as the cart drew near, and immediately in front of the horse. Of course also Jane's impulse was to bring them back, but she only succeeded in saving one, the other in his haste fell, and though unhurt by the wheel, his arm was severely injured.

The screaming, calling, talking, rushing backwards and forwards which ensued, were both confusing and alarming to poor Jane. The neighbours crowded round the child, and seemed inclined to appeal to her as, in some way or other, the cause of the accident. She had rushed after the child, therefore it was supposed she had made him fall, and Jane found herself considered responsible not only for the injury, but for its treatment. "What was to

be done? What would the young lady wish to be done? The child was an orphan, he lived with his aunt Stokes, poor body! she was very weakly, and would never know what to do with him." The voices were so eager that Jane could only indistinctly gather their meaning. She stood in the centre of the crowd, self-possessed in manner but exceedingly pale, trying to make herself heard as she suggested the natural step of taking the child to the nearest surgeon that his arm might be examined. A sturdy labourer took the little fellow up, and the crowd moved on; for numbers had been attracted to the spot, and no one chose to go away till everything was known that could be known.

"Mr. Fowler's is the nearest, carry him in there," said an elderly woman as they turned the corner into High Street. "Yes, pray take him to the first surgeon you can," said Jane, eagerly. She was becoming very uneasy, for the child moaned sadly. "Keep off, will you?" said the labourer, as he mounted the steps to the green door. A few idle boys still peeped in, and Jane was kept back. A window which opened upon a balcony above was thrown open, and some one looked out. "I declare it's Miss Sinclair." said a loud, quick voice, and then a lady wearing a black cap with rose-coloured ribbons called out, "Get back, boys, get back; why don't you let the lady come up?" The boys laughed, and scrambled to the side railings, and one of them in his haste nearly fell upon Jane. She felt so annoyed that her impulse was to go away and leave the child now that he was in safe hands; but whilst she was hesitating, a young girl appeared at the open door, and speaking in a decided tone, informed the unruly little crowd that she would send for the policeman if they did not instantly move; and then making way for Jane, asked if she would not like to come

in. "Thank you; just for one moment, if I am not intruding;" and Jane hurried up the steps, not knowing whom she was addressing till she entered the passage. Then as she looked up, a gleam of satisfaction brightened her countenance, and she exclaimed, "Katharine! Katharine Ashton!—indeed I did not know you."—"But I had not forgotten Miss Sinclair," replied Katharine. An eager smile of pleasure for a moment crossed her face, but her manner became more hesitating, and she added, "Will you walk up stairs and wait in the drawing-room? Mr. Fowler is out, but his assistant is examining the child." Jane paused a little awkwardly. "Mrs. Fowler and Selina—Miss Fowler—are there, are they not?" "Yes; they would be very glad to see you if you would like to wait and hear what is the matter with the little boy." Jane looked round as if she would willingly have escaped from the necessity. "Or the back parlour is empty, if you would rather stay there," said Katharine, opening a door near her. Jane had recovered from her uncomfortable shyness now, and said she would go up stairs; only first—they had not met for so many years—she should like to know how Katharine's family were—her father and her mother, and her brother. She remembered how Katharine used to talk of him. The question was of course reciprocated, and a little family history was given on both sides, and inquiries were made about Miss Richardson, who had given up her school and removed from Rilworth, and Katharine was telling all she could remember, when Mrs. Fowler interrupted them, rushing down the stairs in a silk dress, flounced to such a width that it almost filled the space between the walls and the balustrade. Katharine drew back, and Jane was greeted with a thousand apologies that she had been allowed to remain below. Mrs. Fowler was so

anxious seeing her amongst all those rude boys, and Selina was quite frightened! Jane only laughed, and said there was nothing to be alarmed at; but she walked up stairs and Katharine followed.

“Dear Miss Sinclair,”—Selina did not call her “Dear Jane,” because Katharine was present—it was delightful to see her—it was such a long time since they had met, and there were such interesting things to tell and to hear! The delight was so noisy Jane felt almost stunned by it; and the interesting things were tumbled out from the heterogeneous stores of Miss Fowler’s memory with such rapidity and in such wonderful disorder that Jane’s consciousness of her own identity was rather shaken by it. She listened to the tall, gaily-dressed, handsome girl who sat by her side, overwhelming her with civilities till she began to ask herself whether it was not really true that they had been great friends, and whether she had not herself suddenly become very cold-hearted since she could not reciprocate the gratification. Besides, both Mrs. Fowler and Selina took such an interest in her affairs, they evidently knew all about her. They did not, indeed, actually mention Colonel Forbes’ name, but they talked about happy events, and hoped they might be allowed to congratulate, till poor Jane felt the crimson colour mounting to her cheeks, and tears of shyness and annoyance actually gathering in her eyes.

“Would you be kind enough to ask what the report of the little boy is?” asked Jane, at length, turning to Katharine Ashton, who was standing unnoticed by the fire-place. “Ring, Selina, ring,” said Mrs. Fowler; “I can’t think what has become of Betsey. We have a new housemaid, Miss Sinclair, and it is difficult to get her into the ways of the family. Servants are great troubles, as you young ladies will all find when you have homes of

your own. I can't do anything, can I, Miss Sinclair, in the way of getting you a servant? Mrs. Dore, at the Register Office, mentioned a good steady girl to me last week." Jane tried to smile and look amiable, but declined the offer of Mrs. Fowler's assistance, as she was not likely to require a servant just yet. "Ah! delay! well! you young ladies are particular—that every one knows. Selly often tells me that she never shall make up her mind to be married; but she does not know, does she? till the time comes."—"Would you like me to go and ask for the child myself?" inquired Katharine, breaking into the midst of Mrs. Fowler's speech.—"Ah! yes; perhaps it would be as well: Miss Sinclair will be very much obliged to you, I am sure. Go down to the dispensary, my dear, and knock at the door and ask;—you know where it is, on the right-hand side, at the bottom of the stairs." Katharine was gone before Jane had time to apologise for the trouble she was giving, and Mrs. Fowler went on; "That is Kate Ashton, Miss Sinclair; you must remember Kate Ashton, at Miss Richardson's. You, and Kate, and my Selly, were all at school together. She is a very good girl, is Kate; not, you know, quite the lady—that one couldn't expect—but very useful; a great help at home, I believe. She often comes to see us: Selly likes the keeping up old friendships, and Kate really is a very good girl."—"And old Mr. Ashton is considered very rich," observed Selina; "they say he won't keep on business much longer."—"He has a son to take it, has he not?" asked Jane, feeling quite glad to touch upon a subject which did not involve personalities. "Why, yes, yes," observed Mrs. Fowler, with some hesitation, whilst Selina smiled, and bridled her head, and said, "Oh, mamma!" and then stopped, and

smiled and bridled again. "I am right, Selly," observed Mrs. Fowler, nodding at her: "old Mr. Ashton has got a son to take the business; but we may tell Miss Sinclair, between ourselves, that there is a great doubt whether he ever will take it. You see it's a great pity to throw a fine young man away in that fashion—to put him behind a counter, and make nothing of him."—"The business has been so long established," observed Jane; "and Mr. Ashton is so much respected, it would have seemed the most natural thing to do; however, that is really not any concern of mine, only I hope, for Katharine's sake, that whatever her brother undertakes he may succeed in."

"Oh! there is no doubt of that, no doubt whatever," began Mrs. Fowler; "he is a very fine ——;" the eulogium was stopped by Katharine's re-entrance. "Poor child, how is he?" asked Selina, before Jane had time to speak.—"In a good deal of pain from the bruises; but there is no bone broken," replied Katharine, rather shortly. "They are going to take him home," she added; "but I said I thought Miss Sinclair would like to see him first."—"Thank you; certainly," said Jane; "may I go down stairs?" and she rose eagerly.—"We are so pleased; it has been such a great delight to Selly seeing you again," observed Mrs. Fowler, seizing Jane's hand, and retaining it against her will.—"A great delight, indeed," echoed Selina; "we shall meet, I hope, very often now."—"As often as circumstances will permit," said Mrs. Fowler, with a peculiar intonation of the voice, which was meant as a kind of stage aside; "you forget that, Selly." Poor Jane blushed again, and felt fearfully stiff and cold. "Good morning," was all she could say; and she followed Katharine down stairs.

They went into the surgery; the little boy was

lying in the Assistant's arms; he was quiet, but very pale. A woman who lived in the same house with his aunt, was going to take him home, but she had gone away on an errand. The Assistant was a little impatient of his burden; he had a good many patients to attend to, and there was nothing in the case of a child's bruised arm to excite much sympathy even if he had much to give. Jane asked a few questions about the treatment required, and then observing the hasty glances which the young surgeon cast at the door, offered to sit down, and take the child in her lap, and keep him still. "He is so dirty," said Katharine; "you can't do that."—Jane did shrink back for a moment as she looked at his soiled face and torn clothes, and then she smiled, and putting her arm round him, said, "I am afraid it will be a long time before we help others, if we wait till the world is clean." An accent in her voice, or possibly an expression in her face, carried Katharine's memory far back—to Miss Richardson's,—the scene in the passage, the ringing of the bell, and the calling over the names. It had a strange effect upon her;—it seemed to break down a barrier between herself and Jane; yet she stood silent and distant as before. "I suppose one ought to feel more pity than disgust with these poor little creatures," said Jane, as she allowed the child's head to rest upon her arm, though not till she had covered it with a handkerchief. "Their mothers ought to be taught to keep them clean," replied Katharine; "the dirty children in Rilworth are a disgrace to the town."—"In spite of the schools," said Jane thoughtfully. "Do you know Mr. Reeves?" she added.—"He calls sometimes to talk to my father," replied Katharine.—"He is a very good man," said Jane; "the poor people seem to like him very much."—"Do they? I never heard any one say much about

him; but my father likes him in the church.”—
“And don’t you like him too?” asked Jane.—“Oh! yes, very much, when I hear him, but he generally preaches in the evening, and then I stay at home and read to my mother: she is afraid of taking cold if she goes out at night—to church at least,—it is so hot.”—“Poor little fellow,” said Jane, again turning her attention to the child, “he is an orphan.”—“He lives in one of the almshouses, in Long Lane, doesn’t he?” asked Katharine; “I fancied I heard one of the men who brought him say so.”—“Yes, with his aunt; I ought to know something about him, for he belongs to my district; but he has been in the country lately.” Katharine looked at him with more interest, and said, she did not know that Miss Sinclair had any particular reason for taking care of him. “Was her district a very large one?”—“No, indeed, very small,” exclaimed Jane, laughing, “scarcely to be called one, indeed, when compared with others. There are three unoccupied now, Mr. Reeves says, and in the very worst parts of the town. I don’t know who could take them;—there does not seem any one in Rilworth willing to come forward.”—“People should be more like you,” said Katharine, quickly; “but I suppose, generally speaking, every one has his own business to attend to.”—Jane became rather thoughtful, and presently said, in a hesitating voice: “Mr. Reeves thinks that the business of the poor is every one’s business.”—“Oh! yes, of course, if they have nothing else to attend to,” said Katharine. “It is a pity there are not more ladies living in Rilworth.”—“And it is such a wretched place!” continued Jane: “I heard miserable stories about it the other day at the district meeting. One family I know myself in Long Lane, seven children there are, the husband works at the cotton-mill, and gets nine shillings a

week, when he is in full work, but half the time he is only employed for three days out of the six, and then he gets nothing; so how they all live is more than I can imagine; and there is an old debt hanging over them for house rent, to be paid by degrees, and the poor woman told me to-day that she lay awake at night, thinking what she should do, because all her little furniture would be seized if the money she had agreed for was not ready. And another woman I know, with five children, and the husband quite out of regular work, only gaining half-a-crown or a shilling occasionally, and the woman looking so ill—actually starved, and telling me one Saturday evening, when I happened to go there, that she could not send her children to school any more, for she had parted with their only decent clothes to get them a bit of bread. And this sort of thing one feels is going on all over the town, and no one seems able to get at it, or really help it.”—

“But I thought the District Society did a great deal to help them,” said Katharine. A sad smile passed over Jane’s face. “If you did but know,” she said, “what it is to dole out district tickets to poor starving people! Six-pence each is their worth; and we are obliged to be very economical over them. Districts of forty families are not provided with more than twelve in a month. I don’t mean that one is not glad to give these, or that the poor people are not grateful for them; but it is startling when one looks through the list of subscriptions to see persons contenting themselves with giving half-a-crown and five shillings a year, and then to hear, as I heard it said the other day, that there ought to be no poverty in Rilworth, because the District Society provides for the wants of the poor.”

“You seem to care a great deal about it,” said Katharine: she blushed as she spoke, for her tone

had been very abrupt, and she was conscious of it. Jane's dreamy eyes were fixed upon her for a moment, in wonder,—“ Can one live amongst them without caring ? ” she said.

There was no answer, and there was no time for one. The woman who was to take charge of the child came in to fetch him, and he was given into her charge, and Jane went with her. She would not leave the child, she said, till she had seen what he would want at home.

They shook hands at parting, and Jane hoped often to see Katharine again ; but her manner was a little awkward, as if she did not know on what footing to place their acquaintance. Katharine smiled,—“ If you will come and see me in our parlour behind the shop,” she said, “ I should think it very kind ; I am there nearly all day ; my father will not let me go into the shop.” Jane held out her hand again—this time with great cordiality,—“ Thank you ; then if I may come, I will,” and she followed the woman and the little boy down the street.

Katharine stood at the door looking after her ; then she heard Selina Fowler's voice, and, without waiting to be spoken to, she hurried home.

CHAPTER V.

KATHARINE ASHTON'S character was one which unfolded itself slowly : the bud was only half opened even at eighteen, but within it was the form of the perfect flower ; so it is with all whose dispositions, like hers, are grafted upon candour and honesty of purpose. There is a great deal of talking in the

present day about truth, and "shams," and "hum-bugs," but through it all one cannot help feeling that as much falsity often exists in the minds of those who declaim most loudly upon the subject, as in the very persons with whom they are finding fault. Theories of truth are for the most part untrue. It is practical truth which we want,—conscientiousness,—the agreement of the daily life with the principles upon which it is professed to be governed. Let these be what they may,—high or low, religious, or merely moral, founded upon right or upon mistaken judgment,—if the constant effort of the heart is to keep the principle and the action in accordance, there is a hope,—more than a hope—almost a certainty, of improvement, for the foundation of the character is true. And so, on the contrary, if we allow ourselves, in ever so slight a degree, to hold principles which we do not heartily try, in spite of constant failure, to carry out in practice, the germ of improvement is wanting, for the foundation of the character is untrue.

Katharine Ashton's tone of mind was not in the least like Jane Sinclair's. Jane was deeply, earnestly religious, both in feeling and conduct; Katharine was religious also, but the motive was duty, not love. Jane was dreamy and imaginative, and but for her exceeding unselfishness and kindness of heart, it would at times have seemed a task beyond her strength to be practical. Katharine, on the contrary, was essentially active in body and mind; so active that energy became her snare, for constant occupation kept down her higher impulses. Yet one thing they had in common,—sincerity; and when they met, with the barriers of society and education between them, they understood each other, and were at ease.

Katharine, perhaps, the most so. She had no wish for anything beyond her own position; no object in striving to be what she was not. Simple herself, she gave others credit for equal simplicity; and when Jane met her cordially, and recalled the pleasant feelings of old times, she received the kindness as it was intended, not as in any way a condescension, but as the warmth of heart of an old friend.

Yet there was an influence in Jane's character to which it was scarcely possible that Katharine should be insensible. She was very ignorant of herself,—of her own powers,—or even her own tastes; but there were some moments in which glimpses of higher enjoyments than she had yet known, and impulses for nobler good, shot, as it were, across the twilight of her mind. She could feel what she did not reason upon; she had felt the charm of Jane Sinclair's quiet but chivalrous spirit of self-sacrifice when they were children together at school. It had insensibly aided to keep up the standard of her own principles, as its memory lingered with her in after years; and now it had met her again in the same form,—unpretending, unexciting, almost concealed by an impassive manner, yet as intensely earnest, as thoroughly single-minded, as in the young days when Jane lost the chance of her own reward, because she could not make up her mind to give up the hope of helping another.

“How can one live amongst them without caring?” repeated Katharine to herself, as she walked leisurely home. She had a new idea in her mind, and she looked down the narrow alleys and courts, which opened into the High-street of Rilworth, with something of the feeling of having seen them for the first time. Yet it did not quite strike her that she could have any concern with them: she did not know that she had time, or talents, or

money to spare, as she supposed Jane had. She felt, indeed, that Jane was using her powers to the best advantage, and she honoured her for it. If she herself was a lady, with plenty of money, and nothing to occupy her, it seemed that she would like to do the same; but now with the business of the shop, and her duties to her parents, and work for her brother, there could be no time, she fancied, for any thing more.

Yet Katharine was not happy when she reached home; the old sense of nothingness and uselessness was upon her. She went up to her room to take off her bonnet, and was sent for to write a letter — an order, for her father, to go off by that day's post. There was a great disinclination in her mind for such work. She did not see why people should send orders, or what good her father did, except to himself, by undertaking to execute them. People read, she supposed, for amusement, and what was amusement? Jane Sinclair's work was much more profitable. She wished she could have something like it, instead of her own; but that was discontent, and Katharine had a great dread of growing discontented, for she thought that she saw in her own mind a tendency to it; and she knelt down and repeated a prayer against the fault, out of a little book of prayers which Miss Richardson had given her. Katharine's sincerity made her do that. A childlike conscientiousness took the place of love in her religion. She did what love and faith would do; but, as yet, she only found safety in it, not pleasure.

Writing the letters occupied her till nearly four o'clock, — and then there was just time to read to her mother till it grew dark; so she brought one of the novels from the library, and read aloud till the twilight; and then the fire was stirred, and

a bright blaze made, and chairs were drawn near to the cheerful hearth; and Mr. Ashton came in from the shop to have a little talk before tea.

“Well, Kitty,” was his first question, “where did you go this afternoon when I saw you setting forth so boldly up the street by yourself?”—“Selly Fowler asked me to walk up and see her,” replied Katharine; “she wanted some help about a new dress she is going to wear to-night, and the maid was busy.”—“Miss Selly likes to see her handsome face set off by fine clothes—doesn’t she, now?” said Mr. Ashton, laughing. “But what is the party to-night?”—“A tea-party at Mr. Madden’s, the brewer’s,” said Katharine, “and a dance, too, Selly thinks. She wanted me to wish to go too, father,” added Katharine, with a smile, “but I did not wish it at all; I should never care to know set-up people like the Miss Maddens.”—“They are very stylish, though,” said Mrs. Ashton, “and the Andrews’s are there for ever.”—“That is partly why I don’t like them, mother dear,” said Katharine; “I never like any one that Matty Andrews likes. But, father, I saw Miss Sinclair to-day, too, at Mr. Fowler’s, and she asked after you all, and after John, and seemed to remember all about us.”—“Calling at Mrs. Fowler’s, was she?” said Mrs. Ashton; “I never should have thought they visited; old Miss Maurice used to keep so much to herself when she was living here.”—“She was not calling, though Mrs. Fowler took it as a call,” said Katharine, laughing; “she came there by accident, because there was a child hurt, and she had seen it fall, and came to know what the hurt was. She has one of the districts, and goes about a good deal, I suspect.”—“Ladies like to fidget in and out with the poor people,” said Mr. Ashton, “but I don’t see, for my part, the good of it. What is the use of a clergyman if he doesn’t

look after his own poor? however, they have nothing else to do in the world—I suppose that's it.”—“Miss Sinclair thinks the Rilworth people very badly off,” said Katharine. I tell you what, Kitty,” replied Mr. Ashton, somewhat hastily, “that is just one of the things which young ladies like to talk about, because they don't understand it. There's a set of idle vagabonds in Rilworth who will drink, and won't work, and they may be poor, I grant; but who can help a man who won't help himself?”—“But if the man drinks the woman suffers,” said Mrs. Ashton, who had a natural sympathy for wives. “Very likely; but let the worst come to the worst, there's the Union, with plenty to eat and drink, and good teaching for the children,—there isn't a better school in Rilworth than the Union School.”—“The poor are very foolish, I must say that,” observed Mrs. Ashton. “I was talking to Anne Crossin, the new washerwoman, the other day, and asking her why she and her blind husband did not go into the Union; and she said that if he went they must all go, and then she shouldn't be with him, or with the children. But, as I said to her, it's better not to see them, and to know they are well off, than to be with them and see them starve. She couldn't take in the notion, though, and said she would rather work on as she was, and trust in Providence.”—“But, father,” asked Kate, “wouldn't a man like that get something from the parish?”—“That depends,” replied Mr. Ashton, oracularly, —“you see, Kitty, the guardians of the poor have two things to attend to—the public and the pauper;—if they help the pauper beyond a certain point, they come heavy upon the public, and then there's an outcry. Poor-rates in Rilworth, as it is, are monstrously heavy.”—“John Crossin keeps a lodging-house,” said Mrs. Ashton,—“that's the reason why they don't get any

help from the parish.”—“To be sure not!” exclaimed Mr. Ashton: “a man pays his fifteen pounds a-year, and rates and taxes, and yet he wants to be considered a pauper: it’s an absurdity.”—“It does seem fair enough,” observed Mrs. Ashton; “and Anne Crossin didn’t exactly complain,—only, she said that it would be no good to her to get into a smaller house, because, if she did, she should have rent to pay, and now the lodgers did help her with that, and sometimes there was a trifle over.”—“Then, they only want a little help till the man can have his eyes couched, and get back to his work again,” said Katharine—“it does seem rather a hard case.”—“My dear Kitty,”—and Mr. Ashton became a little excited in manner, as he always did when there was a question about the Union—“it’s mere nonsense for a girl like you to give any opinion about such matters. Guardians of the poor are bound to protect the public; they can’t allow imposition; they don’t want people to starve, and so they say come into the Union; and if the poor don’t choose to come into the Union they must take the consequences.”—“Then, what Miss Sinclair says is quite true,” said Katharine, “and it is a great pity that more help is not given to the District Society; for you see, father,”—and a smile played upon her lips—“district societies are not bound to protect the public.”—“I don’t know anything about district societies, and don’t care what they do,” replied Mr. Ashton, “but I never will stand by silent and hear the guardians of the poor abused. There they are, working week after week like dray-horses to keep down the rates; and every idle vagabond in the country who doesn’t choose to lift his hand to his mouth is to be put upon them for support: it really is too bad.”—“And things were so badly managed in the old poor-law time, when every one was

helped," said Mrs. Ashton: "the sums of money that were spent!—no one ever would have imagined it; I used to hear my father talking about it."—"Sums of money spent, and no good done!" replied Mr. Ashton: "now we have matters regularly ordered, and economically too."

Katharine was not accustomed to argue with her father: and, in the present case, she would not have known what she was to argue for; but she did not feel that the root of the matter had been reached. Possibly guardians of the poor were bound to be strict; but if they could not give help, who could?

The report of the District Visiting Society happened to be lying on the table, and she had an impulse to examine the subscription list. Mr. Ashton's name was down for five shillings per annum: the whole amount of the subscriptions was eighty pounds. Katharine was rather fond of reckoning, so she amused herself with making a calculation. The population of Rilworth was about 5,000—that she knew. Suppose 500 only required relief, the eighty pounds would be a little more than three shillings and threepence each.

Poor Anne Crossin—with her blind husband and her seven children!—no wonder that her heart sank when she had no resource even in the guardians of the poor, and her share in the public charities of the town was but three shillings and threepence in the course of the year.

Katharine went to bed that night thinking of the poor. She could scarcely be said ever really to have thought of them before;—and she did more than think—she prayed for them; she asked for special help for special cases—the poor washerwoman—the woman who lay awake at night thinking how she should pay her rent—the mother who sold her children's frocks to buy them bread. When she rose

up from prayer she went to her desk, and took out half-a-sovereign which she had laid by for the purchase of a new work-box, and put it in her purse, that it might be offered on the next opportunity to Miss Sinclair, for her district.

CHAPTER VI.

It was a bright afternoon for Jane's walk to Maplestead, or rather on the Maplestead road; very warm for the end of September, and yet very invigorating; and there were glorious colours on the fading leaves, and dancing lights amongst the heavy boughs of the old beeches and oaks, and sunshine on the broad green border of grass by the road side, and misty purple vapour over the peeps of the distant country. In days of yore there had been a forest where Maplestead stood, and the peculiarities of forest scenery were still to be traced along the road,—glades, and underwood, and spaces where trees had once stood, now turned into open commons, and rich in heath, and fern, and gorse. Jane would not have been human if a glad feeling of future possession had not enhanced the enjoyment of that walk. All the property on both sides of the road between Maplestead and Rilworth for many miles belonged to Colonel Forbes by recent purchase. The estate was one of the finest in the county, and she was to share it. It was a very strange fact,—she could scarcely believe it to be true; she so young, so ignorant of the ways of the world, so little fitted, as it seemed, for a position of influence. Almost she could have thought herself wrong in

undertaking it, but there was another fact more strange—that she should be loved; that a man like Colonel Forbes, accustomed to the most intellectual society, fastidious, clever, universally respected, should care for her—more than care for her—that he should have felt the happiness of life at stake, when he asked if his affection could be returned. That would have been a problem never to be solved, but that Jane loved herself, and from the depth of her own feeling could gain faith to believe in his.

A shadow fell upon the road: it was very distant, but Jane's eye caught it in a moment. She stepped forward hastily, but checked the impulse almost immediately, and only drew the closer to her mother's side and became silent.

"There are two," she said, as the forms of the persons approaching became more distinct. Her tone of disappointment met with instant sympathy. "Some one he has met on the road, I dare say," said Mrs. Sinclair; "they will be sure to part again." Jane did not reply, she walked more slowly now as if she dreaded the meeting. "It is not a very prepossessing looking person," said Mrs. Sinclair, smiling; "I do not think Colonel Forbes will long have him for a companion."

Jane watched them anxiously. She did not like the meeting to be in the presence of a stranger, and she could willingly have turned aside to avoid it altogether; but they were too near for that. Colonel Forbes stopped when he came up to them, as if he meant to wish his companion "good bye," but the hint was not taken. "It is young Ashton, Mr. Ashton the bookseller's son," said Mrs. Sinclair; "there is nothing very awful in him, Jane, so you need not look so alarmed." Jane was not alarmed at the sight of John Ashton, she only thought of him as a restraint, but she did shrink from some-

thing, she could not tell what, and her limbs trembled, and her heart beat very fast; and then in her extreme effort to be self-possessed, she went up to Colonel Forbes and placed the coldest, most lifeless of hands in his, and accosted him with a remark upon the weather, which might quite as easily have been addressed to John Ashton.

The polished gentleman to whom the words were spoken betrayed no signs of the impression which the greeting gave him. He bowed John Ashton away with an air which did not admit of another word being said, offered an arm to Jane and to her mother, and turned with them towards Maplestead.

"The young man wants one of my farms," he said, addressing Mrs. Sinclair. The information was not very interesting, and no one probably but Jane would have noticed the tone in which it was made. It struck her, however, as chilling, and there was a quick glance at Colonel Forbes' countenance, followed by a slight shadow upon her own. Mrs. Sinclair paused; perhaps she thought that Jane would speak; but finding her silent, she asked a few questions about the farm and the young man's prospects. Colonel Forbes went on drily—he could be very dry, peculiarly uninteresting, when he chose, only one felt that underneath there might be a volcano working, and so there was the excitement of guessing when it might burst. "Young Ashton," he repeated, "wants one of my farms; I don't know whether I shall let him have it. I don't fancy speculations on my estate. The young man seems clever enough, but he is theoretical, and likely to try experiments."—"He is Katharine Ashton's brother, mamma," said Jane timidly.—"You know him, then, do you?" asked Colonel Forbes a little stiffly.—"Oh, yes; that is, I don't know him, but I know his sister. We were at school together in

those odd days when I went to Miss Richardson's." Jane's words were quite free; but her manner was very hesitating. "Then probably you have a wish in the case," said Colonel Forbes. Jane's impulse was to say, yes, and to beg that John Ashton might have whatever he wanted, but her unfortunate shyness stood in the way, and in the same quiet tone she replied that she did not particularly care about it. A quick ear might have caught the sound of a gentle sigh which escaped from Mrs. Sinclair as Colonel Forbes became suddenly silent, and a few minutes afterwards she withdrew her arm from his, and said that she thought it might be better for her not to go any farther, and she would turn back. Colonel Forbes was very polite—very properly desirous that she should not walk by herself, but it was all a matter of form, and Mrs. Sinclair resolutely retraced her steps towards Rilworth, and Jane and Colonel Forbes walked on alone.

Neither of them spoke. Colonel Forbes moved his walking stick backwards and forwards; Jane went steadily on, looking neither to the right nor the left. They were very near the first lodge at Maplestead; their usual walk was the beech tree avenue, which led from it in a side direction to the house. Colonel Forbes opened the gate, but Jane stopped before entering. Three persons were coming down the hill, and one was Katharine Ashton; the others Jane did not quite know, but she thought that the showy bonnet must be Selina Fowler's. They were so near that she could not avoid them without positive rudeness. Colonel Forbes looked like a thunder-cloud; he held the gate open impatiently. Selina was pressing forward to speak, but her arm was within Katharine's, and Jane saw that she was forcibly kept back, and they passed with only a bow. Jane turned to Colonel

Forbes, and said with a smile of relief, "For the sake of Katharine Ashton you must give the farm to her brother; you would have had Miss Selina Fowler forcing her acquaintance upon you but for that little bit of tact."—"And why not for your own sake, Jane?" exclaimed Colonel Forbes impetuously. The volcano was about to burst, but Jane did not tremble now; anything was better than that miserable stiffness caused by her own fault of manner. "Are you never to have courage to ask me for anything you wish?" he continued,— "must we always meet as strangers? or am I to believe that there is something so unfortunate in myself as to inspire fear when I most earnestly long for confidence?"—"I will try," said poor Jane, and tears gathered in her eyes. "I should have been better if we had been alone, but I thought you would not like it."—"Like what?" he repeated quickly; "not that a word or a look should pass which a stranger might comment upon. You know well enough, Jane, that I should shrink from that as much as yourself; but are there not a thousand ways of showing that we understand each other? A smile, or an accent, the pressure of the hand even? And am I never to see any thing but that look of a frightened fawn, or feel any thing but those icy graspless fingers?"—"Wait and see," said Jane. She looked up into his face with an expression of such confiding love, that the most distrustful spirit, even that of Colonel Forbes, could not but have been touched by it. He was a very impatient man, very exacting: a man who is impatient and exacting must, in spite of his better principles, too often be selfish and unjust, yet he was honourable, and in a degree soft-hearted. One such look as that and he was won back, at least for the present, and

he put his arm round Jane and kissed her, and the cloud passed away.

They talked of John Ashton, and the farm, and of Katharine, and Jane's acquaintance with her. It was all interesting to Colonel Forbes then; he liked to read Jane's character in what she said, and delighted in watching the unconscious betrayal of her thoughts, and seeing how, in everything, she had a reference to him. She praised Katharine Ashton, and described her simplicity of manner, her quiet dress, her considerate thoughtfulness, and, at last, encouraged by the attention she received, and thinking more and more of Katharine, and less and less of herself, grew quite excited and eloquent. By the time they returned to Rilworth, they had discoursed upon many subjects, and were both charmed with their walk—charmed with each other. Jane thought they were also both charmed with Katharine Ashton; but she was mistaken; Colonel Forbes had nearly forgotten her existence.

There was a note lying on Jane's table when she reached home. It was from Katharine, enclosing the half sovereign for the District Society. "Miss Ashton had called to see Miss Sinclair," the servant said, "and had waited some time, and then she had left the note." "So nice and good of Katharine Ashton—so practically good, is it not?" exclaimed Jane, putting the note into Colonel Forbes's hand. It was examined and commented upon. The handwriting was clear and legible, just like Katharine herself, Jane said: the few sentences were well expressed, from being entirely to the point. Colonel Forbes was attracted by it. He was a thoughtful man in his way, and very full of theories. He had theories especially about society. Proud though he was—as proud perhaps or prouder

than any other man in the county—he yet professed upon some subjects an ultra liberality. Every one beneath him was to be raised, but to that precise height which would still admit of his standing superior. It was pleasant to hear him put forth his views upon these points; his words flowed so smoothly; one felt when listening to him that the golden days of fraternity and equality might, after all, not be so complete a myth as the startling facts of the world would at first lead one to expect.

He was a great educationist too, a staunch upholder of national, model, and industrial schools; his speeches in their favour at public meetings were proverbially good, and his influence in private was always exerted for their support. Yet, strange to say, Colonel Forbes was not a popular man. He had many political friends amongst the tradespeople of Rilworth, and it was said that if he came forward he would certainly be returned for the borough, but there was no enthusiasm for him. He bestowed favour, but not sympathy, and he gained that which favours can buy,—respect and attention,—but affection demanded a price which it was not in his nature to give. His way of looking at Katharine Ashton's note was a singular exemplification of this trait. It was to him a specimen of the mind of a class, not of an individual. He perceived in it not what Katharine Ashton saw, or thought, or felt, but what the daughter of a person in Mr. Ashton's position might, under favourable circumstances, and with the increased advantages of the nineteenth century, become. "Yes, it is a clever, well expressed note," he said, as he returned the paper to Jane; "it shows what may be done—what is doing, in fact—all through the country. Fifty years ago no one who had not been highly educated would have been able to write in that way."—"Katharine Ashton

is clever," said Jane, "yet I don't believe she is in any way remarkable; but what I like is the thoughtfulness and the decision. I quite well remember its striking me when we were children together at school, that when a thing was to be done, Katharine was always the person to begin."—"I dare say she is a very good girl," replied Colonel Forbes, carelessly. "One can't be surprised at the way education creeps on," he added. "Such a man as Ashton has enormous influence in a town like Rilworth, and you may be quite sure he is shrewd enough to see that to have his children sensible and well informed is to increase his own power."—"I suppose all that kind of calculation does go on," observed Jane, "and I have no reason for supposing Mr. Ashton to be different from his neighbours, but I think one would be glad to see persons educating their children from some better motive than that of increasing their own power." "You must take things as they are, my dear Jane," was the reply; "it does not do to be Utopian. You can't expect people to put aside as a motive, the tangible good which is set before their eyes every day, and act from some abstract theory which they have not time to think about."—"But," said Jane, and her voice was a little hesitating, from the instinctive dread that they were about to differ,— "I should think that is what we must all learn to do more or less. Justice, and temperance, and truth are excellent virtues, in a worldly point of view, but if we practise them only from worldly motives their value is diminished, if not actually lost."—"Young, dear child, young," said the Colonel, and he looked complacently upon the soft, blue eyes which were so timidly lifted up to his; "but we won't discuss the point now,—I must be going; only just sit down and play to me for a quarter of

an hour, and tell me to-morrow if I can do anything to please this good friend of yours, Katharine Ashton."

CHAPTER VII.

THE next day was Saturday, a busy day at Mr. Ashton's. A great deal of business went on on Saturdays, so many people came in from the country; the shop was always full from about one o'clock till five, not perhaps with purchasers, but loungers, who yet very often became purchasers in the end. Selina Fowler always made a point of going to see Katharine on a Saturday. She was sure to hear news in some shape or other, for though Katharine was not curious, she could not avoid knowing a little of what was going on in the shop, especially as Mr. Ashton himself would occasionally stray into the parlour, and narrate, with considerable humour, the sayings and doings of the unthinking customers, who supposed he had neither eye, nor ear, nor thought for anything but the sale of his books.

"Now do tell me, Kate," said Selina, as she reposed in a lounging attitude on the seat of a window which looked out into the back court and the little garden, "do tell me when Jane Sinclair and Colonel Forbes are going to be married."—"I don't know Miss Sinclair well enough to ask her," replied Katharine, who was diligently stitching a wristband; "perhaps, Selly," and she looked up archly, "you had better inquire, as you seem to think she is wishing to make your acquaintance."—"Oh! as to that," replied Selina, tossing back her bonnet, and shaking the profusion of long black ringlets

which half covered her face, "we are acquainted, you know. Mamma was saying yesterday, that really she felt it quite rude not to have called; but we shall meet next week at the ball, I dare say, and then we can make apologies."—"Are you going to the ball?" asked Katharine, and a smile, which, however, was not perceived, played upon her lips. "Why, of course I am; every one is going."—"And you think Miss Sinclair will be there?" inquired Katharine. "Jane Sinclair! certainly. Colonel Forbes is one of the stewards. And you will be there too, Kate. I tell you every one is going."—"They call it a Union Ball, don't they?" asked Katharine. "A Union Ball in honour of royalty," as I heard George Andrews say this very day," replied Selina. "George is full of it; they have made him a steward, and he and I are to dance the first country dance together."—"What is the price of the tickets?" asked Katharine.—"Four shillings; they would not have it higher, George told me, because of making it more than people could afford; and they would not have it less, because it might admit people one shouldn't like to be there. Not but there will be an odd set, as it is, George says. The Dobsons, of the china shop, I hear, mean to go, but I don't believe they know how to dance a bit."—"A reason why I should not go," said Katharine. "I have quite forgotten how to dance, and I never had but three quarters at Miss Richardson's."—"Oh! but you are different," said Selina; "it will be quite remarkable if you don't go. They were all but putting your father on the committee, I heard to-day. You know it won't be at all a poor thing; if it was, papa and mamma wouldnt hear of my being there; but it really is for every body. I believe the Duchess of Lowther herself is to be there."—"Indeed," said Katharine, and her fingers worked faster than ever;

“do you know, Selly, it strikes me sometimes that the world is going out of its mind?” She said it so gravely that Selina could not detect the lurking satire, and could only answer with a pettish laugh, “La! Kate, you are so foolish, there is no talking to you,” and then put on her bonnet to go. Katharine, however, was bent upon hearing a few more particulars, and Selina, quickly mollified when gaiety was in question, sat down again, and began a detailed, if not a very eloquent description of the whys and the wherefores of the Union Ball, all of which she professed to have gathered from George Andrews, the eldest son of the great auctioneer, and a friend of her brother’s; the said George Andrews having been duly informed of the facts by Colonel Forbes, who was uncle, or grandson, or hundredth cousin to the Duchess of Lowther. The Duke of Lowther, the great man of the county, had, it seems, lately been flattered by the admission of his eldest son into Parliament without opposition, and his friends were therefore anxious that he should give some demonstration of his popular sympathies, and considered no occasion more fitting than that of a Royal birth-day. The Duke had been accustomed on this day to give a dinner to the poor, and a feast to the school children, and generally entertained his own particular friends at his own castle, and these festivities no doubt he would have been willing to pursue; but, under the circumstances, some more special condescension seemed desirable. The Duke was an amiable man, an excellent landlord, a kind friend to all classes; he had a great wish to promote good feelings amongst his neighbours of every degree, but he did not exactly know how to set about it. At last some one suggested a ball, a Union Ball, which might be loyal and patriotic, and gracefully condescending on the part of the Duke and Duchess, if

they would patronise it, and thankfully respectful and cordial on the part of the neighbourhood, if they would make up their minds to go to it. Balls of this kind were not unknown in Rilworth. They had been heard of in former days in connection with charity. Why, it was said, should not the amusement be equally suitable in the present instance? It might be open to all persons, and it would do good to trade, encourage kindly feeling, and be, in fact, the beginning of that unity of feeling, which is a grand aim of all persons who wish to better the condition of their fellow creatures. The idea was mentioned, without the Duke's knowledge, to his lawyer, Mr. Lane; by him it was communicated to Mr. Madden, the brewer; by him to Mr. George Andrews, the son of the auctioneer. A committee was formed, and Colonel Forbes was requested to discover in what light the proposed ball would be viewed at the castle. The Duke was kindly interested, the Duchess most amiable,—the ball was said to be under her especial patronage,—and her name was even suffered to appear in the printed bills: then, of course, all the world were to be present.

Katharine Ashton, working in that quiet parlour with her mother, had not the smallest idea of the excitement which was prevailing around her. The days of charity balls were long past, and she had never been present at one. It had not entered her head till she heard Selina talk, that any ball of any kind could come in her way. But it did seem a little tempting now: she did not wish to dance; she did not care to be finely dressed, but she thought it would be very pleasant to hear the band of music, and see the room lighted; and as Selina ran on with her folly, though Katharine knew it to be folly, she did not think that the world was quite as much out of its mind as she had at first imagined.

“There, I must go now,” said Selina at length. “Mamma will scold me like anything if I don’t get home before four. She promised to take me to Miss Dyer’s to see what things she has got.”—“Beginning betimes, I see, Miss Selly,” said the laughing voice of Mr. Ashton. He had just come in from the shop, and had caught the last words; “Why, what a figure you will cut at the ball!” Selina was not very fond of Mr. Ashton; she never could make up her mind whether or not he was laughing at her; and she would have been afraid of him, only that it would have been placing him too much on an equality,—and she never forgot the shop. “Colonel Forbes has been in, talking about the ball, Kitty,” continued Mr. Ashton, “and he says he hopes to see you there.” Katharine looked up in wonder. “Me! father; I never spoke to him.”—“More people know Tom Fool than Tom Fool knows,” exclaimed Mr. Ashton, who was evidently labouring under some pleasurable excitement; “the Colonel knows you, if you don’t know him. He told me he passed you in the road, the day before yesterday.”—“Oh! yes, I remember now,” said Katharine, “just by the lower lodge at Maplestead; you recollect, don’t you, Selina?”—“To be sure; he and Jane Sinclair were having a lovers’ walk. How foolish they looked when we came up!” and Selina laughed in a way which made Katharine feel cross. “I suppose all persons walk together when they are engaged to be married,” she said rather sharply; “there was nothing very foolish that I could see; at any rate, it would have been much more foolish in us to interrupt them.”—“In you, of course,” said Selina, tossing her head; “because you don’t visit them.” Katharine only smiled, and turning to her father, asked if he knew whether Miss Sinclair would be at the

ball? "I suppose so; of course, indeed, she will be," was the reply. "It is to be a ball for every one,—a Union Ball. The Colonel and I have been having a little talk about the state of things in Rilworth. It is not at all satisfactory, he says, and I agree with him. There is a want of the unity, the sympathy, there ought to be; there is no fellow-feeling in the town, and things never will go right till there is."—"And do you think the ball will help to produce the fellow-feeling, father?" asked Katharine,—and she laid down her work, and waited with real interest for the answer. But Selina broke in: "To be sure it will, Kate. I would lay anything that when George Andrews and young Madden are dancing in the same room, they will forget all their quarrels, and be quite friends again. There's nothing like dancing for making people friends."—"Begging your pardon, Miss Selly, that's all nonsense," said Mr. Ashton. "It's not George Andrews, nor George any body, that's particularly thought of, but the town in general. It is the tone of the town, the Colonel says, which will be improved by having a Union Ball. Depend upon it, we shan't have all those upstart looks, and airs, and graces from the Miss Maddens, and the Miss Lanes, when they find that other people have as good a right to dance and be merry as themselves. I thought," continued Mr. Ashton, "the Colonel spoke particularly well upon the subject, and he said he should make a point of being there himself, and he meant to bring a large party with him."—"But, father," said Katharine, "it does not seem to me exactly clear how people are to be at all the more friends for dancing together in the same room just for one night. They will go away and forget it, and after all I dare say some of them will take offence."—"That's because you don't under-

stand the working of things, Kitty," replied Mr. Ashton. "What we want in this country is unity. There is no question of that. We have no unity amongst us. Now if we can but get up something which all may join in,—a meeting for some one purpose,—people will begin to feel they have something in common; and it is not only the town folks, but the country people,—for they will all come, Colonel Forbes says. He has taken to the idea himself mightily. It is just what he has been aiming at for years, he tells me, to bring people together in a hearty, cordial way. So you see, Kitty, you must go, and what is more I must give you a fine new dress, I suppose."—"White muslin, with pink bows down it,—that's the most genteel," said Selina. "It was what I wore when I went to the Maddens' great party last Christmas. I am going to have blue silk for the ball; I am tired of white, and blue does best with my complexion."—"And blue is somebody's favourite colour, I suppose," said Mr. Ashton, slyly. Selina pretended to look angry, and put up her hand to her face as if she thought she was blushing, but she managed to say very boldly, "If you mean Mr. John, he would have given his eyes to have seen me in pink; but I protested I would have blue, and blue it is to be."—"I shall look very droll in a white muslin dress, with pink bows," said Katharine; "I never put on such a thing in my life before; and then my arms are so red!"—"Oh, nonsense, Kate," exclaimed Selina; "with white kid gloves, who need ever care for red arms? I didn't think you had been so vain, did you, Mr. Ashton?"—"My Kitty vain!" exclaimed Mr. Ashton. "No, Miss Selly, we leave that for other people. But any how, Kitty, I told Colonel Forbes you would go to the ball, and I am to let him know at the gas committee this evening

how many tickets we shall want." A knock at the private door interrupted the conversation. Mr. Ashton returned to the shop, and Selina rose to make her escape. Katharine's acquaintances were not considered quite on a level with herself, and she was always a little afraid of an introduction. "Well then! I may say that Colonel Forbes and Jane Sinclair are sure to be at the ball," she exclaimed, in a low voice. Kate stood up suddenly, her face was crimson, and when Selina turned round, Jane Sinclair was standing in the passage behind her.

They certainly were a great contrast—Jane, with her very neat dress, her simple grace and refinement; and Selina, with her loud voice and boisterous manner, her showy silk and rustling flounces, and the bonnet, half off her head a perfect garden of flowers. Jane bowed, distantly; she might have heard Selina's words,—at any rate, it was supposed she had—and Selina rushed by like a whirlwind. Jane, however, was very self-possessed—much more so than Katharine, who looked annoyed. Jane shook hands heartily, and then she sat down and spoke about the weather,—and there was a pause, which was a little awkward. Katharine took up her work, and asked if Miss Sinclair would excuse her going on with it—it was for her brother, and she was anxious to finish it.

The ice was broken then—there was a subject to begin upon; and Jane hoped she had not come at an inconvenient hour; she had chosen it because it seemed the least likely to be the dinner hour. "We dine at half-past twelve," said Katharine, "and drink tea at half-past five, and have supper between nine and ten; the hours suit with the shop better than any others."—"And I suppose you are often out in the afternoon," observed Jane. "It was about four,

I think, when we met you the other day at Maplestead." The *we* was spoken without hesitation. Jane had an instinctive perception that she was safe with Katharine Ashton.—"Yes; but I don't often walk as far as Maplestead," replied Katharine. "My brother persuaded me that afternoon to go some way with him; but then he saw Colonel Forbes, and left me and Selina to go and speak to him upon business."—"I saw your brother with Colonel Forbes," observed Jane; "and I heard also what the business was, though I did not ask."—"John did not tell me what it was," replied Katharine.—Jane looked surprised, and a little embarrassed. "Then, perhaps I am only interfering in mentioning it," she said; "but I called—partly to see you, and partly because Colonel Forbes thought you might know something about your brother's plans."—"Was it about a farm?" said Katharine, looking up eagerly from her work.—"Yes, a farm your brother wishes to take, I believe. Is he quite resolved upon being a farmer?"—"He would like to farm his own estate," said Katharine, with a smile, which had a good deal of care in it. "Perhaps, Miss Sinclair, Colonel Forbes would talk to my father about it: he is the proper person to consult about John's schemes."—Jane was silent; she felt thrown back. "It is very good of you to interest yourself about him," said Katharine; "I don't mean to be ungracious." She spoke so simply and cordially that Jane's reserve was broken through. "You never used to be ungracious when we were at Miss Richardson's," she said, "so I should think you very much altered if you were so now."—"I say out what I think so soon," said Katharine—"that is my fault; but I don't mean anything but what I say,—and I do feel it very kind of you to trouble about John."—"Only, I am afraid I can do no good,"

said Jane.—“Not in helping him to a farm,” replied Katharine—“at least, that is what I think. I can’t fancy him fitted for it, Miss Sinclair; he knows so little about farming; he has only been trying to learn lately.”—“So Colonel Forbes feared,” replied Jane; “but he must have some taste or fancy for it to have taken up the idea.”—“He has a fancy to be married,” said Katharine, her bright eyes sparkling with a momentary feeling of amusement,—“but he has no other fancy that I know of.” Jane seemed puzzled; and Katharine, feeling that her words required some explanation, added—“I may say it to you, because every one knows it—he wants to marry Selina Fowler.”—“Oh! indeed;” and Jane seemed sorry, yet still perplexed.—“You know what Selly was at school;” continued Katharine; “she is just the same now, only grander; and she looks down upon John, and upon all of us,—and that, I am sure, can’t make him happy. But John thinks it would be a fine thing to give up the shop and live in the country; and he has great notions that, if he could marry Selina, such people as Mrs. Madden and Mrs. Lane would visit them, and then they should be what he calls up in the world. I don’t mind saying all that to you,” she added—though a blush crimsoned her face—“I know you will understand.”—“Yes,” said Jane, thoughtfully: “he is not very unlike the rest of the world.”—“Everybody wants to get up higher,” said Katharine, quickly; “but why should they? why can’t we all be as we are?”—“We should be happier,” said Jane, and a sigh escaped her. Perhaps she was conscious of not being entirely free from such a wish herself. “And more true and honest-minded,” continued Katharine. “People are so double when they are pushing themselves on. Selly Fowler doesn’t mean to be double, but she is; she comes and talks to me when

she has no one else to talk to, and gets me to help her make her dresses; but she doesn't care to notice me when she is with the Miss Maddens. However, that is very wrong of me; I ought not to say anything against Selly—only it comes out naturally when I talk of her.”—“And so you are quite contented, are you, Katharine?” asked Jane. The tone had much in it of the easy unreserve of school days. Katharine paused. “Not quite contented, I think,” she said, whilst her fingers moved quickly and almost nervously. “I should like”—and she threw aside her work suddenly, and fixed her deep, earnest gaze upon Jane's face—“I should like, Miss Sinclair, to know what use one is in the world.”—“That is just the kind of question you used to ask poor Miss Richardson,” said Jane, laughing, “and she never knew how to answer you.”—“Nobody can answer me,” said Katharine; “I don't ask many people now—no one, indeed; but I thought,” she added, “when I happened to be at church the Sunday before last, in the evening, that I should like to ask Mr. Reeves.”—“Don't you know him? have you never spoken to him?” asked Jane.—“I saw him once just after he came,” replied Katharine; “he called to ask if I could help at all in the Sunday school. I believe some one had told him it was likely I would; but my mother did not like my going away from breakfast on Sunday mornings, and so it came to nothing. Mrs. Reeves called twice afterwards; but I was not at home, and she only saw my mother. I think, though,”—and Katharine's face lighted up with eagerness,—“I feel nearly sure Mr. Reeves could tell me some things if I could talk to him.”—“I think he could tell you a great many things,” replied Jane; “but what was it he said which put the wish to see him into your head?”—“It was about working,” said Katharine,

“and it is that which is always puzzling me. You don't work as I do, Miss Sinclair, and you have not the need ; yet still you do something, and every one does something ; but it seems as if it was all for ourselves,—and that grows tiresome, and does not seem much good : of course, though, you don't feel it, because you do good to the poor people.”—Jane was giving her attention to what was said, yet it was with an air of inward thought all the time.—“I remember that sermon,” she replied, as Katharine stopped for an instant ; “it was about unity.”—“Yes ; people's working for one object, and each having a part to do, which could not be done by any one else—like masons and carpenters building a house. It was a very pleasant notion ; and when I came home I felt as if I could make tea, and stitch wristbands, and keep accounts, much more cheerfully if I thought it was part of a great business going on in the world, and not my own small one.”—“I must beg Mr. Reeves to call upon you again, Katharine,” said Jane, laughing ; “he will rejoice to find any one in Rilworth who has a notion of working.”—“I don't think I have much notion of it,” replied Katharine, “and I have very little time ; but it would make me more one with people, Miss Sinclair, to have to work with them than to go to a ball and dance with them ; and that is what every one is talking about now.”—Jane did not appear at first to recollect,—“A ball?” she said. “Oh ! I remember. Are you going to it ?” —“They want me to go,” replied Katharine, “but I don't know whether I shall. I should like it well enough, I dare say, when once there, but I am sure I should not be one bit the better friends with other people for it.”—“No !” exclaimed Jane, “who could think you would be ?” —“A good many people, I believe,” said Katharine ; “I fancy,” she added, with

some hesitation, "that Colonel Forbes does." Jane coloured, and was silent.—"You must have heard of the ball?" continued Katharine.—Jane's answer sounded rather abrupt, in spite of her gentle voice. "Yes, it has been mentioned to me."—She waited for a second; and then, suddenly turning from the subject, exclaimed, "I have not mentioned now what I principally came for—to thank you very much for the half-sovereign for the District Society."—"It won't go far amongst the poor people," said Katharine, "but I had nothing else; I will give you some more when I have."—"Give it to Mr. Reeves, you mean," said Jane, smiling, in spite of herself, at Katharine's open way of speaking of her charities.—"It is all the same," said Katharine; "but it was hard to think of what you said of the poor people, and not do something for them. I thought of asking, too, if you did not think it interfering, if I could ever go on a message for you, or do anything for you in your district? Sometimes, when you are wishing to take a walk, it might be a convenience, and I can generally get out a little while in the afternoon."—"Would you really? it would be very kind." Jane's face became quite animated. "I would go now, this afternoon, or any time," said Katharine; "I will go at once, if there is anything to do," she added, as she stood up and began to fold her work. Jane laughed, quite merrily for her.—"Oh! Katharine," she exclaimed, "how like you are now to what you were at Miss Richardson's!"—Katharine's answer was grave, and very earnest;—"And so are you like, too, Miss Sinclair; it would be strange if I did not wish to help you."

Jane went home to meet Colonel Forbes. He had been very busy all the morning in making arrangements for the ball. It was a thing he liked, for he had a good deal of taste, and every one in Rilworth deferred to his opinion. He felt himself

so popular too all the time, making friends with Mr. Madden and Mr. Lane, and consulting Mr. Ashton, and others of the influential tradespeople! And popularity had many charms for him, though he was not sure that he should stand for the borough at the next election. He came back to Jane in what, for a person of his calm, rather stiff manners, was a state of excitement, to tell her what he had been doing, and especially the half message he had sent to Katharine Ashton. He thought it would please her; she was so full of consideration herself, and so glad of any thing which promoted kind feelings amongst others.—“I told Ashton she must come,” he said, as he threw himself into an arm-chair, declaring that he was almost too tired for a walk.—“She is just the sort of girl who will look well, because she has no airs and graces. I can fancy the Duchess of Lowther taking to her immensely.”—“Is it very stupid of me not to see the great benefit which the Duchess of Lowther’s notice could be to Katharine?” said Jane, and a smile lurked around her mouth whilst she looked timidly in Colonel Forbes’ face.—“Yes, it is very stupid of you,” he replied, pettishly, “when I have been setting my heart upon pleasing you. The Duchess of Lowther’s notice may not do any literal good to Katharine Ashton; it may not be a matter of pounds, shillings, and pence, and that I suppose is what is to be understood by good; but it is an honour, that any girl in her position may be proud of. What are you thinking of now?” he added, catching hold of Jane’s hand, as with rather a grave face she was turning away from him. Jane hesitated. “What are you thinking of—I must know?” he repeated. “Why, that you puzzle me,” said Jane, quickly, “and that you have puzzled me ever since this odious ball was mentioned. You would not

care whether the Duchess of Lowther noticed me.”—“Noticed you!” he repeated, starting from his seat—“noticed my intended wife. I should not wish the Queen to notice you:”—“Because your notice is a sufficient honour,” said Jane, playfully; “I am glad you have so good an opinion of yourself.” Colonel Forbes looked a little annoyed. “You may put what construction you please, Jane, upon my words,” he said; “but surely you see the difference between a person standing, as my wife must do, upon her own ground, requiring no support, and a person like Katharine Ashton, who is really nobody, and to whom support is everything.”—“But suppose we differ upon the premises,” said Jane, with a smile which had the effect of softening the frown upon Colonel Forbes’ face. “Suppose I think that Katharine Ashton has ground to stand upon as well as myself, and that she does not require any more support.”—“Then, my love, I think you are speaking ignorantly, and know nothing about the constitution of society.” Jane Sinclair had a marvellous temper. She might have spoilt a much better man than Colonel Forbes; yet even she could not help feeling a little hurt at the tone in which this was said; but she did not reply to it, she was too humble. And how, indeed, could a man like Colonel Forbes be faulty in her sight? Clever, polished, handsome, with high-sounding words at command, and devoting his life, as it seemed, to works of public utility—above all, seen with eyes blinded by a first affection—Jane could not doubt him. When they differed she said to herself that it was the innate difference between men and women which made them view things differently. One question only she asked now, and it was chiefly to turn the conversation—“why, if he had such an idea of the good which it would do to bring all classes more

closely together, he objected to her going to the Union Ball?" "Because we keep our choicest treasures screened from the common gaze," was the answer; and the words fell so sweetly upon Jane's ear that she forgot to inquire into their wisdom.

CHAPTER VIII.

"So you and Kitty are going finery hunting this afternoon, wife?" said Mr. Ashton, as he sat down to dinner with only his wife and daughter, about a week after the first mention of the Union Ball.— Mr. Ashton was in particularly good spirits: he had just made a successful sale of some valuable books, and he was upon the point of satisfying his hunger with a roast duck, which happened to be one of his weak points. It would have been strange if he had not been pleased. "Miss Dyer has not much left, I am afraid," replied Mrs. Ashton; "Kitty has been so long making up her mind whether she will go to the ball." — "And she doesn't look very bright about it now," continued Mr. Ashton. "What in the world has come over you of late, Kitty? One would think by your face that you were ninety instead of nineteen." — "Perhaps it is a pity that I am not ninety," said Katharine, smiling; "because if I were, I should not have to go to the ball, and then there would be no cause to look grave. But, father, I think you would be of my mind if you had to dress yourself up in white muslin, and dance about in a room with the Duchess of Lowther looking at you." Mr. Ashton burst into a hearty fit of laughter. "Well, child, it might be I should; but I don't see why you are to care for the Duchess

of Lowther, or the Duchess of anything. Why, hasn't one human being as good a right to dance as another?"—"I should not care a bit for the Duchess of Lowther here," said Katharine,—“in this room I mean. If she were to come in this moment, I could do my work, and talk about her business (if she had any), and feel as good in my way as she is in hers; and I should not care a bit either in the shop, if I was there; but somehow, father, that great room at the “Bear” is not like home, and I shall not feel like myself when I have pink bows stuck about me, and I shall think that the Duchess of Lowther is laughing at me, which I know she couldn't do here, because there would be nothing to laugh at.”—“I don't see what there will be to laugh at there,” said Mrs. Ashton, in a quick tone of anticipated anger; “you had three quarters' dancing at Miss Richardson's, and every one said you did very well.”—“And you danced away as merrily as a Scotch lassie last year at our neighbour Carter's,” said Mr. Ashton. — “Because I knew every body there,” replied Katharine; “and I was quite at home, and it was great fun going down the country-dance, but I don't know anything about new-fashioned dancing; and Selly says there will be none but that at the ball, because it won't be genteel.”—“Well, then,” said Mrs. Ashton, “if you can't dance in the new way, Kate, you must dance in the old, that's easily enough settled.”—“Only that the new-fashioned people will carry it all their own way,” said Katharine, “and there will be only one band for us all.” Mrs. Ashton looked a little discomfited at this obvious objection, and was contented with murmuring that she did not care a bit about the ball, but she did not like her child to be different from other people. “That is just what John Carter was saying to me this

morning," said Mr. Ashton. "It is not," says he, "that one cares to go oneself, but one does care to be put aside; so honest John means to go." — "John Carter at a ball!" exclaimed Mrs. Ashton, "who would have thought it"! — "There 'll be many a worse man there," said Mr. Ashton, "let them be as high grandees as they may; and I should just like to see any of them looking down upon John Carter; as respectable a man as any in Rilworth, as I heard Colonel Forbes declaring to-day. Give me the leg of that duck, Mrs. Ashton, and Kate, child, take the wing; you are not eating anything to-day." Katharine hesitated a moment, and then said quietly: "I think, mother, the wing would be rather nice for Jemmy Dawes, in Long Lane, and I could take it there this afternoon. His arm hurts him a great deal, and he doesn't eat much." — "Jemmy Dawes, Kate!" exclaimed Mr. Ashton, "who is he?" — "Only the child that was nearly run over the other day," said Mrs. Ashton. "But Miss Sinclair looks after him, Kate, and if you go there you won't have time for Miss Dyer's." — "Only I thought, mother," said Katharine, "that perhaps you would go up to Miss Dyer's first, and look over the things, and see what you like, and then I might come to you afterwards. It isn't very far to Long Lane." — "But you can't take a plate about the streets," said Mr. Ashton; "you will look as if you were coming from an eating house." — "Which will be quite true," said Katharine, gaily, "and all the more reason that one should help others to eat. But, mother, you did not mind when I carried the rice pudding to Mrs. Carter, when she was ill." — "That was different," said Mrs. Ashton, "they are old friends; but I don't see why, if Miss Sinclair is a district visitor, she is not to take care of her own poor." — "It's her duty," exclaimed Mr. Ashton; "so finish your dinner, Kitty

and let us have no more of this nonsense. What's the use of my bringing you up to be a careful, modest girl, not even letting you come into the shop, if you are to go gadding about by yourself in all the back lanes of Rilworth?"—"You will make yourself quite talked about by and by," echoed Mrs. Ashton, assuming a courageous tone; "to my certain knowledge you have been down to Long Lane twice this week."—"But Long Lane is not a very bad place, mother, is it?" said Katharine: "I am sure I have heard it is not as bad as Pebble Street, and Betsey Carter goes there every day of her life."—"Betsey Carter is a good deal older than you, Katharine," said Mrs. Ashton: she alwas said "Katharine" when she wished to be peculiarly emphatic. "And I don't want you to be like Betsey Carter," continued Mr. Ashton, "and that's more to the point. To my mind she is a set up girl, always going to district meetings, or teachers' meetings, or committees, and thinking herself a saint; and all the time only caring to get invited to drink tea at the Rectory. That is not what I call religion. I like people to keep their station, and I don't think there is any good done when they try to go out of it, and I wonder, for my part, that Mr. Reeves can bear it. I declare the way that girl spoke to him the other day in my shop, was quite a scandal; just as if she was the person who knew everything and he knew nothing. No good can come of it, I'm sure. I have had a bad opinion of District Societies, ever since I found how it took people out of their proper place; and I don't want ever to see you having anything to do with them, Kitty."

Katharine was silenced, but she did not eat the wing of the duck.

Mr. Ashton stood a little moodily by the fire

when dinner was over. He had an uncomfortable impression of the conversation. So also had Katharine; but Mrs. Ashton talked for both; and as she busied herself in giving a little help to the maid who took away the dinner things, and assisting Katharine in folding up the table-cloth and sweeping the crumbs from the floor, lest her new carpet should be spoilt, she discoursed upon things in general, and Miss Dyer in particular. "It would be no good," she said, "for her to go to Miss Dyer's alone; she shouldn't in the least be able to tell what to choose; not that she fancied indeed that Kate would know much better; she was never much given to dress; but of course if she was to wear the gown, it was proper she should choose it."—"Why not go to Selly Fowler, mother?" said Kate in a tone of amusement: "she has been buying dresses for every one she tells me—Matty and Susan Andrews, and the youngest Miss Madden, and,—as she says, one of the Miss Lanes, but that I don't quite believe, for she does not know them well enough."—"Well to be sure, that is a good notion!" exclaimed Mrs. Ashton; "not that I should like Selly to think we hadn't just as good taste as she has, she is set up enough without that; but it might be as well to get a notion of what she means to wear, that you mightn't have the same."—"No fear of that," replied Katharine, a little frightened, for she had spoken hastily, and had no real idea of putting herself in the power of Selina's taste. "Selly means to wear blue silk, and I am to have white muslin and pink bows—you mustn't forget them. Fancy me, father," she added, turning to her father, and laying her hand playfully on his shoulder, "fancy me done all over with pink bows—shan't I look like a walking rose-tree?"—"A cabbage-rose," said Mr. Ashton, relaxing into a smile, as he patted her

cheeks. "What a woman you are grown, Kate, this last year! and what a colour you've got in your cheeks! quite the colour for a painter, as Colonel Forbes said to me this morning." Katharine's colour became something deeper than that of a cabbage-rose. "I will go with you, mother, to choose the dress," she said, "and we need not ask Selly anything about it. You know better than she does what is good muslin and what is bad, and that is the chief point."—"Yes; muslin will wash, that is one good thing," said Mrs. Ashton, after thinking for a moment; "and if there were to come any other ball this winter, you might trim it up with green, or blue, and people wouldn't know it to be the same."—"And if there weren't any more balls, it would cut up into something useful," said Katharine; "I shan't so much care if it is muslin, mother."—"But you will want some other fineries, child," observed Mr. Ashton. He had been paid for his books in ready money—gold—it was heavy in his pocket, and he was in a hurry to relieve himself from it. "Nothing but the bows," said Katharine, kissing him, "they will be fine enough for any one."—"Nonsense, Kate," exclaimed Mr. Ashton, "you must have some ornaments. Why, there's Miss Selly will come out like a jeweller's shop, and I don't choose to have my girl looked down upon."—"There's her grandmother's brooch, with the red garnet in the middle and the blue stones round it," said Mrs. Ashton. "I have heard say that the garnet is a great beauty."—"Grandmother's fiddlestick!" exclaimed Mr. Ashton. "Why, wife, you would have the child look as if she had lived a hundred years ago. What do you think Colonel Forbes, and the Duchess of Lowther, and all the grandees would say if they saw her with her grandmother's brooch on?"—"Just as much as they would say if they

saw me without it, father," said Katharine, laughing. "But I should like," she added, as she caught the disappointed expression of Mr. Ashton's face,—“I should like, father, to have something new and pretty if I might; if it would not cost very much, and if there was a place for your hair, and mother's, and John's in it.”—“Well then! if one must—you girls are dreadfully extravagant; but I suppose you must have your way. There,”—and he threw down three sovereigns on the table,—“be off with you, and don't trouble me any more with your follies.”—“All for myself, father?” said Katharine, her eyes sparkling with delight. “Who else should it be for? Take it, child, and say thank you.”—Katharine threw her arms round him and gave him not a kiss but a hug. Mr. Ashton withdrew himself from her gently, ashamed of the weakness which made a tear glisten in his eye. “Only one more word, father,” said Katharine, following him to the door leading into the shop. “If the brooch should not cost all that, might I have what is left for my own, to do just as I like with?”—“Dig a hole and bury it if you like,” was the reply; “only run away now, for there's the Duchess's carriage stopping.”

CHAPTER IX.

“MOTHER,” said Katharine, as she came down stairs dressed for walking, “I suppose it won't do for me to carry that piece of duck to Long Lane, as my father says he had rather not?”—“You have got your Sunday dress on,” said Mrs. Ashton, “why not let Susan carry it?”—“I thought she would be busy, putting away the dinner things,”

replied Katharine, "so I did not like to ask ; but if she might go?"—"To be sure, there are the dishes to be washed up," pondered Mrs. Ashton: "let it stay to-day, Kitty ; your father may like the wing of the duck for supper."—"I thought we could get him some toasted cheese," replied Katharine ; "and the boy is very weak, and I don't think he is likely to have anything from Mrs. Sinclair's to-day, because Miss Sinclair told me they were going into the country for a visit, so there is not likely to be a dinner dressed, except for the servants. We might go to Miss Dyer's first, and come in for the duck afterwards, if you liked, mother. He is a very nice little boy," she added, "and he is Anne Crossin's nephew." Mrs. Ashton was uncomfortably tender-hearted. One reason why she never liked to hear about her poor neighbours was that it made her unhappy. She stood in the passage considering,—moved to the door, came back again, and exclaimed, half angrily, "What a girl you are, Kitty, for having your own way ! There, go and fetch a basket, and let me take the duck myself, and hear no more about it."—"Oh ! mother, I could not let you do that."—"Why not, child ? it is not fifty yards, and Susan must wash the dishes."—"Then you will let me go too, and show you the house ; my father can't be angry at that," said Katharine ; and, not waiting for the permission, she ran off to the kitchen, where the remnants of the dinner were lying on the dresser, searched the closets for a basket, seized the much-talked-of duck's wing, and put it into a small plate, with the two remaining potatoes, and covering the whole with a saucer, and adding a tolerably large piece of bread, was standing again at her mother's side before Mrs. Ashton had at all made up her mind whether she was not giving herself very unnecessary trouble.

“What a girl you are!” was again Mrs. Ashton’s comment, “no sooner said than done.”—“Well, dear mother, and how else is one to get through the world?” replied Katharine. She hung the basket on her arm so as to be least noticed, and they walked up the street together; Katharine amused at having had her own way, and pleasing herself with thinking how the child would enjoy his dinner; Mrs. Ashton in a ceaseless fidget, lest the gravy of the duck (of which, however, there was a very small proportion) should somehow or other get through the basket, and spoil Kitty’s best gown. Happily that thought so possessed her mind, that she did not see Mrs. Fowler and Selina on the opposite side of the street, and so was not troubled with any fears as to their noticing the basket, and wondering where she was going.

Jemmy Dawes was left in the cottage alone, sitting on a stool almost touching the dusty bars of the little fire-place,—a happy circumstance for Mrs. Ashton’s sympathies. She had a great dread of fire, and an idea that parents who allowed their children to be in a room without a guard, were quite answerable for murder. The first questions which she put to the child were, what had become of his aunt, and his grandmother, and his uncle, and in fact, all his relations, and why they had gone away from him, and what he would do if a coal hopped out; questions which if not tending much to the child’s ultimate safety, had the effect of bringing out a good deal of the history of his family, poverty, sickness, and sorrow; dragged forth, as it were, to light, from his simplicity. Mrs. Ashton was much excited. “It was a shame,” she said, “a downright shame, to leave a child of that age; not to set any one to watch him; not put up a guard; not even to beg a neighbour to look

in upon him! But the poor were always so thoughtless; really it seemed as if they hadn't the same feelings as other folks. A fortunate thing it was for the child that they had happened to come; he might have been burnt to death ten times over, for any thing his aunt or his grandmother seemed to care; and so easily too! "There, my man! you will like this, shan't you?" she said, uncovering the basket. The little fellow raised his watery eyes to her with a smile, but he did not say anything. "Don't you think now, Kitty, he might as well eat it whilst we are here, and then there will be no fear of his tumbling into the fire at the same time?" Katharine did not precisely perceive the connection of the two actions, but she was very willing to see that the poor child had what they had brought for him, and that it was not shared with a set of hungry cousins. Mrs. Ashton peeped into a cupboard, and took out a knife, and as no fork was to be found, she managed to cut off the meat from the bone by the help of a knife and a tea spoon, praising herself as she did so for having such a clever thought, and looking at the boy from time to time with evident satisfaction, as with hungry eyes he watched the progress of his dinner preparations. Then she made a table of a wooden chair, and moving the child far enough away, as she said, from any hopping coals, told him to begin and eat fast, lest any one else should come in and want it. "I'se to say grace first," said the boy, raising himself with difficulty from his little seat. He stood up, and joined his hands together, and repeated something quite unintelligible. "Well! that is odd," whispered Mrs. Ashton to Kate, "who would have thought it?"—"Did your aunt teach you to say grace, Jemmy?" asked Katharine. "No, it wasn't aunt, it was the lady," said Jemmy, speaking with

his mouth so full that Katharine was obliged to make him repeat the words. "Miss Sinclair, I suppose," said Mrs. Ashton, in an under tone, "these district ladies are always rather given to Methodism."—"But it is quite right, mother," said Katharine, "you know how careful you always were to make John and me say grace when we were children."—"Oh! yes, quite right, only odd; I should have thought a lady like Miss Sinclair, going to be married too, as they say, would have had something else to think of than teaching a little urchin like that to say grace." Katharine made no answer; her eye at the moment caught a streak of blue sky gleaming through the dusky window pane, and something crossed her mind—a feeling more truly than a thought, which, if she had put it into words, might have been a question whether the nearest and dearest of earthly interests, even marrying and giving in marriage, could really be placed in importance above the work of training, even in the slightest degree, an immortal soul for heaven.

"There, now we are out of that close lane, and you can take my arm, Kate," said Mrs. Ashton, as they turned into High Street together. "I shan't want you to go there often, you'll catch a fever if you do." Katharine did not urge the point, she was satisfied that she had done her duty for the day, and she did feel at the moment that the air in the broad street was much more pleasant than that in the little cottage. So they walked on, settling where they should go first, and Katharine entering much more into the pleasant prospect of her new brooch, now that she had disposed to her satisfaction of the wing of the duck. "I declare there is George Andrews coming out of the "Bear" with Colonel Forbes and Mr. Lane," said Mrs. Ashton. "They have been having a talk about the room of

course. Let me see, it is those three windows to the right which make the ball room, isn't it Kate?"—"Five windows, mother," replied Katharine; "that is, there is a partition between, which they take down when they want it."—"Five windows! well that will hold a good heap. The more the merrier, as my grandmother used to say when we sat down five-and-twenty to roast goose and boiled beef on Michaelmas Day. And there is Charlie Ronaldson with them, what is he doing there I wonder?"—"Nothing, I should think," said Katharine, looking across the street. "You know, mother, he is going somewhere to learn land surveying, but it is not quite settled yet, and so till it is he has not anything to do except what he makes for himself."—"He is a very genteel young man," observed Mrs. Ashton. "I sometimes think whether he went cut out John in Selly Fowler's good graces."—"No fear of that," replied Katharine, as she watched more attentively the group standing in front of the "Bear." "He is too quiet a good deal for Selly. But do look," she added, "how George Andrews is holding forth. And Colonel Forbes listening as if George was Prime Minister." "Is not that good now?" said Mrs. Ashton.

George Andrews, a shrewd, low-browed, red-haired young man, of about six-and-twenty, certainly was stating his opinion with an air of great authority, lifting his fore-finger, and turning from Colonel Forbes to Mr. Lane, and from Mr. Lane to Colonel Forbes, wishing, it would seem, to convince them of some fact which apparently they were not inclined to contradict. "What a great man George has become since he has been on this ball committee!" observed Katharine, "a much greater than Charlie Ronaldson ever was or ever will be. Greatness is not in his way."—"George has such a won-

derful pushing way," observed Mrs. Ashton. "Yes," replied Katharine, "as my father said to me the other day, one would think he had been practising all his life selling himself by auction. But mother, see, they are moving away; if we cross the street now we shall be sure to meet them; do let us wait." No; that was not in Mrs. Ashton's way; she was not at all inclined to let slip such an opportunity of hearing all that had been said or done about the ball, and Katharine's observation only had the effect of so quickening her movements that, in her haste to be on the opposite side of the way before the gentlemen had gone by, she put herself in danger of being run over by a baker's cart. "How d'ye do? How d'ye do?" was her salutation to George, accompanied by a pause which he could not but notice, and he stopped and spoke, though it cut short something he was saying to Mr. Lane. Mr. Lane and Mrs. Ashton did not know each other, Mr. Lane therefore walked on. Colonel Forbes moved as if he meant to do the same, and then, as with a sudden recollection of duty, he paused: "Mrs. Ashton, I am so glad to have the opportunity of seeing you. I hope your husband told you what I was saying to you this morning. Miss Ashton, I trust we shall have the pleasure of seeing you at the ball on the 15th."—"My daughter is very much honoured, I am sure," said Mrs. Ashton, with a half-bow half-curtsey, and her really handsome face was radiant as a sunbeam. Katharine neither bowed nor curtseyed, but said, "Thank you, sir, I think I am going."—"And you will come early, I hope," said the Colonel, "we don't want to make it a very late business. The Duchess does not fancy very late hours, and we must have supper about eleven; that is, if our friend Mr. Andrews can be brought to consent."—"Twelve, Colonel, not one moment

earlier, if you want to do what people like," said George. "Nobody will get into the fun of dancing before eleven, and if you break it up then, the thing will go off flat."—"Well, then, we must have a little private supper for the Duchess and her party at any hour her Grace pleases. You won't object to that, Mrs. Ashton. Miss Ashton, I dare say you are of Mr. Andrews' opinion, and don't like the thought of having your dance broken up too soon."—"I don't know, sir," replied Katharine, "I should think everybody would like best to do what the Duchess of Lowther wishes, if she means to be there."—"Very courteous," said the Colonel, with a patronising smile, "but unfortunately every one else is not inclined to be equally amiable. But we shall make a compromise, I dare say. Mr. Andrews, we shall meet, I suppose, to-morrow—good afternoon. Good afternoon, Mrs. Ashton;" he half put out his hand to shake hands with Katharine; but she either did not or would not see it, and he bowed and walked away. "Now that is what I call upholding the people's rights," exclaimed George Andrews, stroking his red whiskers complacently, and looking round for applause. "If a ball is to be a Union Ball, as Colonel Forbes calls it, why is the Duchess of Lowther, or the Duchess of anything to be consulted?"—"Only because she will be the person of most importance in the room," observed Katharine. "Pooh!" replied George, rather unceremoniously, as he gave his hat a little self-conscious shake; "at a Union Ball nobody is of importance but the stewards. I have been saying that to the Colonel for the last half hour. 'Just see, Colonel,' said I, 'what will be the effect of the eleven o'clock supper; there will be,'"—He was stopped in his speech by Mrs. Ashton. "But I thought it was all settled, Mr. George, and that the Duchess was to have her

supper alone, if she liked it, and every one else afterwards."—"It won't do, it won't do," replied George oracularly, "take my word for it, it won't. If the Duchess can't come and behave like other people, she had much better stay away. She will give offence, as sure as fate she will."—"Then it will be very unkind in people who take offence," said Katharine. "Why is not the Duchess to have her way as well as we ours?"—"Because she is one and we are many," replied George; and he drew himself up with an air which betokened that he had settled the question entirely to his own satisfaction. "She only wants to have supper alone," persisted Katharine, "that won't trouble us."—"I beg your pardon, Miss Ashton, my time is precious, I can't stay to argue the point." George Andrews gave a contemptuous farewell nod, and hurried away.

"If the Duchess is to be nobody at the ball, why should they make such a fuss about her having supper with every one?" said Katharine, as she and her mother walked slowly on towards Miss Dyer's. She had spoken almost as much to herself as to her mother, but her words were answered by a third person, Charles, or, as he was commonly called, Charlie Ronaldson; the son of a man who had formerly been bailiff to the Duke of Lowther, but who, from various family misfortunes, had lost large sums during his lifetime, and at his death left his only boy to make his way in the world by himself. When Mrs. Ashton had described Charles Ronaldson as a "genteel young man," she did not mean that he was a fashionable gentleman, he did not look like one; but he did look that which was far better—a man of intelligence and thought, and honourable feelings, with that simplicity of mind, the result of humility and self-respect, which, unconsciously to its possessor, refines and dignifies the general

character and manner. He was a shy person, — very shy; it was rarely he found himself in an element that suited him, and so it was rarely that he found himself sufficiently at ease to talk. And he was a lonely man, with no brothers or sisters, his father dead, his relations for the most part at a distance. He had been educated at a good grammar school, thanks to the Duke of Lowther's bounty; since then he had been a good deal at home with his mother, whilst practising farming on the Duke's estate; now he was going to apply himself to land-surveying, as Katharine had said, — still helped by the same hand. He was not too proud to begin life under an obligation, but the sense of it made him feel his position peculiar. He had no money to spend in amusements as other young men did — he had no capital upon which to calculate the chances of business, and raise up castles in futurity; all that was to be done was to be the result of hard head labour; and this for the present was his only thought, — how to work so as to place himself in a position where he might no longer be a burden to his benefactor. It was rather a careworn idea for a young man just entering the world; and, combined with his early sorrows, poverty and the loss of his father, it had sobered him; not made him melancholy, not robbed him of hope or the power of enjoyment, but sobered him; so that he looked at life as a man many years older than himself — for he was only three-and-twenty — might have done, and this gave him a quietness of manner which was generally considered the most remarkable point about him. "That shy fellow, Ronaldson," was the epithet by which he was most generally known, and by which Katharine had frequently heard him described. She was not prepared therefore for his venturing to walk up the street a few paces by her

side, and even reply to her remark, though she had seen him lingering behind George Andrews during their short conversation, and noticed that he turned in the same direction as themselves. She quite started when he said, very awkwardly, as if he was scolding himself for the liberty he was taking:—Miss Ashton, “I don’t think people do consider the Duchess of Lowther nobody.”

“I don’t for one,” replied Katharine, trying not to smile at the odd way in which he turned round to glance at her, and then looked across to the other side of the street, apparently not in the least caring whether she answered him or not. “And I don’t think it ever was intended that we should think her nobody, do you?” he continued. He was a little less shy at the second observation, and actually kept his face towards her, whilst listening to the answer. “No, replied Katharine, “Why should she be called Duchess, if she is to be nobody?”—“But, my dear Kitty, you don’t understand,” interrupted Mrs. Ashton. “You did not hear what George Andrews said. It is only at the ball—at this Union Ball—that we are not to have distinction; and, upon second thought, I must say I have a notion he may be right. I should not care myself, but there’s many I know who will think it a great offence if the Duchess does not sit down to supper; the Dobsons for one. I heard Martha Dobson say myself yesterday, that half the fun at the ball would be making one with the grandees.”—“Well,” said Katharine, as if she was tired of the subject, “I don’t see how it is to be settled; all I know is, that I never think that people are all one, except——” She stopped for an instant. “Except when?” asked Charles Ronaldson, and his hand was put forth, and then taken back, and then put forth again. He wanted her to see that he was going to say good-bye. “Except when

they are in church," said Katharine, and she took the shy fingers in hers, and gave them a cordial shake. His face brightened up, and he said energetically, "Perhaps it is a pity that we are not always in church."—"Perhaps so," said Katharine. "Good bye." She did not quite know what he meant; but they were close to Miss Dyer's shop, and she wanted to get rid of him. "It is bad beginning to talk to Charlie Ronaldson," she said laughingly to her mother, as they went in; "he never has courage to leave off."—"But he is a good young man though," observed Mrs. Ashton; "I like Charlie very much, only I wish he would learn to look one in the face." Katharine wished the same; that awkward habit of looking away whenever he addressed any one, took off all, or nearly all, the pleasure she had in talking to him. She never knew whether he was listening to her or not.

CHAPTER X.

"CLEAR muslin, of course, Mrs. Ashton," said Miss Dyer, leading the way into the show-room, "and broad tucks."—"Yes, if it's the fashion. I should like it to be quite the fashion."—"Broad tucks is just the thing," replied Miss Dyer; "broad tucks, with a narrow edge of ribbon round the top; that's what we've just made for two or three ladies. I am sure you would like broad tucks with pink, Miss Katharine, or blue would look very pretty."—"I don't think it wants any ribbon," observed Katharine; "and, mother, I should not like to be exactly the same as any one else."—"Then pink on the shoulders and round the body would be ex-

tremely nice," continued the dress-maker, producing a roll of rather narrow pink ribbon, and folding it so as not to crease it. "That would be quite different from everybody, and you might have a pink sash and streamers to match; or, if you chose, pink satin bows down the dress; but in that case you must have a full skirt and no tucks. I can show you some beautiful patterns," and she opened the last number of the Dress Magazine, containing simpering ladies in all varieties of costume, and bodiless dresses of every newly-invented pattern. Katharine was not in the least bewildered; she had made up her mind before she came what her dress was to be, and she kept to her own taste. "I would rather not have more pink than I can help, mother," she said; "and I should like," she added, turning to Miss Dyer, "to have my dress quite plain, with a folded cape like this," and she pointed to one in the magazine; "and I should choose to have it full, without tucks; and that broad pink ribbon will do very well for a sash, with a bow and ends in front. Mother, dear, that will please you, won't it? You know all that narrow trimming will take a great deal, and it must be unripped every time the dress is washed, and so it will give a great deal of trouble."—"Just as you like, Kitty," said Mrs. Ashton, with a slight accent of disappointment. "The pink round the tail would smarten up the dress; but, as you say, it must be unripped when the frock's washed, so have it your own way; only do let it be a fashionable make, Miss Dyer."—"Oh, depend upon it, Mrs. Ashton—depend upon it;—Miss Kate's first ball, and the Duchess to be there, and Lady Marchmont, and Lady Julia,—depend upon it, it shall be quite fashionable. Miss Katharine, if you please, I will just take your measure." That was an ordeal Katharine was not quite prepared for; she generally made her own

dresses, and she thought it very disagreeable to be turned and twisted about like a doll, and measured in length and breadth, and covered with thin white-brown paper, cut and slit, and pinned together. And Miss Dyer seemed never weary of giving gasbes with her large scissors, and taking pins out of her mouth, and placing them in an ominous vicinity to Katharine's neck. And her mother was not likely to be weary either, for she was going round the room all the time, examining the caps hanging upon the mahogany stands; so there seemed no prospect of an end. But it came at last; and Katharine put on her dark shawl and straw bonnet, and thought how much more comfortable and at home she felt in them than she ever should in the white muslin. "White kid gloves, Miss Katharine?" said Miss Dyer, just as Katharine had laid her finger on the handle of the door. "Oh, yes, I forgot." Katharine spoke a little impatiently, and Miss Dyer laughed, and said: "it was not many young girls of Miss Katharine's age that would be fussed at having to buy ball things. There was Miss Fowler and Miss Madden, they had been a good two hours settling it all." — "And did not content themselves after all, I dare say," said Katharine. "Those gloves are my size, Miss Dyer; please will you put them up, and I will take them with me." The gloves were put up, and Katharine ran gaily down the stairs, turning back, however, to whisper to her mother, who was still lingering and looking back at the caps, "Mother, dear, let me make your cap; you know mine suit you better than any, and I got a notion of a new trimming whilst I was being 'tried on.'"

They went next to the jeweller's. Katharine liked that much better than the dressmaker's. She had long wished for a brooch with her father, and mother, and brothers' hair in it; but she had

never had courage to ask for it, it seemed such a foolish expense. Now her father himself wished her to spend the money, so she had no scruples. Several persons were in the shop, and they had to wait some time before they were attended to, and this gave Katharine an opportunity of examining all the brooches under the glass counter, and making up her mind what she should choose. Mrs. Ashton stood by her touching her elbow every now and then. "Look at that blue one, Kate, that's a beauty, and that gold one with the red stone; why it's nearly as large as your grandmother's garnet, but I don't like it as well, do you?" Katharine disliked blue stones, and was not very fond of red ones, but she did not wish to discuss them, for the Miss Maddens and Miss Lane were in the shop, giving orders for some hair bracelets, and she was quite sure that the youngest Miss Madden, who was a great gossip, was listening to all she and her mother were saying. "Why, Katharine, what are you doing here?" she heard some one behind her exclaim in a noisy voice just as the shopman had found time to attend to her. "How do you do, Selina?" replied Katharine very quietly, giving her hand without answering the question. "I like that plain gold one best," she added, addressing her mother in a low voice, "because I can wear it always, and it has such a good place for hair." Selina looked over her shoulder, "Choosing brooches, I declare. Well! who would have thought that?"—"Choosing what?" asked Miss Julia Madden, coming up to Selina. Katharine could not help hearing her, neither could she avoid noticing that Selina walked away directly to the other end of the shop, and that both began laughing. "Mother, do you mind my having the plain brooch?" she continued. "No, not exactly, if you wish it; but, Kitty, do look at Miss Lane's brooch; that one

she laid down on the counter just now to have a pin put to it." It was a handsome sapphire brooch. Katharine admired it very much, but it did not make her discontented with her own selection. "It is not like a common stone at all," she whispered, "I dare say it cost a great deal of money, and if it did, such a one would not suit me. It is the place for hair I want most, and besides, I should never scarcely wear anything so bright as that."—"You have such an odd taste, Kitty," said her mother. "I declare your new brooch won't be half as smart as your grandmother's garnet. If it wasn't for the old-fashioned setting you had better wear that at the ball after all." Mrs. Ashton's voice was unfortunately loud, and as, in her simplicity, she was not conscious of often saying things which other people should not hear, she seldom took the trouble to lower it. The speech was followed by a very audible giggle from Selina Fowler and Miss Julia Madden, checked by a hush from Miss Madden, and a threatening look from Miss Lane. Katharine heard the latter say, "really those girls are too bad," and Miss Madden went up to her sister and reproved her, but the giggling went on very much as before. Katharine tried not to think about it, but she could not help being annoyed, especially with Selina. She wished her mother would make haste and decide, but Mrs. Ashton could not yet give up her wish for something smart, and insisted upon turning over the brooches again before the choice should be finally made. Katharine sat down patiently on the only unoccupied stool; other people came into the shop and the shopman moved away. "Mrs. Reeves," whispered Mrs. Ashton, putting her head close to her daughter's, and pretending to be examining the same ornament. Katharine slightly moved her head, and saw behind her a lady about

six-and-thirty years of age, quiet in manner, very sensible looking, and not at all pretty. She was standing patiently whilst Miss Lane gave some last orders. Katharine rose and offered her seat. Mrs. Reeves did not look at all strong, and, besides, she was the clergyman's wife. The offer was not accepted, but the tone in which Mrs. Reeves said, "thank you," was very cordial and kind, and she recognised Mrs. Ashton, and asked how she was, and inquired whether Mr. Ashton had lately been suffering from gout; and then Mrs. Ashton pointed out Katharine as her daughter, and Mrs. Reeves shook hands with her, not at all as Colonel Forbes might have done, but with the pleasant friendly manner of interest and kindheartedness.

She spoke to Miss Lane also, and they talked together of some mutual friend; and the Miss Maddens and Selina Fowler bowed to her, and Mrs. Reeves returned the bow rather distantly. Katharine observed that the loud talking and giggling ceased when Mrs. Reeves came in; perhaps Selina and her friend were ashamed of it—perhaps they were more occupied in watching what Mrs. Reeves did, for they turned round with their backs to the counter and looked at her, and Katharine felt a little comforted by this; she saw they could be rude to the clergyman's wife as well as to her. "May we go, mother?" she asked, when Mrs. Ashton had completed her inspection; "I don't think I shall see anything I like better." Mrs. Ashton pointed to a turquoise brooch. "I could not wear that every day, dear mother, and there is no place for hair."—"Well, as you wish, child. Here, Mr. Green, put up this gold brooch, will you?"—"And let me pay for it," said Katharine; "two pounds it is, I think."—"Two pounds, Miss Ashton; shall I put it in a box for you?"—"Thank you, if you will."—"I shall be

quite rich besides," she added to her mother, as she took out her purse and laid the money on the counter.

She spoke this without hesitation; for she was quite sure that Mrs. Reeves was not listening to her; and equally sure that, if she did overhear any remark, she would not repeat it and laugh at it. But though Mrs. Reeves might not hear what Katharine said, Katharine could not help hearing what Mrs. Reeves said; for she was talking to Miss Lane and Mr. Green, and telling them of a case of distress in consequence of a fire, for which Mr. Reeves was wishing to raise a general subscription. She was very eager in what she said; and Mr. Green was very civil, and bowed, and hoped such charitable efforts would be crowned with success; and Miss Lane was full of the deepest sympathy, and only trusted that dear Mrs. Reeves would not exert herself too much. Mr. Green, too, was extremely willing—anxious, indeed—to have the subscription papers placed in his shop; and Miss Lane said she should be most happy to give her trifle, when she knew what other people meant to give. But Mrs. Reeves did not appear to advance much farther than this; and Katharine really felt for her, she looked so awkward, and uncomfortable, and disappointed. She lingered, hoping that Mrs. Reeves might speak to her or her mother upon the subject; but nothing was said. Mrs. Reeves only bowed as they moved away. "I shall remember it, though," thought Katharine to herself, "and I can ask Miss Sinclair about it." Five shillings were put aside in her mind instantly: it was but little, but it seemed in a measure to hallow the rest of her riches.

CHAPTER XI.

COLONEL FORBES flattered himself that he was winning golden opinions, as he planned, and consulted, and arranged for the ball ; and every day he went to report progress to Mrs. Sinclair ; and Jane at last became so interested, that she felt quite an inclination to go, and was half-provoked when all her suggestions as to its being right and proper were met with a decided "my love, it is my wish." She had no one, indeed, to support her, for Mrs. Sinclair was of the same mind with Colonel Forbes, though not, perhaps, from the same cause. Mrs. Sinclair was a little o.d.-fashioned in her notions—perhaps, also a little proud ; she could understand, she said, the pleasure of a dance given by a landlord to his tenants—there was something of the old feudal spirit in it—a mutual tie of protection and respect ; but a ball, when there was no one to guide, and no one to look up to, and every one's will was in a measure his law, was only to be made agreeable by the conventional forms of good society. If the persons who met at the ball had not been accustomed to the same kind of society, their conventional forms must differ, and jarrings and disunions must be the result. Colonel Forbes did not care to dispute the point—one reason was as good as another for him ;—he did not choose Jane to go ; and so long as he had her mother's support he did not trouble himself as to why it was given. He did wish, though, that Jane would throw herself more into his notions as to the mode of making friends with the townspeople. He had told her about the invitation given to Mr. Ashton, and about meeting Katharine in the street and offering to shake hands

with her ; and all Jane said in reply was : “ I dare say Katharine did not understand what you meant.” “ You are making mysteries,” he replied ; “ I can see nothing beyond any person’s comprehension in the act of shaking hands,——“ Only that, generally speaking, it implies a certain amount of intimacy and friendship,” said Jane. “ And I intend to be friendly,” answered Colonel Forbes.—“ But friendliness and friendship are different things, continued Jane, “ friendship you feel, I have no doubt,” she added, laughing, “ so far that you would not murder poor Katharine; but if she were to leave Rilworth to-morrow, you would not trouble yourself with a second thought about her.”——“ No reason, dear child, why I should not be kind to her as long as she remains here,” was the answer.—“ Oh ! yes, kind—of course, kind, if she requires kindness ; but the truth is, that I can never get into my head that Katharine requires anything except ”——“ What ? ”——“ Respect,” said Jane, timidly. Colonel Forbes looked puzzled ; but he sat down by Jane, and drew her towards him, and kissed her forehead in a kind of paternal fashion. He was especially fond of her when she was a little afraid of him. —“ Such a very odd child ! ” he said ; and he held her hand and stroked it as he would a child’s ; “ and such very odd notions !—How am I to respect people I know nothing about ? ”——“ I think we may respect every one in manner,” said Jane ; — “ poor people and every one. And what I think very often prevents our doing so, is, that they don’t respect themselves : but Katharine Ashton does respect herself.”——“ How ? — explain a little more.” He was just the very least in the world sharp in his tone. “ She respects her own position is life, — that is what I mean. She respects it as much as we do ours. “ She is not trying to move out of it and above it.”——

“Quite right,—she could not if she wished it.” — “Then I don’t think,” continued Jane, “that we can do her any good, or give her any pleasure by behaving to her as if she did wish it. Young-lady politenesses are not, I think, what she wants.” — “Shaking hands, and so forth,” said Colonel Forbes, laughing; for he liked to hear Jane bring forth her opinions,—she did it so prettily and deferentially, and argument gave her just the animation she required to brighten her soft eyes. “Take care you never shake hands with her yourself, Jane.” — “My shaking hands would be a different thing from yours,” said Jane. “I should do it because I liked her; and you would do it because” — she stopped; — “I was going to say, because you wished her to like you, but that would not be correct. You don’t care in the least for Katharine Ashton’s liking or disliking you, but you do care for Mr. Ashton’s daughter liking you, because that involves influence with Mr. Ashton himself. Oh, Philip!” It was so very, very rarely that Jane ventured upon the Christian name — Colonel Forbes would have willingly endured a lecture of a very different kind for the pleasure of hearing it.

He could not argue with her any more, — he did not at the moment care enough about that subject, about any subject but one: repeating her words in a low tone, he said, earnestly, “Oh, Philip! — that was a very pleasant sound: when shall I be blessed by hearing it hourly?” The crimson colour dyed Jane’s cheeks. “My mother begged for three months,” she said, “and more than two are gone. Shall it be this day three weeks — the fifteenth?” — there was a long pause, — he turned away as if unable to bear the delay. But the answer came — “The fifteenth, if you will.” The words were scarcely audible, and her eyes were dimmed by glistening tears. It was a very painful happiness.

But the day was fixed, and Colonel Forbes' mind was at rest. Uncertainty was worse for him than for most people; his disposition was so imperious, so impatient of opposition. Mrs. Sinclair saw this, and sighed. Jane saw it, and thought how he loved her! The preparations for the wedding were to be very quiet; not so the preparations for the ball. It wanted now but four days, and yet nothing seemed ready. The question of the Duchess's supper was still undecided, but Colonel Forbes had given up insisting upon it. It was left, like a good many other things in this world, to take its chance. So, however, could not be left the important arrangements of lights and music, benches and evergreens, about which there had been at first as many varying opinions as there were members of the committee. Some, who like George Andrews, made it a rule to consult the people, had at first opposed every thing which Colonel Forbes suggested, on the principle that the Colonel represented the aristocratic interest, and in a democratic Union Ball no such influence could of course be permitted. The Colonel had been obliged to fight every inch of his way to the attainment of his favourite points — namely, ornamenting the wall simply with evergreens, instead of masses of artificial flowers — having a very good band from the county town, instead of a very bad one from Rilworth, — and lighting the room with wax candles, instead of oil lamps. But he did gain the victory at last, and when every one else was tired out, — and Mr. Lane, the solicitor, had found out that balls were expensive in time as well as money, — and Mr. Henry Madden had taken offence because George Andrews quizzed him, — and Mr. John Price, the banker's son, who had just been taken into partnership with his father, had been made aware that he was considered a greater oracle at the cricket-club

than at the committee-room of the "Bear,"— and two or three others, who had never attended at all, except to find fault, had discovered that they were exhausted with their labours, then Colonel Forbes stepped quietly into their place, and with the help of George Andrews, managed every thing his own way. It was very cleverly done. The arrangements had been discussed so often, and the colonel had so continually deferred to the general opinion, one day, and the next re-opened the same questions with fresh doubts, that no one could tell where or how they left, and so each took it for granted they were settled according to his wish. There was not one member of the committee who did not believe that on his judgment and his vote entirely depended the success of the ball,—and neither was there one, except George Andrews, who was at all aware that every individual point which had been discussed in the committee-room had been re-discussed, and re-settled by the will of Colonel Forbes. — "Let them think they have their wish," said Colonel Forbes one day to Jane, whilst laughing with her over the changes he had taken upon himself to make: "it is much safer, and makes them just as happy as having the wish itself." George Andrews, indeed, was not to be so deceived, but then Colonel Forbes did not attempt to deceive him. Vulgar and self-opiniated though he was, he was the only individual of the committee who possessed more than a moderate portion of quickness and common sense; and Colonel Forbes had seized upon him, and as he could not work without him, had forced himself to work with him. When the last week before the ball arrived, George Andrews was heartily one with Colonel Forbes,—lured by a good deal of open flattery, a few good-humoured laughs at the expense of his

neighbours, a discreet yielding upon points which were not of the least consequence, and above all a frequent use of the pronouns "us" and "we."

"What trouble Forbes takes about these people and their ball," said Lord Marchmont, one day to his father, when Colonel Forbes had been taking luncheon at Rilworth Castle; "who would have given him credit for it?" The Duke smiled, and pointed to the parliamentary list. The Duke was a man of observation. He knew more of Colonel Forbes' mind than Colonel Forbes himself, for the idea of standing for the borough was as yet only in embryo.

Reports of progress were duly brought to Katharine Ashton by Selina Fowler, for Selina was the dear friend of Matty Andrews, and Matty of course heard every thing from head-quarters. Katharine did not disdain the information. She had not quarrelled with Selina because she had been rude, and she did not intend to quarrel. She did not respect Selina sufficiently to be offended at anything she might do, and she never forgot that it was more than probable she might one day be her sister-in-law. They met as very good friends, and Katharine showed her brooch when she was asked for it, and said it was her father's present. There was no mystery in the case, and she did not think it necessary to make any, — and this baffled Selina, and her curiosity, and her love of gossip, more than anything.

Katharine looked forward to the ball with a good deal of pleasurable excitement as it drew near, though she had cared so little about it when it was first talked about. Her father and John took an interest in it — that was one great point; and her mother liked the idea of meeting her friends, and having a pleasant talk; and though Katharine

could not conquer her sense of the unfitness of a party which was to include the Duchess of Lowther, and herself, and Martha Dobson, she still allowed that she should like to watch the Duchess, and see how she behaved.

The day before the ball Jane Sinelair came to see her. They had met frequently of late on little matters of business connected with Jane's district, and the first feeling of mutual liking, that remnant of school-days, had increased rapidly. Jane could not help seeing that Katharine was, in taste, though not in cultivation of mind, more congenial to her own ideas of what was superior and right-minded, than many whom she met in society, calling themselves ladies; and Katharine looked upon Jane with as much of romantic admiration as was compatible with her natural character. Still the intercourse between them was chiefly matter-of-fact: they talked about the poor and the parish, and a little of Katharine's family; but Jane often lingered in the back parlour longer than was absolutely necessary, and Katharine sometimes found herself saying things to Miss Sinclair which she did not think any one else would have understood. Katharine was wishing to see Jane now to speak to her about the subscription for the family who had suffered from the fire. She waited some time to see what her father would give; but Mr. Ashton would not allow his name to be put down for more than half a crown, because Mr. Madden did not offer more. Katharine could not therefore give her donation openly, but she thought that Jane would take it to Mrs. Reeves for her, and that would do as well.

There was a change in Jane since last they met: Katharine noticed it, or rather felt it. Her visit was very short, and she was more shy, more veiled, as it

were, and her words were not uttered as freely : they seemed less the natural expression of her thoughts. There was no change in kindness, but Jane was no longer living in any degree in Katharine's world, and Katharine might have felt the difference and been pained at it, but that as they parted, Jane stood for a second holding her hand, and blushing deeply said : "Katharine, I am to be married on the fifteenth." — "Married! Oh, Miss Sinclair, I wish you such happiness!" Katharine's voice was nearly choked, and her hand trembled with affectionate eagerness. Jane returned the warm pressure more gently, yet with even greater tenderness. "Thank you. I was sure you would feel with me. Please not to mention it to any one." They parted. Jane to watch for Colonel Forbes, and count the minutes till the hour of his promised visit. Katharine to occupy herself till tea time, in putting the finishing touches to her mother's cap. "Married," she thought to herself, as she took up her needle and thread, and mechanically twisted the ribbon and gauze into its proper form. "How odd it will be! I wish I liked Colonel Forbes better. I wish I was sure he was going to make her happy;—and I shall not see anything more of her then!" That was the worst thought of all at the moment. Katharine did not know before how fond she was of Jane. Marriage would be a great separation. Jane would indeed live at Maplestead, and be often at Rilworth, but the wife of Colonel Forbes could never be to her what the simple, unassuming Jane Sinclair had been. All that "auld lang syne" sympathy dating from school-days would be swept away in the new ties which she was about to form; and again Katharine said to herself: "I wish I could be sure she was going to be happy." From Jane's marriage Katharine wandered off to marriage in general,—to her own—if

such a thing could be ; she could not help smiling to herself at the idea, the possibility, — it seemed so — almost absurd. Whom could she ever find to care for as well as her father, and mother, and John ? And if she did care for “ any one,” — how could she suppose that “ any one ” would ever care for her ? And if she did care, it would be very terrible to go away from home, — it must be some one so very unlike any person she had ever seen, who would make up to her for the loss of home. No, she did not think that marriage was in her way. The girls at school used to tell her so. They used to prophesy that Selly would have a great many offers, but they always said to her that she was sure to die an old maid ; and Katharine had imbibed a kind of faith in the prediction, — so far at least that she was never troubled with fears lest the persons she met should fall in love with her, — a fear which she knew was continually haunting the mind of Selina.

But then, if she did not marry, what should she do all her life ? Live with her father and mother ? but there must come a time of separation. Live with John ? No, — if Selina Fowler did not come in the way, some one else would. Live alone ? like Miss Cookson, the stout old lady, whose father had been the chief linendraper in the place, and who now inhabited the little white house just beyond the turnpike, on the Maplestead Road. Katharine’s heart misgave her. Miss Cookson had plenty to eat, plenty to drink, plenty of acquaintances, no friends, two hundred a year, and nothing to do. She could not wish to be an old maid like Miss Cookson. What then could she be ? what ought she to be ?

That was a deep question ; too deep for Katharine, too deep for many much older and wiser

persons. It was like Christian's "Slough of Despond;" and Katharine felt herself sinking into it. Happy for her that the appearance of the servant and the tea broke in upon her meditations.

CHAPTER XII.

KATHARINE had quite forgotten the Slough of Despond when she entered the long room at the "Bear," on the evening of the long-expected ball. She felt very timid, very awkward, but extremely inclined to be amused and happy. They went early; Mrs. Ashton liked, she said, to be sure of good seats, and there would be enough to do in watching people as they came in. So, almost before the candles were lighted, and more than a quarter of an hour before the musicians assembled in the gallery, Mrs. Ashton and Katharine took their seats on the upper benches, between the fire-place and the door; not at the top of the room, that would have been in the way of the Duchess and her friends. "Colonel Forbes had been there only five minutes before," George Andrews told them, as he met them at the door, radiant in a purple satin waistcoat, and very shining shoes, "but he was gone to the 'Bear' to dress; he would be back as soon as possible, for he was to receive the Duchess, and she was to arrive punctually at eight." Mrs. Ashton was much interested by the information, and considered Mr. George most kindly communicative. She did not think, as Katharine did, that he talked to them only because there was no one of more importance present, and talk he must to somebody. "I assure you, Mrs.

Ashton, we have worked uncommonly hard," he continued: "you wouldn't know this to be the same room in which the great anti-corn law meeting was held last year, now, would you? Matty, my sister, and the two Maddens, the girls, I mean—Harry Madden and I are not on terms exactly,—brought a whole heap of made-up roses to put over the mantel-piece, but we felt it would be better not; it would destroy the tastefulness. It is simple, now, you see, Miss Katharine,—quite simple, like your dress, which you must allow me to say is remarkably pretty." He turned away to welcome a new arrival, and did not see Katharine's affronted face. She never liked George Andrews, under any circumstances; as steward of a ball she thought him actually detestable in his impertinence.

The room began to fill. Amongst the earliest who came were Selina Fowler and her mother, and two cousins from the country, and a young ensign from the regiment stationed at the county town, who had been dining with them. Selina looked handsome; her blue silk dress was very pretty, and very well made, and her long black ringlets were glossy and neatly arranged. Katharine wished she could have cut off some streaming ribbons depending from the dress, and tried the effect of a single white rose, instead of a wreath of pink ones; but that might be her own want of knowledge of the fashion. People, she was aware, did wear very odd colours together, and pink and blue might be quite right. She took pleasure in seeing Selina, and quite forgot any past offences; indeed they were so common that they were not worth remembering. "Selly has brought one partner with her, and she is sure of John and George Andrews, so there will be three dances for her, mother," she said: "how she will enjoy it! But do look! there is Martha

Dobson, I declare, and old Mr. Dobson,—doesn't he look pleased? Do let us go across and speak to him: don't you see him admiring the candles and the laurels?"—"We shall lose our places if we move," said Mrs. Ashton; "people are coming in so fast. See, there is Henry Madden,—isn't it, Kate? I wonder what he and George Andrews are cool about? And who is that young lady in white near him? Miss Sophy Lane, isn't it? I did not know she was old enough to come out to a ball. And next to her must be Mrs. Hugh Coke, of Littlefield. She is going up to the top of the room, you see. I suppose she means to get near the Duchess. That is a very odd cap of hers, Kitty, isn't it? I am glad you did not make mine like it."—"I wish they would begin dancing," said Katharine; "I should so like to see them."—"And to dance yourself, too, child," observed Mrs. Ashton; "your father said he should come in as soon as ever he could, hoping to see you well at it."—"I don't know whom I am to dance with," said Katharine, "and I shall be very much afraid of trying; but I shall be sure to enjoy seeing it all. Do, mother, just get Martha Dobson to come and sit by us; she looks so lonely out there by herself, and old Mr. Dobson is away at the other end, talking to Mr. Lane's clerk." Mrs. Ashton was still afraid to move herself, fearing to lose the seats, but she sent Katharine across the room to give the invitation, promising to take care of her seat for her. So Katharine made her way to the doorway, but was there stopped by a considerable commotion, caused by no less an event than the arrival of the Duchess of Lowther and her party. The press was very unpleasant, for every one moved back, to make way, and Katharine's dress was crumpled unmercifully. She did not think of that, however, being amused

to stand behind the door and watch what went on. "That's Colonel Forbes," she heard whispered by some one behind her. "He is a steward; you may know him by the purple bow at his button-hole; all the stewards have purple bows."—"Oh, then, there's another behind."—"Yes, Mr. Andrews,—Mr. George Andrews, son of the rich auctioneer."—"And Mr. Lane? he can't be a steward, he is too old!"—"Yes, but he is. Stand back; here they come." Some people pretended not to look;—they were the county people at the upper end, who said they had seen the Duchess of Lowther hundreds of times, and why should they look at her now? Katharine had seen her very often too; yet she did like to see her again, for it was a new view of a familiar object; and she was curious to see the party who accompanied her. Lady Marehmont, the celebrated beauty, and Lady Julia and Lady Mary Ferrers, the Duchess's two daughters, and several other unknown but no doubt equally distinguished individuals, who were some young, some old, some handsome, some ugly, but all rather wonderful to Katharine, because they were so like every one else. The Duchess herself was remarkable chiefly for her good-humoured expression of face, and her love of talking. She had been handsome, and she dressed particularly well, and had a certain kindly dignity of manner, from having been accustomed all her life to confer rather than receive favours, all of which tended to create a favourable impression. Katharine looked at her with pleasure, but the person she liked best to see was Colonel Forbes. He was in the room before the Duchess's arrival, and went forward to meet her, and offer his arm, and they walked to the top of the ball-room together. He looked so very refined, so entirely a gentleman, Katharine forgot Martha

Dobson, and thought of Miss Sinclair, and wished she had been there to see him.

“If he is as good as he is good-looking, there will be no fear,” she said to herself.

“Miss Ashton, they are going to dance, now the Duchess is come. Would you try the country dance with me?” It was Charles Ronaldson speaking,—over her shoulder, because he had not the courage to make the request to her face. Katharine was a little frightened,—but a good deal pleased. She had not till then quite made up her mind to attempt dancing at all: seeing so many strangers had at first made her feel it would be impossible; but now that she was more accustomed to them, she had a hope that the very fact of the numbers would cause her mistakes to pass unnoticed. “I should like to try very much,” she said, “but I don’t know much about it, so please let us get quite at the bottom.”

There was great confusion in the room—stewards with purple bows rushing about amongst crowds of perplexed couples, who could not possibly be made to understand that in a country dance gentlemen and ladies must stand opposite to each other; a few individuals more learned and more adventurous making their way to the upper end of the room, and resolutely placing themselves in front of some of the Duchess of Lowther’s friends: scornful looks in consequence on one side, and half-suppressed triumphant smiles on the other;—a good deal of pressing and squeezing,—a muttered apology,—a stiff bow,—fathers, mothers, uncles, and aunts, pressing in upon the ranks, and only kept back by the peremptory commands of Mr. George Andrews, and the more softened, but not less imperious entreaties, of Colonel Forbes;—such were the preparations for the country dance! Katharine kept her arm within

her companion's as long as she possibly could, for she was so bewildered that she did not remember what the dance was like, but the fact dawned upon her when she saw Martha Dobson separated from her partner, a clumsy-looking country boy, and vainly peering for him with her near-sighted eyes, as he stood opposite to her. Katharine turned to Charles, and begged him to keep close to that poor boy and help him, and she would help Martha. "I suspect we know more than they do," she said; "at any rate, we will watch and learn something before it comes to our turn."—"Now Martha," she added, addressing the frightened girl,—"we will just go wrong together, and then nobody can scold us. I don't know anything about it, scarcely, but I mean to learn. See, they are just beginning."

Yes, but not Selina Fowler and George Andrews, as Katharine in her simplicity had expected. Selina was standing not far from herself, looking much out of humour, and her partner was the young ensign; and it was Lady Marchmont who opened the ball, with Colonel Forbes. Katharine was very much amused then; the music was so inspiring, the scene so very pretty, and she thought it would be extremely nice to get to the top, and go down the middle, and she could scarcely keep her feet still, they seemed so involuntarily to keep time to the music. Every now and then she caught a glimpse of her mother through the gazing crowd, and Mrs. Ashton's pleased smile was as exhilarating to her as the music. When it came to her part to turn in the dance, however, she forgot what she was to do, and making a great blunder, blushed and begged pardon, and to make amends, helped Martha Dobson with such excellent instruction, that in some wonderful way—how, Martha never knew—she actually went through the trial of "hands across," and came back to her place

in safety. Louder and more gladdening sounded the music, faster and faster down came the dancers. Katharine was so eager not to make mistakes that she did not notice with whom she danced, and cared no more for Lord Marchmont and his brothers and the great people of the county, than she would for her brother John. Dancing was her business just then, and she set herself to it with straightforward earnestness, as she would to any other business. George Andrews, she found, was not dancing, he was moving up and down behind the ranks, urging every one to "keep up, keep up," not to leave blank spaces, and cause confusion. Katharine saw that there were spaces, that the numbers in the dance were fewer; she did not see the reason, till she observed Lady Marchmont sitting down on a bench by the door, and Colonel Forbes standing by her talking to her. They then had left the dance, so had Lady Julia Ferrer, so had her sister, so had a great many others of their party. She heard some one near her say: "That's too bad; if they have had their pleasure, why shouldn't they wait?" and many were the disappointed angry looks which were cast at them. "You are not going to sit down?" said George Andrews, coming up to Selina Fowler, when she had danced to the end; "you must not, it is against the rules."—"Not against my rules," was Selina's reply, and with a toss of the head, she left her place and sat down. Two or three others followed her example; the spirit of the dancers was departing;—Katharine stood at the top, and did not quite know whether it was worth while to go on. Colonel Forbes saw there was a pause, gave the signal to the musicians,—and the country dance was over.

Disappointment the first,—a great disappointment to Katharine,—but she bore it very patiently. Not so many others. "It was the grandee airs,"

they said, which they disliked, and other folks imitating them; but they would have their revenge; they would have a country dance before the evening was over, and all to themselves, and three times up and down, they would go if they chose it. A decided party was formed; all who had left the country dance were considered to be, as it was said, apeing the grandes; and when a quadrille was proposed, no one else would go into the same set with them. Katharine would not venture upon a quadrille, though Charles Ronaldson asked her, and said they had really not danced at all. She sat down by her mother, and watched the forming of the quadrilles. "Do look, mother," she said, "there are Selly and Henry Madden wanting a place; where will they go?"—"Into that second set, I suppose," said Mrs. Ashton. "There is no one standing opposite to that young lady in the white silk." The young lady in white silk was a cousin of Lady Marchmont's. She and her partner were looking round for a *vis-à-vis*. Selina and young Madden were just coming up. It was impossible not to see them. The young lady put up her eye-glass, glanced round the quadrille, said quite loudly, "We have no *vis-à-vis*," and quietly retired. The dancing began, and Selina was obliged to sit down. "Now that's what I call rude," exclaimed Mrs. Ashton. "Very rude," said Katharine; "but if I were Selly I would not have put myself in the way of it. She might have seen they were not any of them her set."—"But one set is as good as another to-night," said Mrs. Ashton; "people were all to dance together, I thought."—"Yes, dance with the people who dance like them," replied Katharine; that is what they are doing. "Mother, is not Lady Marchmont beautiful, and isn't it pleasant to see her move about in that sliding way!"

“She does not dance half as merrily as you, Kate,” replied her mother. “You went through that twisty figure in the country dance as if you had been at it all your life. How I wish your father could have seen you.” — “Ah, but mother, that was dancing for myself. Lady Marchmont’s dancing is for other people. I could watch her all night;” and Katharine bent forward, that her view might not be obstructed by a venerable old lady who sat next her, and followed every movement of the graceful Lady Marchmont with the most eager delight.

Katharine’s was one of the few faces on which a hearty smile of pleasure was to be seen. The feeling in the room generally was uncomfortable. Selina Fowler was not the only person aggrieved. Miss Lane found herself in the third set, when she wished to be in the second; Miss Madden fancied that Lady Julia Ferrers had cut her; Miss Andrews felt especially angry that, as the sister of a steward, she had not been introduced to the Duchess. Some of the country people were heard making remarks upon Miss Julia Madden’s style of dancing; and the unfortunate “grandees,” — from the good-natured Duchess, wishing to be kind, but not in the least knowing how to begin, to the silly girl who did not choose to be *vis-à-vis* to Selina Fowler — were all included in one term — “airified.”

Colonel Forbes, with the quick instinct of a seeker of popularity, felt, almost before he saw, what was amiss. “We are keeping aloof too much,” he said to the Duchess: “it will not do to have the sets distinct. Can your Grace persuade Lord Marchmont to play the agreeable?” The Duchess, only too delighted to be spared the responsibility of thought, appealed to her son: “Marchmont, there is Miss Lane, — do you see her? — the young lady in yellow :

go and ask Miss Lane for the next quadrille ;—you really must—it will be civil.—And Walter,” — she beckoned to another son — “Colonel Forbes, be so good as to find Walter a partner?—Go and talk your best, my dear boy ; don’t be shy, there is nothing to be shy about.—What else can I do, Colonel Forbes? — only tell me? — what can I do? — Must I walk up and down and talk to them? — Ah! what a comfort! — here are the officers!” A great comfort indeed, not only for the Duchess, but for the whole room. Officers are amphibious animals,—they can live in all elements. Colonel Forbes seized on the Major and the Captain for Miss Lane and Miss Madden, introduced a lieutenant to one young lady, an ensign to another ; then called for a polka ; and, as the whirling dance began, returned to the Duchess, to congratulate both her and himself that the success of the ball was secure.

Most mistaken man ! The polka once begun, when was it to end ? Martha Dobson looked on in despair—Katharine in something much more akin to disgust ; but the polka-dancers—as indefatigable, though by no means as elegant, as the dancing Dervishes—seemed to have made it a principle to continue till they had exhausted their own breath and the patience of their friends. In utter weariness of the fatigue of standing still, some who had never seen the dance before ventured to try it. To cling like drowning wretches to each other—the lady’s head apparently resting upon her partner’s shoulder for support—and then to make a hopping rush, seemed all that was required ; and, brave as unpractised aëronauts, they set off. A collision — a stumble — the interruption of the dance,—unpleasant words followed ; but what did that signify in a polka ? — On and on again, getting more excited, more rapid,

more in the way ! The confusion was bewildering. Lady Marchmont drew back, and, with a haughty air, declared that she could venture upon it no more—the romping was intolerable. Colonel Forbes was annoyed at her annoyance, and would have put an end to the dance, but there was no opportunity. The Duchess, he saw, was as uncomfortable as her daughter-in-law. She talked of retiring; that would have been the most dire offence, and Colonel Forbes petitioned earnestly for a little forbearance—a little patience. “Supper should be prepared for her Grace alone, if that would please her;” but, as he said the words, he felt that he was committing a blunder. The Duchess consented to stay; but she could not allow her daughters to dance any more; or, if they did, it must, she said, be entirely with their own party. Mixtures would not do. Then there was no more hope of another and a more successful country-dance. Poor Colonel Forbes! he felt already all that was being said, and would be said; he had but one consolation—that Jane was not present. “Kate,” said Mr. Ashton—who had made his appearance in the ball-room just as the polka began, and had watched the proceedings for some time in ominous silence—“Kate, that dance may do very well for fine ladies and gentlemen, but, mind me, it won’t do for you.”—“No, father, I should never wish it.”

The polka ended at last. Panting ladies, with heated complexions and disordered hair, threw themselves upon the nearest seats, and equally panting gentlemen stood by them, offering to fetch lemonade. Selina Fowler was amongst them—she had recovered her equanimity; but thanks to Colonel Forbes, not to George Andrews. Colonel Forbes had introduced her to an officer—George Andrews had entirely neglected her: she, who had

considered herself engaged to open the ball with him, had been utterly put aside! The consequences were of no importance to Mr. George Andrews, who had made a foolish speech without in the least intending to act upon it; and who, though he amused himself with talking to Miss Selina Fowler when he had nothing else to do, never bestowed a serious thought upon her,—but they were of great importance to John Ashton. “Miss Selly is making up with John, after all,” said Mr. Ashton, as he saw them stand up together for a quadrille; “I shouldn’t have thought that would have been her line to-night; but he’s a fine looking young fellow, I must say that for him. They make a handsome couple, don’t they, wife?—don’t they, Ronaldson?” he added, turning to Charles, who had just joined them. “Selly is in a pet with George Andrews,” said Katharine, “she told me that just now; she always makes up to John when she wishes to spite any one.”—“That is not said like you, Kitty,” observed Mr. Ashton, “it is not what I call kind; but somehow I don’t think you ever are quite kind to John and Miss Selly.”—“I don’t think I am, father; but I cannot help seeing what is before my eyes, and if I were John I could not trust a girl that was one thing to me one day and another the next. I never could like any one that changed.”—“Are you certain to like one that never changed?” asked Charles Ronaldson. His voice sounded so deep and strange that it seemed like that of another person, and Katharine turned round to look at him; but he was just the same as usual in manner and appearance,—just as quiet and shy, yet with that keen, quick glance which seemed to take in everything that was going on, and comment upon and draw inferences from it in the same moment. Katharine laughed gaily in reply to his question, and said she

would not undertake to promise quite so much as that; but it would certainly be a great point in a person's favour. A bright gleam, the sunshine of the mind, crossed Charles Ronaldson's face; it was very soon gone, however, and, though still standing by Katharine's side, he relapsed into silence. The quadrille was ended, and another country dance was proposed, and every one was seeking or claiming partners. Katharine, to her extreme surprise, was accosted by Colonel Forbes, and, before she was at all aware of what was intended, introduced to a stranger, an officer, and carried away into the crowd, and placed nearly at the top of the dance. Most entirely out of her proper position, she felt it to be. Where were Lady Marchmont, Lady Julia Ferrers, Lady Mary, Mrs. Hugh Coke, and a great many others of the same caste? surely some one ought to take her place! Colonel Forbes clapped his hands impatiently for the musicians to begin. Katharine had no more time given her for wondering. Her part would come next, and she must not put every one out by blundering; and merrily she moved in the dance, merrily she went "down the middle and up again," thinking a country dance one of the pleasantest things in the world; and brightly she smiled at her father, when she reached the bottom, as he came up to her and patted her on the shoulder, and whispered — "Well done, my little Kate, you'll tire them all out after all." But there was no one else smiling, no one at least that she could see; all were whispering, and glancing, and muttering, with clouded brows and scornful lips, and gazing at the upper end of the room, upon the empty seats, where ought to have been seen the Duchess of Lowther and her friends. In the confusion of the dance they had slipped away, as they had hoped, unperceived, and

now a rumour had reached the ball-room that the Duchess was taking her private refreshment, and when she was gone supper would be ready for every one else. It was in vain for Colonel Forbes to go from one to the other with civil bows and smooth words, to suggest that it was of no consequence to them what the Duchess did, that she was in delicate health and disliked late hours, that the ball was but just begun, and they must keep it up bravely till the morning; in vain also that he singled out disconsolate girls who had not danced before, and promised to find them partners for the next dance; in vain that he enlisted his personal friends into his service, and introduced them to all whom he thought likely to take offence;—the deed was done—the spirit of exclusiveness had entered, and the spirit of the ball was gone. As the Duchess did not think it worth while to stay to supper, so did not the county people; as the county people did not, so did not the more important of the townspeople. The room thinned rapidly. When the Duchess's carriage drove off, Colonel Forbes in despair ordered supper; but there was no one to take the lead, no one to give tone or order to the proceedings,—it was one universal rush and press, and seizing upon beef and ham, and jellies, and calling for wine and soda-water; and there was a great hubbub in the supper-room, and a good deal of complaining of want of accommodation, and sharp witticisms upon the grantees, and quotings of proverbs, such as “the more the merrier,” “the fewer the better cheer,” “rather have your room than your company,” “more missed than wanted,” &c.; from all which it was evident that speeches and drinking healths would be quite out of place, and that any allusions to unity and sympathy and the happy mingling of all classes, would be re-

ceived with decided disapprobation. So Mr. George Andrews was unwillingly persuaded to give up his intention of proposing the health of the Duchess of Lowther in a neat speech, and Colonel Forbes relinquished his intention of replying to it in a politic one. Even the health of the stewards it was felt would be a dangerous subject, and still more dangerous would be the discussion of exciting topics whilst the gentlemen lingered at the supper table. The different parties were therefore hurried back to the ball-room before they had time to do much more than taste what was set before them, utterly to the discomfiture of the elderly people, who cared nothing for the dancing but much for the supper, and were heard to say, that to be called upon to pay five shillings for a ham sandwich and a scrap of jelly, was little else than being cheated.

There was dancing after supper, but not pleasant dancing, not at least to Katharine's feelings. The restraint of the first part of the evening was much more to her taste than the licence of the latter part. If it could ever be amusing to see people behave foolishly and rudely, she might have smiled to see the feud breaking out between George Andrews and Henry Madden; George taking upon himself to be the great man of the evening, to give orders and find fault, and Henry Madden venting contemptuous sneers and open witticisms. She might have been amused also to watch Miss Lane's over-acted dignity, and Miss Madden's quiet flirtations, and Selina Fowler's noisy ones; but though Katharine's mind was not philosophical, it was what is far better, simply religious; and the instinct of right feeling told her before she could reason, that all these things, common though they were, and by many scarcely deemed worthy of serious reproof, were in themselves evil.

“We had better go, had not we, dear mother?” she said, joining her parents at the conclusion of a country dance, in which Colonel Forbes himself had condescended to be her partner. “It is getting late, and I am sure you must be tired.”—“Not tired if you are not, Kate,” said Mrs. Ashton, trying to conceal a yawn. “I dare say you would like to stay for the chance of another dance with the Colonel.”—“There is no chance of that, mother,” replied Katharine, laughing; “I have had my turn; don’t you see he is going his round? Matty Andrews and Selly have been laying wagers,” she added, “as to whom he will ask next. He takes us all in right order, according to rank, and Matty nearly quarrelled with Selina, because Selly said it was quite right he should dance with the Maddens before her.”—“Sharp man!” exclaimed Mr. Ashton. “He reckons each dance as a vote; but he won’t take us in quite so easily as that. Come, Kate, are you ready?”—Katharine took one arm, Mrs. Ashton the other. There were but few good-byes to be said; only a parting shake of the hand with Charlie Ronaldson, and rather a distant bow to Mrs. Fowler and some friends near her, who with exemplary patience were waiting till their daughters should be tired of a Scotch reel which had just begun. Colonel Forbes met them at the door.—“Going! Mrs. Ashton, it is quite early; you are rather hard upon your daughter; Miss Ashton, I hope you have enjoyed yourself.”—“Very much indeed, thank you, sir.”—“And thank you for dancing with her,” added Mrs. Ashton. She could not help thanking him, in spite of Mr. Ashton’s hints about policy; it did seem very kind. They were both genuine speeches of hearty good-will; and when Colonel Forbes, wearied and disgusted, went home to meditate upon

the success of the Union Ball, they were almost the only words which recurred to him with anything like real satisfaction.

CHAPTER XIII.

“AND you really mean to ask Miss Selly to be your wife, John?” said Mr. Ashton, not in the most conciliatory tone of voice, as they sat round the fire after supper the week following the ball. — “Why, yes, father, if you have no objection; she has made up to me more of late, and I don’t think now she’ll say, no.” — “Humph! and where do you mean to live, and what do you mean to do for bread and cheese?” — “Get a little help from you, father, I hope,” replied John, “and stock that farm of Colonel Forbes’, which he says he will let me have.” — “More fool he,” replied Mr. Ashton, “I thought he held back and said he did not like to trust his land to a man who knew nothing about farming.” — “He knows better than that now,” replied John; “it’s not his cue to affront us townsfolks, now that there is to be a dissolution of Parliament.” — “Oh! that’s the way the wind blows,” exclaimed Mr. Ashton; “but we must have a little more talk about this matter, John, my good fellow; I can’t have you running your head blindfold against a stone wall. — Farming is not your line and the shop is. Stick to the shop and marry Miss Selly if you will, though I think you might go further and not run any risk of faring worse; but don’t go and bury your money in a ploughed field, and fancy it’s all of a sudden to come up wheat.” John looked very disconcerted. “Don’t take on, John,” said his mother encourag-

ingly ; “ you will bring Selly round to your way of thinking about the shop easier than you fancy. Kate, you must use your influence.” Katharine’s needle moved very fast ; she did not once look up. “ Katharine is quite against me,” said John ; “ she has been so specially ever since the ball.”—“ Since the ball,” exclaimed Mr. Ashton, “ what has the ball to do with the matter ?”—“ It is not only since the ball,” observed Katharine, still working diligently, “ but I did see things then which made me think more about it.”—“ About what ?” asked John. “ I do believe, Kitty, there has been a feud between you and Selina ever since the days when you went to Miss Richardson’s.”—“ I hope not, John, dear,” replied Katharine, with a good-humoured smile, “ that would be a very old quarrel, and besides, I don’t recollect that we ever had any feuds there.”—“ No !” observed Mr. Ashton ; “ Miss Richardson always said you were such a girl for being a make-peace ; but what is the mischief about the ball, Kitty ?”—“ Only that I saw more of Selly’s ways that evening,” replied Katharine, “ and they did not strike me as being nice.”—“ She had more partners than you had,” observed John, “ if that is what you mean.”—“ She knows more people, and she is much better looking than I am,” answered Katharine ; “ but I don’t want to say anything against her ; and I had rather not give any opinion,” she added, looking round as if addressing them all ; “ the least said the soonest mended, and if Selly Fowler is to be my sister-in-law (the words came out sorely against her will) I shall like her for John’s sake, and try all I can to make her happy.” Faster than before went Katharine’s needle, and her head was bent down so low that no one saw the large tear which fell upon her work. “ I suppose we may thank the ball for it all,” observed Mrs. Ashton.

“If it hadn’t been for George Andrews going off then as he did, I don’t in my heart think, John, that Selly would ever really have favoured you.”—“I thought she was going to favour that young flashing ensign,” said Mr. Ashton; “what a chatter and noise they did keep up together; she musn’t do that, John, when she is your wife.”—“She won’t want to do it,” replied John; “it is only her high spirits; when people are married they get sobered.”—“Do they?” asked Katharine quickly, and not quite gently. “Yes, Kitty, they do get sobered,” repeated John; “do you think my mother was what she is now before she married, and when she was as young as Selina?”—“I think she always knew how to be modest and well behaved,” replied Katharine rather pointedly. “Mother, dear,” she added, kissing her, “did you ever make people turn round to look at you because you talked and laughed so loud?” The words were no sooner uttered than repented—Katharine had broken an inward resolution. Mrs. Ashton replied, “I won’t answer for what I was, Kitty; I know I was a very idle lassie.”—“But I will answer for it,” interrupted Mr. Ashton; “she would never have been my wife if she had. I hate such noisy giggling misses; but they are all much of a muchness in these days. Matty Andrews, and the Maddens, and even that little Miss Lane, were all of a piece I thought that night. I declare I liked much better to see Martha Dobson ploughing along like a good, honest, quiet, cart horse.”—“So did I, father,” observed Katharine, laughing, “and I think if they had all been like Martha, the Duchess would’nt have gone off in the way she did. Miss Sinclair said as much to me yesterday.”—“Miss Sinclair has no right to speak about the matter,” observed John, “she was too proud to be there. People can’t expect court ways

in a country place.”—“But they can expect quiet, good ways,” replied Katharine, “and that is what I did not see at the ball; only in a few, that is.”—“Just the grandees,” observed John scornfully.—“Not all the grandees,” replied Katharine. “They were quiet enough, most of them; but I did not think they were all well mannered; that young lady, for instance, who turned off because she would not let Selly dance opposite to her. But what I mean is no matter of being a grandee or not a grandee, it’s something that every one may be who chooses—something which would prevent people from talking loudly to be noticed, because they would feel that it was better not be noticed.”—“Something which you are yourself, Kitty,” observed Mr. Ashton, patting her head as he rose and stood with his back to the fire. “I did not see a better behaved girl in the room.” Katharine blushed and smiled with honest undisguised pleasure. “I should be very bad if I was not well behaved, father,” she said, “when I have lived all my life with you and my mother; and I dare say Selly and the rest would think as I do if they had ever been taught the same; so John, dear,” she added, turning to her brother, “I dare say when Selly and you are married, and she comes to live among us, we shall learn to think more alike.”—“John won’t bring her here,” observed Mr. Ashton shortly, “there’s the shop.”—“John is not really ashamed of the shop, I am sure,” said Katharine kindly, as she laid her hand on her brother’s arm. “It is only just now, because of Selly’s fancy.”—“The shop has done us a great deal of good, that’s certain,” observed Mrs. Ashton. “I don’t know what in the world we should have been without it. I am sure when I married your father, and we set up housekeeping in the corner house in Cork Street, and he was looking about for

something to do with the five hundred pounds his uncle left him, I never thought we should have been as well to do in life as we are now. There is a great deal to be thankful for in the shop.”—“A great deal, indeed,” repeated Katharine very earnestly. John was silent. “It’s work, and amusement, and profit, and respectability,” continued Katharine. “Umph,” ejaculated John in a doubtful tone. “Yes, respectability, John, dear; twenty thousand times more respectability than setting up to be what one is not, and fussing to put oneself out of one’s proper place.” And as John still looked disinclined to speak, she added, “that was what I felt at the ball the other night, and it was the only thing I did not like in being there. It is much more respectable to my mind to be here snug with you, and my father and mother, dressed in my week-day gown, than to be walking about in white muslin, and dancing with that officer and with Colonel Forbes. Isn’t it so, father?” and she fixed her dark intelligent eyes eagerly upon her father. “Would not you like me better to be always as I am now, than always as I was then?”—“I always like you best, child, as you are at the minute,” answered Mr. Ashton, stooping down and kissing her forehead. “Isn’t it time for you to be going to bed?” That was a signal that Mr. Ashton wished to have a little private conversation with his son; and Mrs. Ashton and Katharine took the hint, and, folding up their work, went up stairs.

Katharine was not immediately told, in direct words, the result of the midnight conference,—for it did last till past midnight,—but she read it in John’s triumphant looks, and her father’s thoughtful ones, the next morning. John had gained his point; gained it at least so far that his father had consented to his trying the farm, and had agreed to advance

some money to stock it. The plan was to be tried for a twelvemonth. If it did not succeed, Mr. Ashton pleased himself with thinking that no great harm would be done, the stock might be sold again, and John might return to the shop cured of his folly. Perhaps Mr. Ashton might have been the less easily won over to his son's views, but for an inborn fancy, never yet indulged, for trying his own skill in farming. He himself was a farmer's son, and part of his youth had been spent in farming occupations. The early predilection for the country had never quite left him, and, although now he would have missed the town and the excitement of his shop, with the customers, and orders, and letters, and the importance attached to them, he had no objection to the idea of a pleasant holiday occasionally at his son's home. As regarded his intended daughter-in-law, however he might criticise her, he did not seriously object to her. He was flattered because she was admired; and she was just enough above him in position to make him lenient to her follies. Besides, she was not Katharine,—not his daughter. Whatever she said or did, it was John's business, not his. He was deficient in that quick instinct which gave Katharine a clue to the working of character upon future events. He could see great things, and reason upon them; but he was blind to little things. And yet upon little things the fate, not only of Mr. Ashton's family, but of the whole world must depend: since great things are but the conglomeration of small ones.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE marriage then was settled. Katharine felt there was scarcely a shadow of hope left, though John had not yet made his offer. Mr. Fowler was a needy man, Mr. Ashton comparatively a rich one; the balance in that, the most essential consideration in the eyes of both, would be entirely in John's favour. Mrs. Fowler would not dare to oppose her husband, and was besides by no means likely to be indifferent to the worldly gain; and for Selina herself, Katharine could not but believe that the *éclat* of a wedding, the new name, the congratulations, the presents, the idea of an independent country home, and affluence, if not wealth, in the distance; to say nothing of the satisfaction of showing Mr. George Andrews that if he did not think her worthy of attention, some one else did, would be quite sufficient to outweigh the prejudice against the shop; the only real obstacle in Selina's mind, and one to which John was most willing to yield. As regarded affection, Katharine felt herself uncharitable, but she could not honestly find it in her heart to give Selina credit for much towards any one but herself. She and John had known each other from infancy; there were the early associations, therefore, to unite their sympathies. They agreed in liking fine houses, and fine dress, and fine people; they had the same distaste for regular employment, the same love of spending money: so far there would be no opposition in their lives; but unity in such things was but an insecure foundation for happiness; and no wonder that Katharine's heart beat faintly and rapidly, as she sat at work in the parlour

late in the afternoon, listening for her brother's footsteps on his return from his eventful visit to Mr. Fowler. For John deserved a better fate,—deserved it at least if he had chosen to seek it. He had his father's sense of honour, his mother's kindness of heart, his sister's candour and openness of disposition; his faults in a great measure were the result of bad education in childhood. "John is so high spirited, no one can manage him," said Mr. Ashton, proudly, when he was five years old; and John heard the opinion, and thought it something very grand, and acted upon it; and at ten years of age he was pronounced a noble boy, but a terrible pickle; and at fifteen he was intolerably idle, but there was a great deal of good in him; and at three-and-twenty he was a good-hearted fellow, not fit for business, but a pleasant companion, and a great favourite with every one. There was nothing vicious in him. Katharine had consoled herself again and again with this thought, when his follies had especially pained her. If he could but fall into good hands, a great deal might be made of him. She had always looked forward to his marriage as the turning point in his life; that which would decide the moral ascent or descent. She overlooked the fact, that as men sow so they are to reap; that an idle, thoughtless youth will lead to an idle, thoughtless marriage. John's choice of Selina Fowler was but another form of the same careless self-indulgent temper which had made him as a child play when he ought to have been learning his lessons, and as a young man waste his time with companions far worse disposed than himself, when he ought to have been devoting himself to his father's business.

Five times had Katharine put down her work and gone to the door, thinking she heard John's step in

the passage, and at last, even when the house-bell rang, she did the same mechanically. She heard the question whether Miss Ashton was at home, without exactly understanding from whom it proceeded, though it was a voice which she knew perfectly, and which at any other time would have given her unfeigned satisfaction.—“Here’s Miss Sinclair come to see you, Miss Ashton,” said Susan, following her as she retreated into the parlour; “she says she won’t disturb you as you are busy.”—“Busy! no, I am not busy,” answered Katharine, dreamily; “Whom did you say?—Miss Sinclair?—ask her to walk in.”—She made a great effort to recover her self-possession, and remembered that Jane was going to be married, that it wanted only a few days to the time, that this was probably her last visit; it would not then do to be wrapt up in her own anxieties. Besides, what had she to fear? Had she not already made up her mind to the worst?

“I wanted to come and see you yesterday, Katharine,” was Jane’s opening remark; “but the weather was so bad in the afternoon I could not venture.”—Katharine was glad to talk of the weather, it was such a safe unexciting topic, and they both made sundry sapient observations upon the season, and the short summer, and how soon the leaves had faded, especially along the Maplestead-road, with which Jane showed herself to be particularly well acquainted; and then a little more was said about the ball, and a missionary meeting, and Jane was just beginning to thaw—a process which always required a certain amount of conversation, when Katharine really did hear the quick heavy step for which she had been so anxiously waiting, and John Ashton threw open the door, behind which Jane was sitting, and, rushing up to his sister, gave her a loud, echoing kiss, and exclaimed, “It’s done, Kitty—she’ll

have me.”—Katharine silently withdrew herself, and stood so that he might see Miss Sinclair. His exit was instantaneous, and as the door closed behind him Katharine lost all her self-command, and burst into tears. Jane was not shy then ; she was never shy when it was a question of giving comfort. She went up to Katharine and put her arm round her, and said, in the gentlest of voices, “ dear Katharine, might I know what is the matter ? ” — Katharine might have been proud with any one else — pride was one of her faults — not worldly pride, of station and outward advantages, but a pride even more dangerous, the exaggeration of self-respect. She could not bear to show suffering — she did not like pity. To any one but Jane her answer would have been a quick struggle against sorrow, the dashing away of her tears, and the hasty, “ nothing, thank you, nothing of any consequence,” which as a child had always been her safe reply when any one ventured to intrude upon her hidden feelings. But Jane’s pity was like her love, built upon respect. Katharine felt this, though she could not have explained the feeling. Jane did not patronise, but she understood her ; and when Jane’s question was put Katharine answered without hesitation, “ John is to be married to Selina Fowler.” Little further was needed in explanation of Katharine’s distress. Jane had heard the report from Colonel Forbes ; it was the reason commonly given for John Ashton’s wish to take a farm. She had not thought very much about it at the time — it was not natural she should, having her mind so occupied with engrossing interests of her own. It had vexed her for a moment that Colonel Forbes should have made the promise without consulting Mr. Ashton, as he had given her to understand he would do ; but she did not like to interfere in matters which were

not in her province, and her only comment when the matter was mentioned was: "I hope they may be happy, but I doubt if Katharine Ashton will approve of her sister-in-law."

She reproached herself now for indifference and selfishness; the matter was so much nearer Katharine's heart than she had in the least imagined; and in an instant she had placed herself in Katharine's position, trying to see with her eyes, to feel with her feelings, to understand all the pain, both present and future, which the thoughtless marriage of an only brother, whether refined or unrefined, agreeable or disagreeable, would be likely to cause. "Actually to be married! Is it quite—certainly settled?" she said, as Katharine took up her work, and tried to go on with it, as though nothing were amiss. "He has just been to ask her," replied Katharine. "I was sure beforehand she would say yes; and I don't know why I should be so silly about it."—"She is not fit to be your sister-in-law," continued Jane,—“only, perhaps, Katharine, being with you may improve her.”—“No,” said Katharine, energetically, “no hope of that, Miss Sinclair. I don't mean that Selly can't be improved,—that would be very wrong in me, and very hard. I dare say something may improve her by-and-by, but it won't be anything I can do: she looks down upon me.”—“No! no! impossible!” exclaimed Jane.—“Yes, she looks down upon me,” replied Katharine, “in her way, that is;” she added, with an April smile brightening her face, “which is a way I don't at all care for; but it will keep me from doing her good, even if it were in me. I don't know whether I am right, Miss Sinclair, but I think sometimes that people must have gone some steps already in the right way before they learn anything from those they fancy beneath them.”—“Yes, possibly,” replied Jane,

thoughtfully; "but I cannot say myself that I see the great difference, unless"—and she laughed—"unless you will allow the advantage to be on your side."—"There is the shop," replied Katharine, "and you know I am part of the shop; but I don't care about myself in the least; only—John—he is my only brother" (the quick tears again rushed to her eyes, but they were bravely kept back), "and I used to hope he would marry some one sensible, who would keep him up to business, and help him on to do his duty. Marriage is such a very important thing."—"Yes, indeed," was Jane's short, but emphatic reply.—"It must have such a great influence upon people's future lives," continued Katharine; "if it does not help them on it must draw them back; and if it is not happy it must be so very unhappy."—"Yes," again repeated Jane, keeping her eyes fixed upon the ground; "I have heard all this said by others," continued Katharine, her face becoming animated, and her eyes kindling with eagerness; "but I never felt how true it was till now. Oh! Miss Sinclair, it is a terrible risk!" A pale pink flush coloured Jane's cheek: she looked up suddenly.—"Katharine, you must not frighten me."—"Oh! I forgot—I forgot," and Katharine seized her hand; "but it cannot be the same with you; you must have judged so wisely."—"I hope so," said Jane, quietly. "I don't doubt it," she added, after a moment's pause. Something—it was a feeling which often recurred to Katharine in after years—an undefined, yet vivid sense, of painful misgiving—stopped the reply which suggested itself; she could not say "you can have no cause to doubt."—"I came here partly, this afternoon, to tell you about 'Thursday,'" continued Jane, speaking with the quiet simplicity which was habitual to her, "and to ask if you would mind coming to say 'good-bye' to me.

I shall not be at the breakfast; we are to go some way beyond London, so there would not be time; but if you were at the house when"—her words came a little more quickly, and with some confusion of manner—"afterwards, when we come back from church. I thought I should like it; if you would not think it a trouble, that is."—"A trouble! Oh! Miss Sinclair,"—and in a moment the cloud passed away from Katharine's face—"it is so very, very kind! I could not have hoped you would have thought of me."—"I was sure you would think of me, Katharine," said Jane; "and we have known each other so many years."—"Yes, a great, great many. I like to look back and remember them; but somehow it makes me sad. But I ought not to speak of sadness, though, when everything about you is so bright."—"Speak of anything you like," replied Jane, smiling; my brightness is not of a kind to make me forget other people's cares. Marriage puts one at the beginning of a strange, new life, and gives one enough that is sobering to think about."—"And you will live at Maplestead," said Katharine, "and have a house of your own, and visitors, and parties; I am afraid I shall never see you."—"Sometimes, I hope," said Jane, playfully; "I don't mean quite to forget all my old friends. But, Katharine, I was half-inclined, when I came, to ask a favour of you, which might bring us more together; only, I am afraid you have so much upon your mind now, you may not know how to attend to other things."—"I have it in my mind to finish making my mother's gown," said Katharine, lightly, as she held up her work, "but I don't know that I have anything else. If you mean as to John and Selina, the less I think about them the better, for I can do them no good in the world."—"Then, perhaps you would not care for having your thoughts

distracted," said Jane, "by taking a little charge of my poor people." Katharine felt very uncomfortable. Was she really to become a district visitor? What would her father say?—"Pray don't mind saying 'no,'" continued Jane; "I depend upon your being honest. I would not have mentioned the subject if I had not felt sure you would be; and you must not think I want to leave all the charge upon you;—but the fact is, I cannot quite bear giving up the people all of a sudden, they are so used to me, and I like some of them so much; but, of course, when I am at Maplestead, it will be impossible to go on as I have done; and, when I was thinking about it, it struck me that, perhaps, if you and I were to join together, and you were to see them regularly when I could not, it might be the means of keeping them still under my own eye. Was that very selfish? Would you rather have a district all to yourself?"—"No! indeed," exclaimed Katharine, hastily; "I never thought of having a district at all; I should not know what to do with one, and I have so very little time; and I don't think my father and mother would quite like it."—Jane looked disappointed and uncomfortable, as a very shy, nervous person naturally would, who had made an unacceptable request. She hastened to escape from her difficulty. "Oh! that is enough; pray don't trouble about it; don't think anything more upon the subject; I shall do quite well. I assure you it would vex me if you were to put yourself out of your way on my account. I can easily give up the district; in fact, perhaps I ought to do so, for I shall have enough to attend to with the poor people at Maplestead." Katharine said nothing, and the pause was extremely awkward. Jane wished to go, but she did not like to move, because it would seem as if she was annoyed. "Have you seen Jimmy

Dawes, lately?" she asked, not being able to think of anything else to say.—"I saw him once last week, and once this," said Katharine; "he is getting a great deal better. His aunt told me you were kind enough to talk of putting him to school."—"Yes; to the National School. Mrs. Reeves says she will undertake to see that the penny a-week is paid for him." Another pause. Katharine was thinking all this time. When a thinking fit came upon her, she generally gave way to it; she had not learnt the lesson of society, to talk all the more lightly and indifferently, because the heart is engrossed with other subjects.

The result of her thoughts was known when Jane stood up to go. "I should not like quite to say, 'no,' to your notion about the district, Miss Sinclair; perhaps I ought to take it."—"I don't see any ought in the case," replied Jane, "if you have not time, and if your father and mother would not like it."—"I said that because it came into my head at the moment," replied Katharine; "perhaps I might make time; perhaps my father and mother would not care after I had talked to them a little about it."—"And perhaps you would burden yourself, and put yourself quite out of your way to please me," said Jane kindly. "No, no, Katharine, don't think anything more about it; I only mentioned it because it was an idea which came into my head last night; and after all, as I said before, it may be better for me not to try and continue the district; it may be much better cared for—I dare say it will be—by some one else."—"But is there any one else wishing to take it?" inquired Katharine.—"Not just at this moment that I know of, but I shall hear to-morrow; there is a district-meeting to-morrow."—"And if you give it up then, you won't have any chance of it again," said Katharine, with an air

of thought. "No; but pray, Katharine, don't trouble about it, indeed you will vex me if you do." — "Perhaps I ought," said Katharine, as if she was speaking to herself. Jane laughed. "Dear Katharine, what a conscience you have! I shall be afraid ever to mention anything of the kind to you again." — "If I ought I will," said Katharine, resolutely, and not heeding Jane's remark. Then looking up more brightly, she added, "I should like to help you, Miss Sinclair.—it is not that. You don't think I would not do anything in the world to help you, do you?" — "No, indeed Katharine, I could never doubt you, but" — "I suppose it is not right to send away duties any more than beggars, when they knock at one's door," said Katharine, interrupting the excuse which she felt was going to be made for her; "so, if you please, I will hear some more; won't you sit down again?" She moved a chair towards Jane, and sat down herself. It would have been impossible to resist her determination, and Jane, though not at all satisfied that she was doing wisely, sat down. "Will you tell me how often you go to your district, and how often I ought to go, if I undertook it?" asked Katharine. "I am obliged to go round once a fortnight to change the tracts," said Jane. "I beg your pardon — change what did you say?" — "The tracts, — the little books, — you must have seen them at Jemmy's cottage, marked 'District Visiting Society,' on the outside." Katharine did remember some thin pamphlets, covered with paper — brown by nature, doubly brown by dirt. She had looked into one once, and thought it contained very long, hard words. "And would that be part of my business?" she asked. "Well! yes," said Jane, with a smile on her face, but a little hesitation of manner. "I don't see how it could be avoided; because I could not be

sure of being in Rilworth regularly, though it seems hard to put off the most disagreeable part of the duty upon you. The tracts we have are most of them very old and very dirty, but Mr. Reeves promises us a new set soon. I always put them in a basket though," she added, laughing, "and go down the back street, for I don't wish exactly to be known, as the boys say, for one of the ladies that go 'a-tracking.'" — "And what is the good of the tracts?" asked Katharine simply. "I suppose they may be a good deal of good if the people read them, or if when they read they can understand them," replied Jane, "which sometimes I doubt. But at any rate, they are useful in giving one an excuse for going to houses which otherwise one should have no reason for visiting." — "And what do you do when you do go to those houses?" inquired Katharine. "Not much," answered Jane, "perhaps only ask how the people are, and say what a fine day it is,—but it is a means of becoming acquainted with them, and then if they are in distress they will come to one as a friend. And there is a great deal of distress—more than people have any idea of," she added, "in those respectable rows of white cottages, with little gardens before them, in the outskirts of Rilworth." — "But," said Katharine,—and she paused—"if people come to me in distress, I shall not know what to say to them. I shall only be able to tell them to go to Mr. Reeves." — "Precisely the very thing," said Jane, in a tone of amusement; "the very direction which Mr. Reeves gives himself. If the people are in distress, they must be sent to him. But, Katharine, there is a great deal of trouble in the world—not clergymen's trouble—not what they can help; little tiny things, about which no one would like to take up their time, but which I am sure it is a great comfort to be able to tell to some one; money troubles, and frettings of temper,

and discomforts ; and the better class of people have just as much of this kind of care as the very poor, and that is the reason why the tracts are good things. Once a fortnight, at least, you have a reason for going to them, and hearing something about their affairs. And then there are so many little kindnesses to be done, not a clergyman's work ; which no clergyman in fact could attend to ; such as getting their children admitted to schools, or finding places for them as servants." Katharine looked a little aghast. " You think it will take up a great deal of time," said Jane, noticing the change in her countenance. " Yes, more a great deal, I am afraid, than I shall have to spare," was the reply. " It does take time," continued Jane, " but you don't know, Katharine, how much can be managed in that way, by doing a little often. I never have been as busy as you, but I have sometimes had a great many interruptions and occupations, when people have been staying with us ; and lately," she added, blushing, " you know I have not been able to be my own mistress ; but I have contrived still to go on with the district. Sometimes I have not been able to give round the tracts as often as I should, but I never troubled myself about that. I did what I could, and left the rest. And I used to manage to go and see any persons I wanted to see particularly, at odd times ; sometimes just before I went for a walk, and sometimes when I came back ; and now and then, if I was very much behindhand, I gave up everything else for a day, and went out both in the morning and the afternoon. I think the more one has to do, the more time one learns to find to do it in." — " And your mamma never objected to your going about, then ?" asked Katharine. " She would have objected perhaps," said Jane, " if I had followed my own way. She used to object sometimes at the

place we lived in before we came to Rilworth, because then I was so very much bent upon giving up everything for my district, that I made myself quite ill. But Mr. Reeves has been my help here. He told me I might do what I could, and not vex myself if it was little ; and he really scolded me one day, when he found that I had given up reading with mamma, because I thought I had not time for that and the district too. He said that people who could not discipline themselves in home duties were not fit to go abroad and offer to help others.”—“ But I don’t know Mr. Reeves,” said Katharine ; “ I shall have no one to help me.”—“ But you will know him if you are a district visitor,” said Jane, “ because you will go to the district meetings, and then you will become acquainted with him. I was thinking,” she continued, after a moment’s consideration, “ whether, if you really had any notion of kindly helping me, you would go with me to-morrow morning to the district meeting ; it is at eleven o’clock. It would be the only opportunity we might have of being there together.” Katharine could not suddenly acquiesce. She said she would think over the matter, and talk to her parents, and send Miss Sinclair an answer in the evening. One difficulty more, an appalling one, presented itself to her mind as she accompanied Jane to the street-door. “ When they are ill,” she said,—and she stopped Jane from proceeding further,—“ do you think it your duty to go and read to them, and talk to them ? ”—“ Now and then, to the old women who are only sickly ; or sometimes, if Mr. Reeves tells me, when it is a lingering case, and reading is a comfort ; but I don’t talk much, I don’t know how. I read what Mr. Reeves advises. It is better here, a great deal,” she continued, earnestly, “ than at Breme, where we were last. The clergyman did

not go about there as Mr. Reeves does, and it was a very large parish ; and though I had only a few houses in a good part of the town, because mamma objected to anything else, there were some very distressing cases, — people who were ill, and whom I was nearly sure had been very careless and wicked, but they were not dangerously ill, and so the clergyman did not visit them much. I used to long to say something to them, but I never knew what. Now and then I read a little, but I did not know what to choose, and it seemed unkind not to find out the comforting parts of the Bible, and yet I was certain in my own mind that they wanted to be roused and frightened. That was very bad ; it almost made me feel as if I was doing more harm than good. Perhaps I should have done better to leave the matter alone ; but I was not very experienced, and the place was so poor, no one scarcely went about to see the people except mamma and myself. But it is very different here. Mr. Reeves knows every one ; and if you ask him what you ought to do, he will tell you at once, and then the responsibility will be off your mind.”

That was a comfort to Katharine ; yet it still seemed a very awful undertaking to be a district visitor.

A note was sent to Jane in the evening.

“DEAR MISS SINCLAIR,

“My father and mother do not mind my trying the district for a little while ; so, if you please, I will go to the meeting to-morrow, if you will kindly take me. I think you said eleven o'clock, and I will try to be at your house at the time, unless you had rather not.

“Believe me, dear Miss Sinclair,

“Yours sincerely and respectfully,

“KATHARINE ASHTON.”

It was a short note, easily read and easily understood by Jane, but it had cost Katharine a great deal of trouble, or rather its contents had. Mr. Ashton's prejudice against district visitors was not the less violent because it had no tangible foundation; and Mrs. Ashton's fears that Katharine would go into close, unwholesome rooms, and catch a fever and die, were not the less vivid because there was no precedent of any such dire calamity in the annals of the Rilworth District Visiting Society. Katharine had a hard task, and she accomplished it with a tact which was more the result of instinct than of reasoning. She did not attempt to argue, but she coaxed and pleaded, and said how pleasant it would be to help Miss Sinclair, and how much she should like to be friends with Mr. and Mrs. Reeves, till Mr. Ashton's good nature was won over, as usual, to consent to anything which Katharine seemed to fancy; and Mrs. Ashton's maternal vanity was soothed by the idea that her child's acquaintance with Miss Sinclair would still be kept up. These were not very high motives for such a consent, and it is not said that they were the only ones. There were many considerations of usefulness and kindness brought forward, and talked over, but the balance for and against the question was nearly equal; and nothing but a rigid self-examination, to which neither Mr. Ashton nor his wife had ever been accustomed, would have enabled them to see what it was that finally decided them.

Katharine was satisfied, but not glad. She was undertaking what she felt to be a duty, but she did not like the idea of it. One feeling she had was, that it would be a check upon her freedom, a constant claim, interfering with her walks and her home pursuits. If she engaged in the work she

must, she felt, do it thoroughly, and then it would be a care always upon her mind. She had an idea that people can avoid responsibilities by not undertaking them, overlooking the fact that there is a responsibility of omission as pressing as that of commission, and far more fearful, because, in the generality of instances, we never wake up to be conscious of it until it is too late to remedy our neglect. She went to her room that night with the sense of a burden upon her. Life seemed to have more cares than she was prepared for;—there were to be cares for other people as well as for her own family; but Katharine had no idea of shrinking from the duty. She never had allowed herself to do that, even in her childhood. At school, if a lesson was to be learnt, whatever it might be, it was begun and carried through without delay or hesitation. Her moral step was slow, straightforward, and resolute; slow to determine, straightforward in its direction, resolute in its progress. As yet she wanted warmth and love; but those are the rewards of duty. Yet a feeling, momentary, but not to be forgotten, did come over her as she opened her Bible to read a few verses, according to her constant practice, the last thing before she got into bed—a solemn but thrilling sense of happiness, and it followed upon the words, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto Me.”

CHAPTER XV.

MR. REEVES' study, with the bookcase filled with volumes of divinity, pamphlets, and official reports—

and the writing-table, inconvenient to all but one person—and the great arm-chair taking up all the space on one side of the fire-place—assumed an awful aspect to Katharine when she entered it the next morning, notwithstanding the support which she received from Jane's presence. She could not dispossess herself of the feeling that she was going to make a profession of being better than her neighbours; and was really relieved when Mr. Reeves shook hands in a good-humoured matter-of-fact way, and, without any special remarks upon her new duties, thanked her for offering her assistance, and begged her to sit down. Mr. Reeves was an elderly grey-headed man, with a singularly composed business-like manner. He disappointed many people in consequence. They said he did not impress them in any way—they were not always reminded of his being a clergyman. Perhaps that was a disadvantage in some respects—it made his ordinary actions less regarded; but it had the effect of heightening the value of his earnest advice when he did think it necessary to give it. If such a very practical, matter-of-fact person thought certain duties and feelings of importance, no one could doubt that they were so. In his case there could be no fear of an opinion being the result of poetical enthusiasm. The generality of the persons assembled struck Katharine as being of the same business-like cast, not excepting even Jane Sinclair, with her graceful refinement of manner and most melodious voice. There were two or three elderly ladies, quiet, steady people, who dressed in brown silks, and always wore dark ribbons in their bonnets; and there were the Miss Lockes, two sisters, whose father had been a clerk in some public office, and whom Katharine knew perfectly by sight, though she had never spoken to them; and Mrs. Pearson, the

widow of a great ironmonger, a bustling-mannered, active person, who appeared to know the concerns of every one as well as her own, and who was constantly appealed to as an authority; and a young, timid-looking girl, whose name Katharine did not know, but who, like herself, appeared only recently to have entered the society; and last, though not least in her own estimation, Betsy Carter, the eldest daughter of Mr. Carter the linendraper, the same individual who had excited Mr. Ashton's antipathy to district visitors. Three gentlemen visitors also belonged to the society, but they were to have private meetings of their own on another day. The ladies sat round the room at some distance from the table, and a little murmuring conversation went on, whilst Mr. Reeves looked over some accounts. They seemed all quite at home with Jane, and shook hands with her, and inquired for Mrs. Sinclair; and Jane was not as shy as usual, though she coloured rather when Mrs. Pearson asked if it was true that they were going to lose her as a district visitor. Miss Carter was vehement in her regrets when she heard Jane's answer, and equally vehement in her hope that Katharine would take advantage of the good instruction Miss Sinclair would be sure to give; and then she began to offer a little advice of her own upon the best way of dealing with Dissenters, which made Mr. Reeves put aside his accounts, and, standing up, say, after glancing round the room to see that all were present, "I am sorry to say Mrs. Reeves is not well enough to be here to-day, so perhaps we had better begin." Every one knelt down, Katharine of course with them; but the prayers came upon her rather as a surprise, and she could not collect her thoughts immediately and attend properly. They were very short, and Katharine did not exactly see why some

of the collects which were used should have been selected ; but the prayers gave her a feeling of unity, and she felt as if it would not do to gossip and talk upon useless subjects afterwards. Mr. Reeves re-seated himself and asked for the reports. One of the brown ladies happened to be sitting nearest to him and delivered hers first. It was chiefly statistical ; how many visits had been paid, how many tickets given, &c. Mr. Reeves noted them in a book, and gave the tickets required for the next month. So he went round the circle, but not always without comment. Some of the reports had cases of distress marked down, and the details were given to Mr. Reeves, or occasionally reserved for a private interview. Other subjects were discussed more generally ; these were, for the most part, when persons had removed from one district to another, or when, as was frequently the case, the children of the family were in fault, and then references were made to the rules of the National Schools, and precedents quoted, and opinions given in parliamentary style. Miss Carter was especially prominent in her remarks, putting Mr. Reeves right in two instances, and suggesting to him that he had better call himself and give some advice to a woman whose child had been taken from the school unnecessarily. Katharine quite felt with her father, that if it was necessary for all district visitors to be like her, the office was not a desirable one ; but Betsey was the exception. Generally speaking, nothing could be more unpretending, unexciting, even dull, than the meeting. It required more imagination and more enthusiasm than Katharine possessed, or than she thought she was ever likely to possess, to elevate such prosaic duties into a religious devotion to the service of God. She wondered more and more that Jane Sinclair, with her peculiarly high-bred tone

of thought and feeling, her cultivation of mind, and dreamy poetic enthusiasm, the influence of which Katharine always felt even when she did not comprehend it, could bring herself to work heartily with persons so unlike herself, and not only listen to, but thoroughly interest herself in the every-day details of the lives of the poor.

Mr. Reeves was very kind and cordial in all he said and did, and showed a wonderfully accurate knowledge of his parish; but his way of speaking of everything was too business-like to be attractive. It did not make Katharine feel that she could ask him questions if she were in a difficulty; yet she saw that there was a general feeling of confidence in him, and that he listened as attentively to small matters as to great ones. Perhaps by and by she might be more accustomed to him and more at ease; if not, she thought there would be but little to help her, and district visiting would be even more difficult and disagreeable than she had imagined. The tickets for the month were given to Jane, so that Katharine really had nothing either to say or to do. She grew very weary when the conversation became discursive, and the Miss Lockes began talking to one of the brown ladies about some of their home affairs; and Mrs. Pearson and Betsy Carter entered into a long argument as to some new kind of work which had been introduced into the school. Mr. Reeves appeared to her to possess a wonderful amount of patience; he finished his copy of the reports, and waited without any irritation of manner till Mrs. Pearson had concluded a description of a sampler worked when she was young, and afterwards framed and glazed; and then he stood up as before, and said, "I think our business is finished," and all knelt down again, and there

were two or three more short prayers, and the meeting was at an end.

Some shook hands with Jane as they went away, some did not; but there was no question of worldly distinction, only of degrees of acquaintance. In a certain sense all were one—that was the chief impression left upon Katharine's mind when the rest of the visitors departed, and she, at Jane's request, remained to speak to Mr. Reeves. Somehow, in spite of the dulness, and dryness, and coldness, and odd mixture of prayers and business, they were one.

Mr. Reeves' manner changed when he was left alone with Katharine and Jane. He was very methodical when he had business to do; he showed that he had not leisure for subjects not immediately concerning his parish; but the accounts and the district tickets put aside, he took Katharine's hand cordially, and said that it had given him great pleasure to see her there,—pleasure, if he might say so, as much for her own sake as for that of the poor. Katharine was a little frightened, and very much pleased.—“She should like,” she said, “to be of use, but she was afraid she should make a very bad visitor, especially after Miss Sinclair.”—“Especially with Miss Sinclair, you mean,” said Jane, laughing.—“I am not going to give up my poor people entirely, Katharine.”—“We hope not,” said Mr. Reeves, kindly; “the poor people would be very sorry.—But, my dear Miss Ashton, what I wanted to say to you, and what I asked Miss Sinclair to keep you behind for was, to beg you to come to me at any time or any moment and let me know your difficulties, and how I can help you.—You know,” he added, with a smile, “that I am especially bound to aid those who are working for me.”—“If their work is worth anything,” said Katharine.—“Perhaps I may be a better judge than you are of the

value of the work," said Mr. Reeves; "but one thing I will venture to say, that if you will only take courage and continue it, you will find it an incalculable blessing to yourself if not to your poor people."—"Katharine has a faint heart, I am afraid," said Jane, looking at her affectionately, and noticing that she was pale, and had a more tired, distressed air than usual.—"All our duties might give us faint hearts if we had nothing besides to depend upon," answered Mr. Reeves thoughtfully; "but it is quite true that district visiting—all visiting amongst the poor—must give us faint hearts; and that is what I should like, Miss Ashton, and in fact every one engaging in it, to consider beforehand. I dread most especially sentimental enthusiasm in such matters. It never lasts, and it always does harm. The work which you have undertaken, my dear Miss Ashton, is very up-hill and trying; often extremely disheartening, always to a certain degree oppressive."—"And I don't think I shall have time enough," said Katharine, bringing out boldly the fear which at the moment weighed most upon her.—"Perhaps not the time that you would wish, but give what you can; if every one did that, the world would be a very different place from what it is. And, to tell you the truth, I doubt if you, or any person who has not been accustomed to really hard work, can at all tell how much it is possible to do in the day."—"And Katharine need only learn by degrees, need she?" observed Jane. "She may begin with very little, and then go on to more—that is what I did."—"But I should not like that," replied Katharine; "I should be glad to know at once all that I have to undertake, and then I should be able to make up my mind to it."—"Is not that a little impatient?" asked Mr. Reeves. "It is not the way in which it is God's will to deal

with us. He begins with us gently, and leads us on step by step. I think we might do well to practice something of the same lesson in dealing with ourselves. I should rather advise that Miss Sinclair's experience should be your guide. She knows all the poor people, and she will tell you what she has been accustomed to do, and which are the most pressing cases to be attended to. If you will content yourself with these for a beginning, I think you will do wisely; and don't look forward, don't try to fancy what you will do in any sudden emergency or difficulty, but go on quietly from day to day, doing, as I said before, what you can—only," he added more seriously, "let it be what you can,—not what you happen to wish or like."—"That is not in Katharine's way," said Jane; "the fear with her will be that she will overwork herself."—Katharine was thoughtful for a moment; then she said: "No, Miss Sinclair, it is not that. I can work very hard when I see what I have to do, but I am not quick in seeing."—"A common fault," remarked Mr. Reeves, in a tone of kindness which Katharine felt to be very encouraging, "especially amongst"—He seemed a little doubtful how to express himself.—"Amongst tradespeople?" said Katharine. He smiled.—"Not exclusively amongst tradespeople; they form part of the class I mean—a large part, certainly;—but generally speaking amongst persons who lead useful, domestic lives, and have daily business to attend to."—"They are so very useful already," said Jane, "it seems hard to expect them to think of anything more. Idle people, like myself, on the contrary, would be miserable without the work."—"Exactly so; and yet, my dear Miss Sinclair, when one looks at the present state of England, and its vast needs, it is impossible not to feel that all—not only idle people, but busy people—must

exert themselves, if any radical improvement is to be effected.”—“And there are not many idle people in Rilworth,” said Katharine.—“No, nor in any of our country towns. The influential persons are persons in trade; and if real good amongst the lower classes is to be effected, it must be by their means.”—“They don’t all think so,” said Katharine, quickly, as she remembered how strange this doctrine would sound to her father and mother.—“I don’t think they do,” replied Mr. Reeves; “there are many exceptions of course; but very often they seem to consider the care of the poor as the peculiar province of the clergyman, assisted, perhaps, by one or two idle persons, like Miss Sinclair. And so it is,” he added, “that I hail with greater satisfaction a recruit from the business ranks than I do from any other. Your example, my dear Miss Ashton, may do more than Miss Sinclair’s, and she will not mind my saying so.”—“But I never thought about the duty before,” said Katharine, “and I don’t see why I am to expect that others should.”—“One may hope, though one may not venture to expect,” said Mr. Reeves; “I quite agree with you that it is difficult to open people’s eyes to new duties, and especially so when they have already enough before them to occupy all their attention. But that is the peculiar danger of persons in business, in any business, whether professional or trading. They seem to have no surplus either of time, or thought, or money, and it does not enter their heads that they ought to make any.”—“And then people are shy,” said Katharine, in an apologetic tone. “I should never have liked to offer myself if it had not been for Miss Sinclair.”—Mr. Reeves looked pained, not at Katharine’s speech, but at something in his own mind.—“Yes,” he said, “our English exclusiveness comes in there—we are all afraid of each other.”—“We

need not be," said Jane, and she involuntarily glanced at Katharine, as if feeling that in her case there could be no obstacle in the way of kindly feeling. "There are faults on both sides," said Mr. Reeves, "but I will not enter upon that subject now. Some day or other, when Miss Ashton and I are better acquainted, we may be able to talk about it. Besides," and he took out his watch, "I must send you away now, for I have a person coming to me on business at half-past twelve."

Could it be so late? Katharine did not believe it possible; the time had gone very quickly, at least the latter part of it. "Then you will apply to me in any difficulty," said Mr. Reeves, as Katharine wished him good-bye; "and you must let me call and see you sometimes, and bring Mrs. Reeves with me: she will be able to help you in many matters which are out of my province. I need not say," he added very earnestly, "that new duties are a reason for new prayers. We shall all go wrong if we forget that."

Katharine went home with Jane, and they spent another half-hour in going over the names of the people in the district, and settling what was to be done with them. Jane very much wished to have gone round with Katharine, and thus to have introduced her to the people whom she did not know; but it was not possible; the next three days would be incessantly employed; and Colonel Forbes (though Jane did not say so) was so exacting, so grudging of every moment of her time, that she could not venture to undertake any new work. All she could do was to give Katharine the tracts which were to be distributed the next time, properly numbered and marked; and to advise her, when she went to any house, to say that she was come instead of Miss Sinclair, who hoped

to pay them a visit again very soon. Jane heaved a sigh of mingled relief and regret as she gave Katharine her tract basket, and delivered up the tickets which were to supply the district for the next month. "It seems saying good-bye to it all," she said; "I can never again do what I have done. Oh! Katharine, how good-byes make one wish that one had done better!" Katharine put the basket on the table—her heart almost misgave her. "That was naughty of me," said Jane, "I have frightened you, but I did not intend it. One thing I can say honestly, that I would not but have done it for all that the world can give." Katharine took up the basket again, but she was very grave. "I shall not see you again, dear Miss Sinclair, only on Thursday. What time must I be here?"—"At half-past ten, if you don't mind waiting. I should not like to miss you, and I might if you came later."—"And you will never be Miss Sinclair again," observed Katharine. "Do you mind my saying, I shall never like the other name as well?"—"Wait till you are used to it," said Jane, with a bright smile; "and Katharine, I promise you, whatever I may be in name to others, I will always be Miss Sinclair in heart to you." Katharine's heart was too full for any words; her pressure of Jane's hand was almost convulsive; and, gathering up the tickets which were scattered on the table, she hurried away.

CHAPTER XVI.

It was Thursday morning. Katharine came down to breakfast, dressed in a dark green silk, her Sunday dress; Mrs. Ashton in a dark brown one.

The breakfast hour was eight, rather before than after; but this morning Mr. Ashton was particularly busy, and they were late. Katharine tried not to be impatient. "Mother, dear," she said, after they had waited more than ten minutes, "don't you think I might go and hurry my father? I should be so sorry not to get a good place."—"Yes; and tell him the tea has been standing nearly a quarter of an hour; he can't bear cold tea." Katharine put the tea-kettle on the fire to avoid the necessity of such a punishment, and went to call her father, stopping, as she passed the window, to look out, in order to be quite sure that the morning was going to be fine. "We are to begin breakfast without him," she said, as she came back. "Mr. Fowler is just come in."—"Then no need for us to trouble ourselves about him," observed Mrs. Ashton, "they will be talking for another half-hour. Where's John?"—"Not down yet, but I suppose he will be directly; that won't do for the farm, mother, will it?"—"He will get up fast enough when he has business of his own to attend to," said Mrs. Ashton, who could not endure the slightest imputation upon her son: "your father never got up properly till he was forced to do it. But sit down, Kitty, and give me some tea, and make haste, for I must give Susan directions about the market before we go to the church." Katharine did not talk very much during breakfast, though she answered all her mother said with a very tolerable show of attention. She was obliged to be more alive to common matters however, when her father came in, which he did when breakfast was about half over, and happily after, and not before, John made his appearance. His first exclamation drew from her the plan of the day's proceedings. "Why how brave you look, Kitty, this morning! And

you too, wife! What's the matter with you both? John, my boy, you and I are not half-good enough for such company."—"One would think they were going to be married," said John, gazing on his sister's pleasant face, and slight, neat figure, with evident complacency; "I'm sure Kitty is smart enough."—"Who knows but what I may be going to be married? one of these days, that is," said Katharine, laughing; "but, John, I really am going to see a wedding, and my father knows it, only he has forgotten it."—"Of course I have," said Mr. Ashton. "What is the use of remembering such fooleries? Bad enough to have made a show of oneself once in one's life, hey, wife? Do you remember my fine blue coat, and how it did not come in time from the tailor's, and how your father offered to lend me the one he was married in? I warrant, Kate, your Colonel and his bride won't have anything half so fine as that."—"I dare say not," said Katharine; "but I don't much care for Colonel Forbes, only I hope he will make Miss Sinclair happy."—"So like you women," said Mr. Ashton, "all for dress: a bridegroom is nobody, because he doesn't wear a white veil and orange flowers."—"Well! somehow," observed Mrs. Ashton, "one does think very little of the bridegroom at a wedding."—"Except that it could not go on without him," said John, a little fiercely, thinking, probably, of his own prospective happiness, and not choosing to be so overlooked. "No one would be likely either to overlook Colonel Forbes," he added, "he will make himself first wherever he is."—"And very right, too," observed Mr. Ashton; "defend me from a man who is ruled by his wife."—"Miss Sinclair is much more likely to spoil her husband than to rule him," said Katharine. "I should like to know what you mean by spoiling,

Kate," said John.— "Aye, let us hear," added Mr. Ashton; "it won't do, you know, John, to have bad counsel given by-and-by, will it?"—"No," replied John, with a smile; for he was always pleased when any allusion was made to his own marriage. "I won't have bad notions put into Selly's head, I warn you of that, Kitty!"—"I should be very sorry to put bad notions, as you call them, into any one's head," replied Katharine; "and I don't know much about how people go on when they are married; but I do think that living with a person like Miss Sinclair, who would be always giving up her own will, would be spoiling to any one."—"Trust Miss Sinclair for that!" replied John; "she will know fast enough how to have a will of her own when she is Mrs. Forbes. Where is the woman who does not know it?"—"Aye, where?" echoed Mr. Ashton, triumphantly. "I just ask you now, wife, whether, when there's a question between you and me, you don't always carry the day?"—"I can't say for that, my dear," was the reply. "I think it's pretty equal; but we don't often have questions that I can remember."—"But," said Katharine, "what I should call spoiling would not be giving up in great matters, but being afraid to differ, and always humouring little fancies, and that sort of thing."—"And that you wouldn't do, Kitty, hey?" asked Mr. Ashton; "take my advice, and never let that secret out, or depend upon it you'll never get a husband."—"I don't say that I should not do it," said Katharine. "I dare say if I was very fond of a person I should, because I should like to please him; but it wouldn't be the less spoiling for that, and it would not be the less likely to make a man selfish, and so end in taking away one's respect." Katharine did not add, "That is what I am afraid for Miss Sinclair;" she could not bear

to realise her own fears, especially before those who would not be likely to understand them. "Well! you must have a husband made expressly for you, Kitty," said Mr. Ashton; "it is not every one that will do for you, that's clear. I should have thought now such a man as Colonel Forbes was just the person likely to take every woman's fancy—good looking, and smooth spoken, with an air of being somebody which there's no mistaking. I wonder what you would want more?"—"I couldn't say," replied Katharine, "and happily for me I am not obliged to say—I am not going to marry Colonel Forbes."—"But still what would you wish more?" inquired John. "I should just like to know for curiosity's sake."—"Well," replied Katharine, "it would be hard to tell; but in any case I should like to be quite sure of what a man is at home as well as abroad, and I should like to hear something about him from his mother and sisters, if he had any. I have a great notion that a man who does not make himself pleasant in his own family is not likely to do so in the long run to his wife."—"Nonsense," exclaimed John, "how would you get the sisters to speak the truth about their brother?"—"There, again, I don't know how I should do it," replied Katharine; "but there would be certainly some way of finding out. At any rate, if his own family were not much to him, which is easily known by a person's way of talking, I should think that I had better not have anything to do with him."—"Vastly prudent, Kitty," said Mr. Ashton, laughing; "but, unfortunately, you don't know anything about the matter. People tumble into love and marry, and then begin to ask questions when the deed is done. As for Colonel Forbes, I never heard he had any sisters or mother either."—"Oh! yes he has," replied Katharine, "sisters at least; two of them are to be Miss

Sinclair's bridesmaids."—"Well, they can't have been much at Maplestead," observed Mr. Ashton, "or we should have been sure to have seen them."—"He is a curious man, the Colonel," said John, thoughtfully. "I have been talking to some of his tenants lately, and they say they would rather confront a wild bull than thwart him."—"Passionate is he?" said Mr. Ashton, "I should not have thought that."—"Not passionate," replied John; "but he just turns off and says nothing, and does n't forget."—"Umph!" was Mr. Ashton's comment. Katharine did not want to hear anything further. She asked if any one wished for more tea, and when the answer was given in the negative, rose from the table, locked the tea-caddy, and went up stairs.—"Kate does not like the Colonel, but she won't have him abused," said John Ashton, as his sister left the room.—"That's natural enough," replied Mrs. Ashton, "so fond as she is of Miss Sinclair. But what is the use of troubling about it all beforehand. When people are married they must get on somehow."—"Or anyhow, hey, wife?" observed Mr. Ashton, patting his wife on the shoulder. "But never mind, the 'anyhow' has done well enough for us, and we will hope it will do the same for the Colonel and Miss Sinclair.

Katharine was provoked with herself for having encouraged the conversation. It had filled her with uncomfortable thoughts. She wished that she had been contented to go as she had promised, and say "good-bye" to Jane, and had not persuaded her mother to accompany her to the church. Then she might have stolen away quietly, and nothing would have been said. She did not like it to be supposed that she had any feeling against Colonel Forbes, it was so silly. What reason had she for disliking him? She who, except on that one occasion at the

ball, had never exchanged half a dozen words with him. And why should she not trust to Jane Sinclair's opinion? Why should the fact of his apparent separation from his family, and the chance opinion expressed of him by a tenant, tell more against him in her mind than all Jane's devoted admiration and affection? She tried to shake off the impression, and, putting on her bonnet, went into the kitchen to her mother to see if she could help her in any way before they went out; and then she returned to the parlour, and when Susan had taken away the breakfast things busied herself with putting it in order, arranging the books in their shelves, and dusting the little china ornaments on the mantelpiece—anything rather than stand still and think that it was Jane Sinclair's wedding-day.

“Come, Kitty, are you ready; we shall be late;” and Mrs. Ashton, having kept her daughter waiting for at least ten minutes, became at last extremely impatient.—“One moment, mother.” Katharine folded up her duster and put it where it was always kept, in the drawer of the bureau, and hurried after Mrs. Ashton.—“Ten was the time I think you said, Kate? Just look up at the town-clock; my eyes are rather weak this morning. It wants twenty minutes, does n't it?”—“Yes, mother, just twenty; we shall be in very good time and no one will take our seat.”—“I don't know that, Kitty. Folks are not over particular at a wedding.”—Mrs. Ashton quickened her step, so that Katharine could scarcely keep pace with her. Happily there was in consequence no fear of talking, and no leisure for thinking. At the church-door a crowd of idle boys and untidy women were assembled, and a few well-dressed persons were straggling into the building one after the other; but there were not so very many, as Mrs. Ashton remarked, so it was to be hoped their seat

was not taken. It would have been if they had been five minutes later, for it was one of the best seats in the church for seeing ;—in the transept, but close to the chancel. The west end of the church was hidden, but that did not so much signify. A good deal of walking about and whispering was going on between the clerk and the sexton, and benches were being moved from the chancel, so as to give greater space. It was not much like the preparation for a religious service, and the people in the pews were some standing up, some sitting down, and all looking about. Katharine placed herself as much out of sight as possible behind a pillar, and then she knelt down and prayed, not only the usual prayer, that she might remember that she was in the house of God, but a special one, deeply, intensely earnest, for Jane Sinclair,—for her happiness—her goodness ;—for happiness even more than for goodness. Katharine had faith in the one ; she did not know why she distrusted the other. She sat down afterwards and tried not to be disturbed by all the movement about her ; and looked steadily at the altar and the coloured glass in the east window in order to sober her thoughts, till at last there were sounds of carriage-wheels, and her mother whispered, “ They are coming, Kate,” and then, like every one else, she turned towards the entrance to look. They came up the aisle—a party of gaily-dressed ladies in their brilliant silks and muslins, and gentlemen in full dress—and crowded into the chancel ; and Mr. Reeves came out from the vestry and took his place at the altar ; and, after a very short delay, Jane Sinclair followed, leaning upon the arm of her uncle—her mother’s only brother. Katharine saw that she was dressed in white, that she wore a white veil, but she noticed nothing else, not even the young bridesmaids who followed ; only,

as the little procession entered the chancel, she bent forward to look at Jane's sweet colourless face, and saw that it was untroubled in its inward peace, though very serious; and her own heart grew lighter and beat less anxiously.

The wedding party ranged themselves round the altar, and Katharine could see little of any countenance then, except that of Mrs. Sinclair. She was standing close to Jane, but so as rather to look down the church. It was a face not easily to be read; time had traced upon it the furrows of many griefs; they seemed more deeply imprinted upon it at that moment than they had ever been before; But were they the sorrows of the past or the future? — Katharine could not guess; but she thought of the lonely hearth, the empty chamber, and marvelled that a wedding should ever be considered gay.

And the service began and continued without pause. The promise was made to love, and comfort, and honour, and keep in sickness and in health; and who that looked upon the gallant, honourable, true-hearted English gentleman, and the gentle girl at his side, so graceful in her loving timidity, yet so honest in the open avowal of her affection, could doubt that the vow would be kept?

Not Katharine. As they knelt together at the altar, and she heard Jane, with a clear voice, steadily and unfalteringly give her troth, every shadow of misgiving vanished.

To grieve her, to disappoint her,—so pure, so unselfish, so devoted, it would be impossible! Only one pang shot through Katharine's mind as they left the church. It had been Jane's wish that the service should be concluded with the Holy Communion. Why was this—the first wish of her married life—set aside?

Katharine and her mother parted at the church-

door—Mrs. Ashton to hurry home and see that nothing had gone wrong in her absence, Katharine to make her way as well as she could through the crowd, and hasten through quiet, back streets to Mrs. Sinclair's house. She was expected, and the servants took her up stairs to Jane's dressing-room. The lobby on the outside was filled with a large imperial, and several smaller packages and baskets, ranged ready for departure; her maid was busy putting up the few last things. Katharine asked if she could be of any use, and occupied a few moments in assisting to fold some dresses, but she was soon interrupted. The carriage had driven back quickly, and Jane stayed but a short time in the drawing-room to receive the congratulations of her friends, and then was hurried away by Colonel Forbes to prepare for her journey.

Two of the bridesmaids (Colonel Forbes' sisters) accompanied her; they all came into the room together, and Katharine drew back. Jane looked eagerly round the room. "I thought—Oh! Katharine, you are there. How kind of you!" She held out her hand to Katharine, and a warm pressure was interchanged. But Katharine could only say "Dear Miss Sinclair," and then blush, and apologise, and retreat again to the side of the lady's-maid. "Please go down stairs, dear," said Jane, addressing her sisters-in-law, "and do what you can to make Philip patient, and I will be ready in two minutes. And don't let them keep dear mamma talking in the drawing-room, I must have her with me." Mrs. Sinclair was already at the dressing-room door, and Miss Forbes and her sister retreated. Katharine was going too. "No, please not," and Jane laid her hand upon her arm to stop her; "you will help me." Mrs. Sinclair came in as quietly composed as in her every-day life, only there was a little

tremulousness in her voice, as she said, "My child, are you ready?" Jane threw herself into her arms: "My own mother! how cruel to leave you!" She sat down in a chair and buried her face in her hands. Mrs. Sinclair stooped down and kissed her, and whispered something in her ear; and Jane rose up self-collected and tearless, but she could not speak again. Her mother and the maid assisted her to change her dress, and Katharine took the rich white silk, and folded it, and laid it in the trunk left open for it. The room looked out into the street, and they heard the servants packing the carriage, and Colonel Forbes giving orders. Some one came for the last box, and Katharine helped the maid to carry it out of the room, and returned alone. She felt then that she must go, and she went up to Jane and asked if she could do anything else for her. Jane took her hand, and placed on her finger a small ring. "Please wear it, dear Katharine, and remember me, and to-day;—and pray for me," she added, in a low, broken whisper, as she bent forward and kissed her forehead. The eager blood rushed to Katharine's cheek:—"Remember you, Miss Sinclair,—how could I ever forget?" She turned away, and walked slowly down the stairs.

Katharine stood in the hall with the servants; she could not make up her mind to go till she had seen the carriage drive off. There was great bustle and confusion in the house, and a good deal of talking in the drawing-room; in the dining-room servants and waiters were preparing the wedding breakfast. Colonel Forbes came several times into the hall, and went out to the carriage to see that everything was properly packed, for he did not seem to like trusting to servants. He was extremely particular about all Jane's packages, and made the maid tell him what she would especially want, and got into the

carriage himself to be sure that everything was placed comfortably for her. "Now, is that the last?" he said, as the small trunk which Katharine had assisted to pack, was lifted up to the carriage-box. "Yes, sir, all."—"Then go, and tell your mistress that we have not a moment to spare." He took out his watch and held it in his hand, counting the minutes as he walked up and down the hall. Jane appeared immediately, not with her mother, but her uncle. Her veil was down, but Katharine saw the large tears rolling down her cheek. Colonel Forbes took her from her uncle, whom he shook heartily but impatiently by the hand, handed her into the carriage, and placed himself behind her. "My shawl—I have forgotten my shawl," Katharine heard her say. Before any one else could move, Katharine had rushed up herself to the dressing-room for it. She brought it to the carriage-door. "Thank you, thank you," said Colonel Forbes, as he took it from her. "Anything else, my love?" and he turned to his wife,—“then drive on.” He closed the door with a loud sound. Katharine saw Jane's nod, and sweet smile of thanks, and she heard also the Colonel's eager words, as he threw himself back in the carriage, and drew his wife towards him—"Now, at last, my own."

CHAPTER XVII.

"KATE, what are you doing with all those dirty little books?" asked Mrs. Ashton. Katharine was seated at the table with a pile of district tracts before her. "Marking them, mother, to give round; arranging them rather, I should say, for they are

marked. Miss Sinclair—Mrs. Forbes, I mean—marked them for me.”—“What blunders you do make about names, child,” said Mrs. Ashton; “your father told me that it was only yesterday you happened to be in the shop, when Mrs. Sinclair came in, and you asked her if she had heard from Miss Sinclair.”—“Not very strange,” replied Katharine, “considering that I have known one name so much longer than the other. By the by, mother, Mrs. Sinclair said they were gone into Wales to see some friends, and they would not be at Maplestead for another month.”—“It seems a wonderfully long time since they went away,” observed Mrs. Ashton; “no one would think it was only this day week.”—“And I have not been round with the tracts yet,” said Katharine. “I don’t know what Mr. Reeves will say to me.”—“What you will say to him is the chief matter,” replied Mrs. Ashton; “you must tell him that you have been very busy, and that the weather has been very bad, and the only fine day, which was yesterday, I wanted you to go out with me.”—“All the more reason why I must go round the district to-day,” said Katharine; “you don’t want me at home, mother, do you, for anything?”—“There’s the new tablecloth to be hemmed,” said Mrs. Ashton; “and I told Peggy Dore, that if she would have the body of my new gown ready by Saturday, you and I would finish the skirt.”—“But Susan can hem the tablecloth,” said Katharine. “I know she is not busy this afternoon; and if I work hard, mother, this evening, I think I can make up the skirt in time; there is not much to be done to it. To-morrow, you know, John wants you, and me, and Selina too, to go over to Moorlands in Mr. Fowler’s chaise; so I can’t go anywhere else then. That farm is beginning to take up a great deal of time,” she added, laugh-

ing; "it is much worse than the district."—"I don't know that," replied Mrs. Ashton; "the farm is a good way off, and the district is close; but I suppose you must go, Kitty, as you promised Mrs. Forbes you would; only don't be late for tea, and mind if there's any fever your father won't choose you to go near it."

Katharine promised all that was required, and ran up stairs to put on her bonnet. "It is worse than going to a dentist, I declare," she said, as she came back into the parlour to fetch the tracts and arrange them in the covered basket; "I don't know what in the world I shall say to the people, and I am sure I shall get confused with the names. Let me see: Long-lane comes first; then the houses in Briton's-court, and the south end of Woodgate-street. I never know in Rilworth which is south and which is north. The south end, mother, must be where Anne Crossin lives. I don't know quite now," she continued, looking at some of Jane's memoranda, "whether I am to take in both sides of the way; however, I need not trouble about that to-day; Long-lane will be as much as I can manage in one afternoon, let me work as hard as I may. Good-bye, mother, dear, and wish me well through it." And she went up to her mother, and gave her a half merry, half nervous kiss, and set off.

Katharine was obliged to go a little way up High-street to arrive at Long-lane; and on her way she met several people whom she knew, but she did not stop to speak to them. She had a fancy that everybody must be able to tell the contents of the covered brown basket. But there was one of the Miss Lockes stealing into a back street, no doubt, like herself, going into her district. It was singular to find what a bond of sympathy the

idea created. She who had known nothing of Miss Locke before, except by sight, felt now that she was quite like a companion and friend. Jemmy Dawes' cottage was the only house, except the alms-houses, that she had ever been into in Long-lane; and that was at the further end, near Briton's-court, and the tracts were numbered in regular order for her to begin at the corner of High-street. Katharine turned into the lane, and stopped before a little green door—a very puzzling door: it did not look quite like the entrance to a poor person's house, and yet it could not well belong to anything else; and besides, she had been told that some of the houses in Jane's district looked so respectable that no one would imagine they were inhabited by persons in want. She pondered for some seconds, and then, with a sudden bold impulse, tapped at the door. No answer was made, and she lifted the latch. The door opened into a garden; but there was another low open door close by, and within was what looked like a labourer's kitchen. Katharine was hesitating whether to advance or draw back, when a pleasant-featured homely young woman came out of the house, and asked her to walk in; and of course she entered. The young woman did not ask her to sit down in the kitchen, as she expected, but led the way through a stone passage, opened another door, and calling out, "A lady come to see you, ma'am," ushered Katharine into a long, low room, furnished with great neatness, and lighted by two deep windows, in which were placed stands of geraniums, and a cage with a canary. In this apartment two most respectable elderly females were seated, one knitting, the other reading to her. Katharine's impulse was to rush away, throw aside her tracts, and never attempt district visiting again. "Pray sit down," said the elder of

the two respectable ladies, offering her a chair. But Katharine declined; "she had made a mistake," she said; "she hoped they would excuse it, for she had really no intention of intruding." The two ladies looked at her with an expression in their countenances, which, in spite of their amiability, showed surprise and a little nervousness. "I beg your pardon; have you no business? — nothing to say?"—"Nothing at all," was Katharine's reply, dictated by her native boldness; and then recovering herself, she added, with a blush, "I—I am a district visitor."—"Oh!" The elderly ladies understood the mistake in a moment:—she had entered by the back door; there was not the slightest occasion for an apology; would she not sit down and rest? Katharine declined, but she could not go without making an excuse; and she explained that she was a stranger to her work,—this was the first time she had undertaken to go round the district,—she had taken it for Miss Sinclair—Mrs. Forbes. "Oh! then, we have not the pleasure of speaking to Miss Sinclair," said the reading lady, adjusting her spectacles, for a nearer inspection of Katharine's face. "My name is Ashton," replied Katharine; and the two ladies gave a simultaneous start, which made her start also. "Ashton! Oh! yes, to be sure; Mr. Ashton, the bookseller's daughter. How stupid of us! But—" and they turned to each other—"did you ever see anything so grown and altered?"—"You don't recollect us, my dear," continued the reading lady, "but we recollect you; yes, a good long time ago, we can assure you. I dare say you may have heard our names—Ronaldson, sisters of Harry Ronaldson, of Shene: but ah!" and there came a heavy sigh, "that was before your time."—"You must know our nephew Charlie, though,—I am sure you know him," interrupted

the knitting lady; "I have heard him speak of you many a time." The familiar name was the greatest relief possible to Katharine. She had stumbled, then, upon the two Miss Ronaldsons, who had lately, she knew, settled in Rilworth. It was quite a pleasant acquaintance, and would be particularly so for her mother; there would be so many reminiscences of old times to talk about. She sat down, and her new friends drew their chairs nearer to her, and scarcely waiting for her to speak, began to ask a series of questions about uncles, and aunts, and cousins, some of whom were dead, whilst others she had never heard of. But the Miss Ronaldsons appeared to have an intimate acquaintance with all; and they could remember her mother's wedding-day, and had a clear recollection of having seen her father in petticoats; and they quickened each other's memory, and recalled so many odd stories, that it seemed as if they would never tire, whilst Katharine listened, and laughed, and every now and then thought of her tract-basket, and at last in despair rose up with desperate resolution, and declared she must go. "No, my dear, not yet; we could not think of letting you go. Priscilla,"—and Miss Ronaldson nodded to her sister, and looked at the corner cupboard. Miss Priscilla quickly took the hint, and proceeded to unlock the cupboard, and produce a bottle of ginger wine, and some sweet cake. "Now, my dear, just one glass; it won't hurt you; it's home-made—Priscilla's making. Prissy, my dear, are you sure that is not gooseberry? We make gooseberry wine, too, my dear Miss Ashton, but the ginger this year happens to be the best. Our nephew Charlie always likes ginger when he comes to see us. Have you seen Charlie lately, my dear?" Katharine took a piece of cake, not liking to refuse, and,

after a moment's thought, said she had not seen Mr. Ronaldson for more than three weeks, and she had understood he was gone to London. "So he is, my dear, but he is come back again. He went up to London to see some person about the land-surveying. The Duke of Lowther recommended him to go. He has been a kind friend to him, has the Duke of Lowther, and Charlie deserves it. We can say that, can't we, Priscilla?"—"Surely," replied Miss Priscilla, who being the stronger-minded of the two, was always required to put her seal to her sister's assertions; "there isn't a better young man in Rilworth, Miss Ashton, than our nephew Charlie; so steady, and so fond of his mother, and so given to his work. I say sometimes that he is quite an example to the young men in these days."—"I hope he will succeed, sincerely," said Katharine, a little impatient of this new subject, as she thought again of her tracts. "I know he is a very good young man; every one says so," she added, fearing that she might have appeared cold. "Yes, and every one has good cause to say so," continued Miss Ronaldson; "such a dutiful son as he has been ever since his father's death, and before it indeed. He never gave his parents a moment's uneasiness at any time. But, my dear Miss Ashton, must you really go? this is such a very short visit."—"I must come another day, and pay you a visit when I have no business on my hands," said Katharine. "Do, pray; we shall be most happy at any time."—"And we are in your district, remember," said Miss Priscilla.—"Yes, in your district," echoed Miss Ronaldson, "so you must not forget us."—"I am not likely to forget the door," observed Katharine, with a laugh; "it was a most awkward blunder."—"A most fortunate one, my dear, you mean; we have not had such a pleasant little talk, I can't tell the

time when ; have we, Priscilla ?"—" No, indeed ; a most pleasant talk," replied Miss Priscilla ; " we only hope it will be repeated."—" And if your mother would be kind enough to look in upon us some day, we should be delighted," continued Miss Ronaldson. " Prissy and I don't go out much, especially in cold weather. Prissy is troubled with rheumatism, and I get such bad colds on my chest ; don't I, Priscilla ?"—" Surely," replied Miss Priscilla ; " but can't Deborah carry your basket for you wherever you are going, my dear Miss Ashton ?"—" Oh ! no, thank you," replied Katharine, " there is nothing heavy in it."—" Ah ! so you say," observed Miss Ronaldson ; " but you district ladies are wonderful people for taking things about. The people in the lane talk of nothing but of what Miss Sinclair did for them."—" Mrs. Forbes, you mean, sister," said Miss Priscilla, with a reproving nod. " Thank you, Prissy ; yes, you are right. Mrs. Forbes, as you say, not Miss Sinclair ; but she did go about a great deal, didn't she ?"—" Yes," replied Katharine ; " a great deal more, I am afraid, than I shall."—" Ah ! so you say, my dear ; but we shall hear you talked of just the same ; shan't we, Prissy ? I am glad, though, the basket is not heavy." There might have been a little curiosity in this last observation. Miss Ronaldson certainly fixed her eyes on the covered basket, as if she would fain have had a glimpse into the interior, but Katharine's instinct told her that the little brown books would have required too long an explanation ; and therefore, taking advantage of the pause, she retreated, after many hearty good-byes, mingled with assurances from Miss Ronaldson, signed and sealed by Miss Priscilla, that they wished her all success, and had no doubt she would soon be as much talked about as Mrs. Forbes.

District visiting, doubtless, would occupy a very large portion of time, if all visits were like that paid to the Miss Ronaldsons. Katharine had been with them half an hour, and she had only an hour more to bestow on all the people in Long-lane. But the interview had amused and pleased her, and it would be something to make her father laugh when she went home; and upon the whole it had rather raised her spirits, and given her a stimulus for her work. It was not quite possible to make any more such blunders, for there was no other doubtful door in the lane, and boldly, therefore, she went on.

She knocked at the next door; a clean-looking, fierce-eyed woman, fresh from the washing-tub, with her sleeves tucked up to the elbow, came down a wet stone passage leading into a back court, and confronted her. Katharine held out the tract, and said, "I think you are Mrs. Mears?"—"Yes, my name is Mears."—"I am come to change the tract. I have taken Miss Sinclair's—Mrs. Forbes'—district for the present. She hopes to see you again herself soon."—"Oh!—Cary, what have you done with the tract? here's a lady come for it. Isn't it upon the top shelf?" There was a scuffle in some room behind the passage, and then an untidy-looking girl of about twelve years of age rushed down the passage, thrust the tract into her mother's hand, stared at Katharine, and having satisfied her curiosity, rushed back again. Katharine's business was ended; she could not think of another word to say. Some vague ideas of a speech about wet passages and draughts crossed her mind, but she could not frame any rational sentence. "Good afternoon, I will call again another day," she said. "Good afternoon, Miss," was the answer, in a quick voice, and the instant Katharine was out of the house the door was closed behind her.

Two steps brought her to another door very much like the first; the entrance to the house too was the same—the long passage and the back court: but here she was received by a sickly woman, with a baby in her arms; and as the tract was not to be found, she was asked to walk in, and was shown into a good-sized room, utterly without furniture except two or three broken chairs and a round table; and near the window worked a shoemaker, with a face as sickly as his wife's, and his unshaven black beard making him look yet more ghastly; and on the floor played two little dirty half-clothed children, and on a low stool near the almost empty grate, sat a boy who had injured his leg and could not walk. Very wretched it was, but it gave Katharine an occasion for asking questions and showing sympathy; and the "Thank you, Miss," when she promised to bring the boy a picture-book next time, was encouraging. Not that she could feel she was doing any good; it was a very blind work; but then she was only a beginner, perhaps it would be better by-and-by.

She had only time to go down one side of the lane, but that seemed enough work both for mind and body for one day. It gave her so much to think of, and there was such an oppressive sense of helplessness upon her. One scene of poverty and distress followed upon another, and how could it be possible to relieve all? Especially, what was the good of her trying to do anything without money, or talent, or even time? And if there was not poverty, there was generally an indifference of manner which repelled her, and made her feel that the people wanted to be talked to and lectured into good manners. Jane had told her that Long-lane and Briton's-court were the worst parts of her district, and that she would find some very nice people

in Woodgate-street, but that did not help her very much at the moment. She went home feeling that she had not done half she intended, that she had undertaken a work quite beyond her powers, and that if Mr. Reeves expected her to be of any use to him in the parish he would find himself utterly mistaken. One thing, however, struck her as she went into the parlour in her own home: how comfortable it looked! how bright the fire was! how nice it was to sit down to work again! And that evening the hour at tea was particularly pleasant; Mr. Ashton was so amused with the story of her stumbling upon the Miss Ronaldsons, and Mrs. Ashton promised to go and call upon them, and asked Katharine some questions about the other people she had seen, and agreed that Susan should put by the scraps for the shoemakers family. Katharine was very light-hearted when she went to bed, but it could not have been on account of her district, because that, she had made up her mind, was to be a perpetual burden.

CHAPTER XVIII.

KATHARINE had time the next day to hurry down to the shoemaker's cottage with an old picture-book, and return just in time to be ready for the drive to Moorlands. Mr. Fowler's double-seated chaise was at the door, and John and Selina were seated in it. Selina was in the front seat, which seemed a little thoughtless in both of them, for the back seat was cramped, and would be very uncomfortable for Mrs. Ashton; but then John and Selina were in love, and a certain amount of selfishness is always

allowed to persons under such circumstances. Selina was so very gay in her dress that Katharine was not sorry to be spared the necessity of sitting side by side with her, in contrast ; and Mrs. Ashton, in her extreme good-nature, did not care at all about the back seat, and was only glad, as she said, that the young people should have it all their own way. She looked very proud and smiling, and bowed to all her acquaintance as they drove down the street, and observed to Katharine that, after all, she must own there was some good in the marriage, for they did not get a drive every day. Katharine was only too willing to discover any advantages she could, and quite agreed that it was a delightful afternoon, and much pleasanter to be driving over to Moorlands than going in and out of the cottages in Long-lane.

Moorlands was on the Maplestead road, a little to the right, about a quarter of a mile beyond the upper lodge gate. Katharine looked up the long beech avenue, and thought of the day when she, and Selina, and Julia Madden, had met Colonel Forbes and Jane at the entrance. How rapidly events had crowded upon each other since then! how fixed Jane's fate was! and John and Selina's almost equally so! and yet circumstances had glided on very smoothly, one bringing another in a measure unperceived. So it might be, so it must be with herself, and with every one—all were travelling on to something important as regarded this life, even without the thought of another. She wondered what it would be in her own case.

“You have been to Moorlands, haven't you, Kitty?” said John, turning round, and interrupting her reverie. “No, never; not close, that is: I have seen it passing the lane.”—“Well, there it is, through the trees; you can just catch the chimneys. The Colonel and we shall be near neighbours,

eh, Selly?"—"Yes, it will be quite pleasant," said Selina. "Jane Forbes and I"—Katharine could not possibly resist touching her arm: "Now, really, Selina, you must not say that. Nobody calls married women by their Christian names."—"I beg your pardon, Katharine, I know a great many people who do."—"Then they must be relations, or persons who have known them intimately before," replied Katharine; "Colonel Forbes won't like it—indeed he won't. John, you mustn't let her do it."—"I am not going to call her Jane to her face," observed Selina; "but if I speak of her behind her back I shall call her what I choose, and so I must beg, Katharine, that you won't interfere."—"What is the matter, my dear?" asked Mrs. Ashton, innocently, as after straining her eyes to discover the chimneys of Moorlands, she sank back in the seat, and awoke to the consciousness that something was amiss. "Nothing, dear mother, nothing; only Selina and I differed a little. I am afraid you are not comfortable," she added, trying to distract her mother's attention and her own. "Oh, yes, my dear, thank you, quite—there's plenty of room. John, don't you upset us round the corner." There was no fear of that. John was a most expert charioteer, and took them not only safe round the corner, but along a very rough, bad lane, full of stones and ruts, which made Mrs. Ashton keep her eyes fixed upon the ground in order to give warning of all dangers beforehand, and caused one or two faint shrieks from Selina, and consequent soothing words and fond attentions from John. Katharine was never timid in a carriage, and she had perfect faith in her brother's power of driving, so she had full leisure to occupy herself with looking at Maplestead, of which they had a very good view as they drove along the side of the park. It was a red brick house, with

stone facings, low and long: the wings were modern, and had large sash windows; the centre was old, and there the windows were smaller and the mullions very heavy. There was a good deal of ornament about it, but of what kind Katharine could not quite see, only she remembered having been told that the Clare family, of whom Colonel Forbes had bought it, had carved the figure of a lion, their family crest, wherever room could possibly be found for it. The sun was shining pleasantly on the smooth lawn, and though the season was late the flower beds were gay with colour, and Maplestead, with its noble park and wide-spreading trees, looked a very bright home on that autumn afternoon. But Katharine could not fancy Jane Sinclair its mistress; it was too large for her, too stately, too much shut out from the rest of the neighbourhood; and to live there year after year with Colonel Forbes!—Katharine internally shuddered at the thought. “Very foolish,” as she said to herself afterwards; “no doubt if she had been brought up like Miss Sinclair, she would feel like her. It was only because she was not accustomed to grandeur and grand people, that she did not fancy them.”

Yet there was certainly a relief in driving up to Moorlands in spite of its associations. It was a substantial looking place; the house old but comfortable, and just beginning to be overrun with creepers: in front was a small lawn, at one side a kitchen-garden, at the back, and at the other side, a farm-yard. Affluence, and what people call respectability, were stamped upon it, and Mrs. Ashton was much pleased, and thought it only too much of a place for a beginning, and Selina really did hope that something could be made of it. As they were all satisfied, Katharine could not help being so; in fact, just at that moment she did not

feel that she had much cause to be the reverse. Now that the marriage was really settled, she was beginning to take it, according to her custom, in its best point of view, and Moorlands certainly was a most favourable spot from which to regard it. It would be a very pleasant change for her father, who was so fond of the country; and when her mother was troubled with head-ache, as she was sometimes, it might really be of service to her health to have a little fresh pure air; and the house must be quite large enough to hold them all, if they wished to be there together. What she feared was, like her mother, that it might be rather too much of a place for a beginning.

John helped them out of the chaise, and walked into the house with the air of a master. "A very good parlour, you see, mother, and a capital kitchen and offices, and as many bed-rooms as we shall want. We might build on more behind, the Colonel says, if necessary."—"Build! my dear," repeated Mrs. Ashton, who had a virtuous horror of bricks and mortar.—"If necessary, mother; and it might be. Selina doesn't think she shall be able to do without a drawing-room, and if so, that will take the best room up stairs."—"Of course I must have a drawing-room," said Selina; "how am I to receive my friends else? and what is mamma to do when she comes to stay with me?" A conclusive argument! Mrs. Ashton was silent, because she did not know what to say; Katharine, because she did not think it desirable to interfere. So they went upstairs to see the rooms, and the best, the only really good room, was immediately marked by Selina for the drawing-room, and she made John take out his pocket-book and make a memorandum of the furniture which would be wanted, including, of course, a round table, a chiffonier, a book-case, and a sofa.

“Her own piano,” she said, “would be brought from home, and would fill up the space that was left very well.” Katharine was anxious herself to go over the offices, the kitchen, scullery, pantry, dairy, &c. She felt these to be much more important than the drawing-room; but Selina kept John so long upstairs settling where everything was to be placed, that she had not patience to wait for them, and she and her mother went down stairs together. John had called the offices good, but they did not strike Katharine as being so. They were small, and some of the out-houses were a good deal out of repair. Katharine made notes herself of what she remarked, meaning to show them to John or her father when she was alone with them. It seemed to her that the bargain would not be as great as she had at first imagined. She believed that John was to pay a diminished rent on condition of undertaking the repairs. This might have been all very well if the repairs had been within moderate compass; but it certainly seemed to her that there were dangerous temptations to make unnecessary improvements, from the fact of so much requiring to be done. She had a little misgiving too about her father—he was so very fond of work of the kind; and Selina would be sure to urge John even beyond his own inclinations in the way of extravagance. The idea was so strong in her mind, that when at last John and Selina came down stairs, she ventured to point out to them the state of the premises and suggest whether it might not be as well to reconsider the agreement with Colonel Forbes, since it was not quite concluded, and be contented to pay a larger rent if Colonel Forbes would put the place in order.

John seemed inclined to listen to the idea; but he had no sooner said that it was something at least to be thought of, when Selina interposed, “What! leave

the alterations to Colonel Forbes; let him do just as he might wish! — it was mere folly and absurdity. How was he to tell what would be wanted? And he would be sure to do it in a shabby, skimping way. And then the increased rent would be such a burden, so much more than they could afford! She was sure if such a thing were proposed, the place must be given up; in fact, it would be quite impossible to undertake it; they could not attempt it; it would be ruin:" and tears rushed to her eyes, and even fell down her cheeks, very much to Katharine's discomfiture, and to John's distress. Again Katharine blamed herself for making wise suggestions at unwise times, and to unwise people. The same thing, said to her father might have been really useful. She had a good deal to learn in that way, for, with her natural impetuosity of disposition, it was very difficult to be silent when an idea was pressing upon her mind.

Selina recovered herself after a little sympathy from Mrs. Ashton, who thought it hard she should be thwarted in a matter which seemed to her of slight consequence, and a good deal of soothing from John, accompanied by a promise that she should have it all her own way; and they went out into the garden. It was, strictly speaking, a kitchen-garden, old fashioned and formal, with an abundant supply of cabbages, carrots, lettuces, and other vegetables, and a moderate space left for flowers in the front borders. Mrs. Ashton was charmed with it; Katharine thought it the best thing she had yet seen at Moorlands; and Selina acknowledged it would be all very well if they could plant it out, but as it was it was merely a desight; and she called John away from the inspection of the vegetables to plan some flower-beds for the front lawn. "Selina thinks Moorlands is what people call a villa," said Katharine to her

mother; "I always thought it a farm-house." —"Ah! that's just at first, my dear, she will know better by-and-by. But it won't do to cross her just at the beginning; and, besides, it will vex John." That was the important point, kept, as people say the real business of a lady's letter is, for the postscript. Katharine was quite in the minority, and it was a considerable trial to her, feeling herself, as she did, in the right. But it was a much greater trial to be put aside in her brother's affections. With all his faults, he had always hitherto been very fond of her, and he was so still, she was sure; but he had no thought for her; he did not care whether she gave her opinion or not; he did not notice if she was present or absent. He made Selina sit down, because he thought she would be tired; but it did not seem to enter his head that Katharine might be tired, too. Katharine was not of a jealous disposition; but it was not in human nature to be so suddenly thrust out of her natural place, and not to feel it. She walked about with her mother, and left John and Selina to themselves, feeling very unhappy. She thought she could have borne it if Selina had been less silly; but she was mistaken. If Selina had been perfect it would have been quite impossible to know that she was second where she had once been first, and not to suffer. And then it seemed so wrong, so unkind, unsympathising, selfish,—and her mother did not seem to care at all! she was only glad that John should be happy! Why should not a sister's feelings be the same as a mother's? Katharine began to lecture herself very severely, as she walked up and down the centre walk in the kitchen-garden, waiting till John and Selina were ready to go over the farm-buildings. Mrs. Ashton busied herself in gathering a few autumn flowers to take back with

them, and Katharine began to do the same ; but she could not go on very long, her thoughts interfered with her work. First came the self-scolding ; then a kind of apology and explanation ; then a wonder whether her feelings were unusual ; then a little something like envy of John and Selina — not envy of them, but of their happiness, of that pleasant feeling of being all in all to each other. She would not change with Selina, or with Miss Sinclair, or with any married person she had ever known ; she had never seen the person she would like to marry ; she scarcely knew herself what she would wish him to be like, she had thought so little about it ; but if it were possible to meet with any one quite,—in every respect,—faultless in fact, then it seemed as if it might be a happy life, very happy. She felt that she could make a good wife. She could love, yes, most deeply —there was a rush of feeling at the vision she had conjured up, which told her that the well-spring of her affections had never yet been reached ; and she could honour, she must honour,—without it there could be no love ; and she could obey,—in spite of her theory, that it might be well for a woman not to spoil her husband, she could yield her own will cheerfully and trustingly ; only—she smiled to herself as she woke up suddenly from her reverie, and felt herself thrown back upon the stern fact, that the being of whom she had been dreaming was not to her knowledge in existence, or likely to be so.

“Mother, dear,”—and she went up to Mrs. Ashton, and took from her the flowers she had been collecting,—“had we not better put these into the house, and then go and hurry John and Selina? We shall be late home else.” Mrs. Ashton looked at her watch:—“So we shall, I declare ; it’s past four ;—just go and call them, my dear.”—“Won’t you come too, mother?” Katharine was beginning to fear that she might gain the character of a mar-

plot if she came in their way often. Mrs. Ashton walked towards the front of the house.—“I wonder what they are at.—Just see how John is striding up and down.”—“Measuring, I suppose,” said Katharine; “but it can’t be a flower-bed.”—No, it was not a flower-bed, but a greenhouse;—a greenhouse which might be built on close to the parlour, and might be heated by a flue from the parlour chimney, and might be put up for twenty pounds, and in fact would make the place quite another thing,—quite a genteel country-house, as Selina observed. “A greenhouse, and a farm-yard, Selly, how absurd!” and Katharine laughed heartily one moment, and grew quite serious the next. Mistake the third! Poor Katharine! how often she was to repent that day of her hasty words. Neither John nor Selina deigned to reply to her, but went on planning and talking, as if the idea was the most feasible possible, till Mrs. Ashton insisted upon their going round the farm-yard, if they meant to go at all, since she was determined not to keep her husband waiting for his tea. Selina was too tired then to move a step further, and proposed to wait in the parlour whilst the rest walked round. John offered his arm to his mother, and told Katharine not to keep behind. He seemed now to like having them with him; perhaps he felt that the farm-yard and the farm-buildings were more to their taste than Selina’s. He talked a great deal of his schemes, and of what he hoped Colonel Forbes would do for him in the course of a year or two, and how many labourers would be required, and how he should pay them; and as Katharine listened with interest, he grew quite affectionate in his manner, and promised her that she should come and be his bailiff when she was tired of the shop; and Katharine, in the simple confidence of her own affections, thought

herself more wicked than ever, because she had been jealous. She did not perceive that "I," not "Thou," was still, as it had always been, the first person of importance in John's mind.

The horse had been put up in the farm-stable. John went to find the man who had taken it from him; but he had gone away, and only a stupid carter's boy was left about the place. John gave his orders that the horse should be put in, and the chaise brought round to the front door, and then returned to Selina, from whom he had already, in his own opinion, been an unconscionably long time absent. She was engaged in discussing with Mrs. Ashton and Katharine what colour would be best for the furniture of the parlour and drawing-room; and John joined willingly in the conversation, and did not notice, as Katharine did, that the business of putting the horse into the carriage took double the time that was necessary. The chaise came to the door at last, and they all seated themselves; and John took the whip in his hand, and with a munificent air tossed sixpence to the boy and drove off. "The chaise shakes a great deal, Kitty," said Mrs. Ashton, as they turned into the lane. "I never knew anything go so oddly."—"Only the ruts, mother," replied Katharine; "John will do more wisely in spending his money in mending the road than in building a greenhouse."—"Hey? yes, what did you say?" asked Mrs. Ashton, looking anxiously over the side of the carriage. "It does go very oddly; John, what is the matter with the horse?"—"Nothing, mother, only it is a desperate road. I declare the Colonel is a fortunate man in having his farm taken with such a break-neck drive to it. Now, take care of yourselves, hold fast," and down went one wheel into a deep rut; and heavily, and with a very strange movement, the horse dragged the chaise on a few yards, while John looked over

into the road as his mother had done; and then bent forward to glance at the harness; and as the figure of a man crossed the high road at the further end of the lane, called out, "Holloa! come here, will you, my good fellow."—"It's Charles Ronaldson," said Katharine, laughing; "he won't know you, if you call him good fellow."—"He is a good fellow, I hope," said John; "he will be a good fellow to us if he helps out of this mess.—Here, Selly, take the reins;" and he stopped the horse and jumped out to overtake Charles, who had not heard his call. "What's the matter, John? John, what's the matter? Oh! he's going on," screamed Selina. "Of course he is," said Katharine quietly; "you have dropped the reins." Selina put up her hands to her eyes, and before Katharine could speak again there was a great jerk, and down came both the horse and the chaise, and Mrs. Ashton, Selina, and Katharine were thrown out upon the bank at the side of the road. Selina lay upon the ground crying out in piteous accents that she was killed, and Mrs. Ashton seemed at first doubtful of the same fact; but they were neither of them in as bad a condition as Katharine, who had fallen under them, and bruised her arm against a stone. Even she, however, was not materially hurt, and when Charles Ronaldson and John came up to them she was quite ready to laugh at her own share in the misfortune, and help to quiet the nerves of Mrs. Ashton and Selina. The chaise was the chief object of attention, even to John; it was much scratched, and one of the wheels was broken. This was a most uncomfortable story to carry back to his future father-in-law, and poor John looked not a little disturbed in his mind. Selina, however, had no share in the blame; it was all laid to the charge of the stupid carter's boy, who had pretended, John said, to

harness the horse when he knew no more about it than he did of catching a rhinoceros. The horse was raised with the assistance of Charles Ronaldson, and then it was agreed that the chaise should be taken to the farm and left there till it was settled what should be done with it, whilst the horse was to be led into Rilworth; and so, after a little delay in dragging back the chaise to Moorlands, the procession set off, John leading the horse, and Selina walking by his side, whilst Charles joined Mrs. Ashton and Katharine.

It was not a very long walk, and but for the misadventure it would have been a very pleasant one. Charles was not as shy now as he had been when last they met; the downfall of the chaise had broken the ice; and they talked about Moorlands, and Maplestead, and Colonel Forbes, and Jane, and the district, and the Miss Ronaldsons, so that there was no lack of subjects for discourse. Katharine still, however, had the larger share in the conversation; not because she wished it, but because she could not help it. When Charles did say anything, it seemed always with a view to bringing out her opinions and feelings rather than expressing his own. He was chiefly communicative upon the subject of his aunts, of whom he seemed particularly fond, quite strangely so, as Mrs. Ashton afterwards remarked, for a young man. "They were such good people," he said, "so thoroughly religious and kind-hearted, and had done so much for him; he should never have been in the position he then was if it had not been for them."—"I thought the Duke of Lowther had been your great friend, Mr. Ronaldson," said Katharine.—"My largest friend; I don't know that I can say my greatest, except in a worldly sense. I don't mean that he has not helped me far beyond what I could possibly have

expected; but there are some favours which can only be conferred by relations—which we can only accept from relations. Don't you understand that, Miss Ashton?"—"Yes," said Katharine, "that is, I think I do; but I don't know much about receiving favours except from my father and mother."—"It is something to learn in life," said Charles thoughtfully, "and it takes a long time to learn it; but it was never difficult with my aunts, even when at one time, before my father's affairs were settled, they gave my mother and me a home, and shared their small income with us. The obligation was never painful. Favours bestowed from affection, Miss Ashton, are very different from favours bestowed from duty."—"That must have been twelve years ago that you were living with them, Charlie," said Mrs. Ashton; "you must not mind my calling you 'Charlie,' it comes so natural."—"I should be very sorry if it did not," he replied. "As one grows older, one's Christian-name becomes much more valuable, because one only hears it from old friends."—"I don't like being called by my Christian-name unless people know me very well indeed," said Katharine; "and I never can bear it's being done unless I am asked first."—"I can't fancy any person's calling you by your Christian-name without asking," said Charles, "unless"——He paused.—"Unless what?" asked Katharine.—"Unless it were to come out without their meaning it—knowing it, that is; should you be very angry then?" His voice had sunk into that deep under tone which Katharine had once before remarked. It frightened her a little; it made her think she did not understand him, and yet he seemed very simple and plain in all he said. "I should be angry with anything I thought a liberty," she said. "I learnt that from my mother. Don't you remember, mother, telling

me one day that I was not to let George Andrews go on calling me Katharine to my face? It was very awkward stopping him, but I did manage it. I think it was by saying something which came round to him.—Oh! I remember, I said to Selina Fowler that it was not like a gentleman; and he took the hint directly, for he can't bear not being considered a gentleman.”—“He is a very good-natured young man,” said Mrs. Ashton; “I don't know any one who takes a hint better.”—“Then he must be the essence of good-nature,” exclaimed Katharine; “I can bear anything said plainly, but I can't endure hints.”—“Neither can I,” said Charles quietly. “Miss Ashton, if I ever have anything to say to you, will you promise to forgive me if I say it very openly.” Katharine was thrown back again into awe, his manner was so very strange; but she rallied herself to reply, “Oh, yes, say anything in the world you choose; I can bear a good deal, can't I, mother, dear? when,” she added, laughing, “it is put in the way I like.”—“Only not what you would call a liberty,” said Charles.—“I don't think I should be likely to call anything you would say a liberty,” replied Katharine simply. He turned very pale. Katharine scarcely heard the words, “Thank you.”—“Kate is very good in the way of bearing things,” observed Mrs. Ashton. “There are not many young girls in Rilworth that would submit to be kept in order like her, but that was the good early teaching of Miss Richardson. I must say that for her, she made all her girls obedient if she did nothing else.”—“But she did a great deal else,” observed Katharine; “half the good—that is, if I have any good—I mean half the notions I have of what I should wish to be—came from Miss Richardson. She was so honest-hearted, mother, was not she? and she did all she did

so thoroughly. I remember when as a child I used to go to church and hear about a straight and narrow way to Heaven, I always used to fancy that I saw it a long distance before me, with a bright light at the end, and that Miss Richardson was walking along it; and I used to long so that I could get into it like her and never wander out again." Charles Ronaldson was silent. They had reached the turn-pike-gate at Rilworth, and there his road home separated from Katharine's. "Won't you come and drink tea with us, Charlie?" asked Mrs. Ashton. "Mr. Ashton would be most glad to see you."—"Thank you, thank you;—no, thank you; not to-night, I am engaged." He shook hands and hurried away, and then turned back to say, "You will go and see my aunts sometimes, I hope, Miss Ashton;" but he did not wait for a reply.

"Such a very strange person!" said Katharine; "but, mother, I like him better, I think, than any one else in Rilworth; only I never know what he means."

CHAPTER XIX.

KATHARINE saw a good deal of Charles Ronaldson after that day. She met him often at his aunts', and he and John grew rather intimate, and frequently went over to Moorlands together to talk about farm matters, with which Charles was much better acquainted than John; and this was an excuse for his coming back to drink tea, and have a little more conversation with Mr. Ashton. Katharine liked his being there, though she did not feel, as the phrase is, "that she got on with him." She never could quite prevent a certain feeling of awe; and this feeling increased as she knew more of him.

When his shyness was overcome, and he brought out his opinions boldly, he struck her more and more as being something unlike other people,—in a degree superior to them. He had a way of putting things upon high grounds, suggesting high motives, which sometimes actually surprised her,—it was so unlike what she was accustomed to hear. He did not agree with her father and John in a great many things, and she sometimes wondered that he could choose to be as much with them as he was. At last it crossed her mind that perhaps he liked to be with her; that was after he had stayed very late one evening, when Selina Fowler was drinking tea with them also, and Selina had laughed at her, and put the notion into her head; and though Katharine was angry at the time, she could not in a moment put aside the thought. But she did her best, and lectured herself most heartily and sincerely, and remembered how silly she should think such fancies in any one else. As for attentions, Charles Ronaldson never scarcely showed her any; there was not really any ground for the idea beyond Selina's folly; and Katharine being determined to treat the disease rationally, as she thought, would not allow herself to be at all shy, or awkward, or in any way self-conscious, which had been her first impulse; but resolved to go and see the Miss Ronaldsons that very day, as she had promised, before Selina had teased her, and not to think whether or not she should meet Charles there; and if he came in in the evening, she determined to talk to him just the same as usual. Only one thing she resolved to be careful about, she would never put herself in the power of Selina's gossip, nor that of any other person.

She had once or twice lately met Charles at his aunts', and he had walked home with her. This

should not be again,—not for his sake, nor for hers ; the action she felt sure was as indifferent to him as it was to her, but she would not have her own name bandied about from one to the other, and she could not in justice allow his to be so either. Happily he was going to leave Rilworth in another month, to enter upon his regular business, and then nothing more could by any possibility be said.

Her district business was now proceeding in regular train, and so far it was less burdensome. She knew generally what she had to do, and could arrange how it was to be done ; but it was oppressive to her in many ways, which she had not calculated upon. It opened her eyes to so much evil, so much irremediable suffering ; and, notwithstanding Mr. Reeves' assurance that the great responsibility rested upon him, and not upon her, she could not give herself the relief which he intended to offer. Certainly he was the clergyman, and answerable for the spiritual welfare of his people—he was the person bound to advise and direct ; and she might and indeed would, be going out of her province in attempting anything of the kind. But Mr. Reeves could not be everywhere at all times ; work as hard as he and his curate could, it was impossible, with such a parish upon their hands, to enter minutely into the affairs of every family ; and there were cases of over-indulged children, and careless mothers, and vain, flighty daughters continually brought before Katharine's notice, which she did not in the least know how to deal with. Poor people told her their stories, and seemed to think, that because she could give them district tickets, therefore she could help them in their other needs ; and now and then, if the matter was very trifling, she ventured to give an opinion ; and at other times it seemed advisable to go and talk to Mr.

Reeves. But Mr. Reeves was often out, often excessively engaged with business which could not possibly be put aside. Katharine made the experiment two or three times; but when she had said what she had to say, the difficulty brought before him seemed so trifling, that she was ashamed of herself for having troubled him with it. He told her one day that she must learn to give an independent opinion in small matters; and she knew what he meant. He certainly had not time to decide every question that might arise in every household in Rilworth, and yet the point must be settled, and the responsibility must rest upon the person who helped to settle it; and so Katharine was thrown back upon herself and her own judgment, and her conscience was troubled, and her mind perplexed. Her mother was an assistance to her in some ways. Mrs. Ashton had a good deal of worldly sense naturally, and she had, moreover, the experience of fifty years to guide her, and in cases simply involving prudence and ordinary judgment she could direct Katharine very usefully; but she did not understand any of the more refined or abstruse difficulties which sometimes came in Katharine's way; and for these she most frequently applied to the Miss Ronaldsons. They had worked for years amongst the poor in a country parish, where the clergyman had not been at all active. They could understand, therefore, the feelings of the poor; and this was Katharine's great need. Very often she did not know what to say, or if she knew, she could not tell how to say it. Little suggestions even, as to the treatment of invalids,—giving fresh air,—keeping them quiet,—were difficulties to Katharine, because she did not know how far she might venture to interfere; and if it came to the point of telling a mother that she ought to

send her boys to school, or keep her daughters at home, she would worry herself for several days, because she was not quite certain whether it was her business to advise. If she might have contented herself with giving out district tickets, and changing tracts, her work would have been easy; but Katharine was beginning to open her eyes to the fact, that we cannot, even if we would, escape the necessity of influencing our fellow creatures, either for good or for evil; and life was in consequence becoming more serious and oppressive. It was a comfort though to feel that she was gaining experience, and so it was to be hoped improving. Notwithstanding her dread of interference, she might have begun too boldly, even from her very dread of being a moral coward, but for a hint from Miss Ronaldson, who said one day, in her very kind voice, when Katharine had been complaining of some rudeness she had experienced:—"You see, my dear, what the poor people want is friendliness, and we cannot become friends all of a sudden; except, you know, when people have known about each other very long, as Prissy and I knew you. After a time, they will come to know you, and the look of your face will be natural to them, and then they will take better what you have to say; but I don't think English poor people ever fancy having folks coming into their cottages, and giving them advice suddenly. At least that was what Prissy and I found when we lived in the country; didn't we, Prissy?" Katharine acted upon this suggestion, and tried to make herself, as Miss Ronaldson said, "natural," before she took upon herself, even in a slight degree, the office of an adviser.

Mr. Reeves also gave her very substantial comfort, though it was more for the general practice of life, than for any particular occasion. He called

one day with his wife and found Katharine grave and almost out of spirits; the cares of the district were pressing upon her, so that she was almost tempted to give up her work, and own it a failure. "She was sure," she said, "that she did no good; the people took advantage of her, and deceived her. The little she could give in the way of money would be given just the same, whether she had the district or not; and her mother would be very glad to provide broth or pudding occasionally, as she had been accustomed to do lately; but she was sure it required a more experienced person to undertake such a duty, and therefore when Mrs. Forbes came home she could not help thinking it would be better to give up her share, and trust that some one else would be found who knew better what to do." Mr. Reeves listened very patiently whilst Katharine said this, and then asked her whether she was in earnest. "Quite," was Katharine's reply; "that is," she added, with her usual candour, "quite earnest in wishing it, though I don't know that I should entirely like to do it." Mr. Reeves smiled. "Do you know, Miss Ashton, I have had the same thoughts in my mind lately about my clerical duties?" Katharine stared. "Yes," he said, "I feel myself utterly incompetent; notwithstanding my long experience, I am constantly failing, and making blunders. I really see very little fruit from my labours, and therefore it is natural to conclude that I am unfitted for my office, and shall do better to resign it."—"But,—but," Katharine hesitated, and was very much afraid of being impertinent. "Pray say what is in your mind," he continued.—"I don't quite see, sir, how a clergyman can give give up his office."—"Once a clergyman always a clergyman, you mean?" he replied. "Precisely the difficulty which stops me."

Katharine looked relieved. "Then you are not going to leave Rilworth, sir?"—"Not just yet, I only mentioned my feelings that you might understand I could sympathise with yours." There was a lurking smile upon his lips, which puzzled Katharine extremely. "If I were a clergyman," she said, "I should know that I could not give up my duties." The smile vanished, and Mr. Reeves became serious in an instant. "And though you are not a clergyman, my dear Miss Ashton, are you really more at liberty? There is not indeed the same solemn vow binding you down, but there is an equally clear outward call,—the solemn ordering of Providential circumstances, which have placed you in your present position, led you to your work, opened the way for it, put you in the way of beginning it."—"Yes, if I were fitted for it," said Katharine.—"Then it is in your power to change the hearts of your fellow creatures; you can yourself make them all that they ought to be?"—"No, no," exclaimed Katharine, "it is exactly that which troubles me,—that I cannot do so."—"Neither can I," said Mr. Reeves; "I may preach, and talk, and labour from morning till night, and from night till morning, but I can do nothing. Yet you tell me I should do wrong in giving up my work."—"Yes," said Katharine, thoughtfully, "I see; one's failings ought not to dishearten one so much."—"No; and if we were thoroughly humble, thoroughly imbued with a sense of our own helplessness, they would not do so. It is the one great lesson of the Bible, especially of the Old Testament, that means are nothing. It is taught us continually in the history of the Judges, and the Kings; and in the most striking way. The prayer of Asa is a prayer for us in every undertaking." Katharine did not at the moment recollect the prayer of Asa,

but she determined to look for it when Mr. Reeves was gone. "You must go on with your work, cheerfully and hopefully, my dear Miss Ashton," continued Mr. Reeves, in a lighter tone; "not troubling yourself with how much you do but in what way you do it; making up your mind to commit blunders, and to see little or no fruit; remembering that, if you were to give up your district at once, and never again to take upon yourself such a burden, the responsibility would not be one iota lessened, but rather a thousand-fold increased. It is what I long to make the people of Rilworth feel," he continued. "The excuse meets me at every turn, with regard to district visiting, and the schools, and the duties of sponsors, and numberless other claims of the kind. Again and again people say to me, 'I would, but I am afraid of the responsibility—I am not competent;' as if we were any of us competent! Depend upon it, if we will take the burden, which God in His Providence brings us, He will bear it for us; if we will not take it, it will one day fall upon us and crush us." — "But there are a good many district visitors," said Katharine. "Not as many as are wanted," replied Mr. Reeves; "the districts are a great deal too large, that is one reason why they are so burdensome. And then we want men; and they are much more difficult to find than women—they have more regular, daily employment, and I am afraid very often they have not quite the same spirit. Young Ronaldson is the only volunteer we have had since I have been here. I think I am correct, my dear," he added, turning to his wife. "Yes, the others belonged to the society before," replied Mrs. Reeves; "but he has been an incalculable help; unfortunately, he will be going soon."—"He is an example of what I want to make others see," continued Mr. Reeves, "that it is right to do whatever we can

without nice calculations as to time and the power of continuance.”—“When Ronaldson offered himself to me as a visitor in Pebble-street—which I need not say to you, Miss Ashton, is the worst street in Rilworth—all his plans and prospects were uncertain—he knew that he might be called away at any moment ; but he heard that the street was left, that in fact it was so bad no one would undertake it, and he came to me and told me exactly how he was circumstanced, and said he could not promise to give up any amount of time, because he had other duties to be considered ; but he offered to do what he could.”—“And that has been quite as much, if not more, than any one else,” said Mrs. Reeves.—“Yes, and the advantage is, that he has paved the way for others ; the street is a bad street, and will remain bad, I fear ; but some of the very worst evils have been removed, and the next person who may have it will have comparatively a light task. I really know no one whose help I have valued more than Charles Ronaldson’s,” he continued. “It was just one of those cases in which a man might have made such a fair excuse to himself for doing nothing ; actually not an inhabitant of the town,—here only for a time,—for his mother only took lodgings in Rilworth till his London plans were fixed—all his prospects at a distance, and really feeling the necessity of studying for his business. I am sure I never should have blamed him for refusing to assist me ; in fact, it never entered my head that it would be right to ask him.” It was very pleasant to Katharine to hear this praise ; it made her feel that she was right in liking Charles Ronaldson better than anyone else in Rilworth ; but it rather increased her awe of him. She wondered also how it was she had never heard of his having a district, till she recollected that his name was not down in the last printed report,

and that he himself was not likely to mention the circumstance.

“And now,” said Mrs. Reeves, “having given you a lecture upon the subject of duties, I hope, Miss Ashton, that Mr. Reeves is going to propose himself the business which was partly our object in calling upon you to-day. I really feel he ought to do it.”—Katharine’s heart sank. Was she to be made superintendent of the Sunday-school? Or what other overpowering dignity was to be thrust upon her?—“Can you cover books,” said Mr. Reeves, bluntly.—Katharine looked surprised.—“I hope so, sir; I don’t know that there is anything very difficult in it.”—“But can you cover a great many books?” said Mrs. Reeves, laughing; “little troublesome books—and can you go on working a whole evening?”—“Without once leaving off and saying your fingers ache?” added Mr. Reeves.—Katharine could not quite promise, but she said she had had a good deal of practice.—“Just the very thing,” said Mr. Reeves. “Then will you come and drink tea with us to-morrow evening, and help Mrs. Reeves and your fellow-labourers in the Rilworth districts to cover and mark a large set of new tracts, and some volumes for the lending library?”—“Yes, indeed,” Katharine said, with a bright smile; “she should like it very much indeed. At what hour should she come?”—“At seven, if that will suit you,” replied Mrs. Reeves; “and please bring with you the largest and least spoilable pair of scissors you possess.”—“And remember,” said Mr. Reeves, “that you are to be very grateful to me for providing you with the tracts. I have heard nothing but complaints of the old ones for the last three months.”—“And not quite undeserved, my dear,” said Mrs. Reeves. “A great many of them are uncommonly dry, and all wonderfully dirty.” Mr. Reeves laughed

“It was Mrs. Forbes who put you up to that,” he replied. “She always read her tracts, which I am quite sure you never do.”—“Then we shall have the pleasure of seeing you to-morrow at seven,” said Mrs. Reeves, shaking hands with Katharine. “And don’t let your father and mother scold us for taking you away from them,” added Mr. Reeves. “Will you, now I think of it, ask your father if he has had any tidings of the book I asked him to get for me? He promised he would be on the look out for it, and I have been intending to call every day and hear if he had received any tidings of it.”—“And pray tell Mrs. Ashton,” said Mrs. Reeves, that she need not trouble about your returning home at night, because there will be two or three of our party coming from your part of the town.”—Again there was a cordial good-bye; but Mr. Reeves could not help returning to say: “I don’t know, Miss Ashton, whether you have heard a name which our friends on the opposite side of the Atlantic sometimes give to joint working parties — I heard it from a cousin of mine who had been a good deal among them—they call them ‘Bees.’ So now I give you a formal invitation to a Parish Bee, and remember you are punctual.

CHAPTER XX.

KATHARINE was quite punctual. She entered Mr. Reeves’ drawing-room exactly as the town-clock struck seven. Yet she was not the first arrival. Betsy Carter was there before her, and very busy, so it seemed, for the books and tracts were laid upon the table, and she was sorting them. Katharine

doubted, however, afterwards, whether it was not a self-imposed task; for Mr. Reeves, after shaking hands with her, turned round, and said with a very little impatience of manner: "Thank you, Miss Carter, for troubling yourself with those books, but I think I understand their arrangement best as they are."—Miss Carter left the books; but she wanted extremely to find out whether there was a sufficient quantity of coarse brown paper provided, and insisted upon knowing whether Katharine had brought her scissors. She appeared thoroughly at home, and evidently did not seem to think it in the least necessary to say "sir," to Mr. Reeves. Katharine disliked her more than ever, and was quite glad when some more arrivals threw her into the background. They were to have tea first in the dining-room; but it was not quite ready, so there was about a quarter of an hour's conversation beforehand. Katharine felt a little stiff for a few minutes, and sat up in a corner, and said nothing; but she found herself drawn out by degrees. Every one talked about districts and poor people — that was natural, — but then all had the same interests, so it did not signify; and Mr. Reeves managed cleverly to lead them away from the state of Rilworth to that of other places, and thence to the position of the country at large; till by degrees the conversation ceased to be local, and became so interesting, that Katharine was quite sorry when tea was announced. She went down stairs last, and happened to sit next to Mr. Reeves; and he pursued the subject, and asked her if she had ever read any account of the state of the poor in France before the great Revolution. Katharine coloured, and felt extremely awkward. Very little of her time was given to reading, except when she read out a novel to her mother. She had learnt about the

French Revolution when she was at school ; but the details had quite passed away from her mind. Betsy Carter, however, knew a great deal about it, and talked very learnedly, and gave it as her opinion that the French Revolution was clearly marked out in the Book of Revelations ; an observation which Mr. Reeves allowed to drop without notice. Books, however, were evidently his favourite topic, and when he found that Katharine did not say much about them, he addressed himself to the Miss Lockes, who were also near him. Katharine was very much amused in listening to what was said. The Miss Lockes were both well informed and well bred, and so were the two elderly brown ladies, the Miss Tracys, opposite to them ; and at times, when any book was mentioned which was universally popular, the conversation became quite general. Katharine did not feel herself as ignorant when story books were named as she did when there was an allusion to history ; but she could not venture to say much, though Mr. Reeves made several attempts to draw her out.—“ I suppose you have not much time for reading,” he said at length.—“ Not much, sir,” was the answer. “ I read books from the library sometimes to my mother.”—“ And you have a very fair choice there,” said Mr. Reeves ; “ I don’t know a better circulating library anywhere than Mr. Ashton’s, he has so many books of a better stamp than novels.”—“ I think I read most of the novels,” said Katharine, candidly ; “ my mother likes them best.”—“ I shall quarrel with you if you do that,” said Mr. Reeves, good-naturedly. “ You should take example from my friend here, Miss Locke, who studies everything from algebra downwards.”—“ Study would be very nice, I dare say, if one had a good deal of time for it,” said Katharine.—“ And it is very nice when one has very little time for it,”

replied Mr. Reeves : “ especially if a person wants to be useful, which I am sure you do.”—“ But reading about the French Revolution will not help to make me useful, though it may be very interesting,” said Katharine.—“ I should like to argue that point with you,” said Mr. Reeves, lightly ; “ but my tracts will never have their new covers if we begin now, so I shall leave you to your work, and look in again upon you by-and-by.”—He retreated to his study, and the rest of the party went up stairs again. Tea had made every one sociable ; and as they all drew round the table, with the blazing fire, and the bright lamp lighting up the room, Katharine thought they were a very comfortable party, and wonderfully at home, considering how very little they knew of each other. Mrs. Reeves suggested what each was to do. It was evident that she was an orderly person, and had planned it all beforehand, for there was no time lost in discussion ; and when the division of labour was made, she proposed to read out whilst the work went on, and at once brought out a light book of travels ; and in this way the business of the evening proceeded. It was all very odd to Katharine—it seemed extremely like playing at work ; but there was something pleasant in it, cheerful, and hearty ; and she felt drawn in a manner towards those who were working with her, much more so than she could ever have been to Matty Andrews, or the Miss Maddens, if she had visited them every evening for a month. The work took a longer time than could have been expected. Mrs. Reeves read till she was tired ; so did Miss Locke, and one of the Miss Tracys ; and then Mrs. Reeves proposed that they should have some music, and went herself to the piano, and sang. Katharine enjoyed that extremely. She had a quick ear for music, and could play a

little herself, but she had never practised much since she left school, and had not often an opportunity of hearing good music. One of the Miss Lockes also sang nicely, and she and Mrs. Reeves tried some duets together; and then Mr. Reeves, hearing the music going on, came in, and there was some more conversation about music in general, and the church music; and Mr. Reeves suggested a plan for making the school children practise better; and two or three of the persons present engaged to meet at the church, once a week, to practise with them. Katharine felt strongly that she was in an atmosphere of usefulness, and it suited her active mind much better than any other. But it was not a kind of society which every one would enjoy; Selina, for instance, would have been quite out of her element in it. The party broke up about half-past nine. Katharine was to walk home with the Miss Lockes, who lived at the bottom of High-street. She was ready before them, and waited in the drawing-room whilst they were putting on their bonnets, and talking to Mrs. Reeves in another room. Mr. Reeves was with her, and, rather to Katharine's alarm, renewed the conversation about books, by offering to lend her the volume of travels they had been reading, if she would like to have it. "I should like to think you were a reading person," he said; "it would save you a good deal of pain in life."—"And make me useful?" said Katharine.—"Yes, help very much—a great deal more than you think—to make you useful. I wish you would begin to read." Katharine laughed. "I should like it, sir, if I had books, and time, and——" "Oh! but make time," interrupted Mr. Reeves; "real readers always make time."—"How?" asked Katharine.—"In the same way that every one makes time for what he likes. It is an instinct, to be proved

by experience, not by rule. And, my dear Miss Ashton, if you don't begin now, you never will do so."—"Not when I am old and infirm, and have nothing else to do?" said Katharine. "No, indeed. There is no taste more difficult to acquire, and no habit more easily lost, than that of reading. Begin early, and it will be a blessing to you through life; neglect it, and you may spend weeks, and months, and even years, of helpless old age, longing that you could care for books, and yet unable to take an interest in them."—"But you must not think I never read," said Katharine; "I do very often read to my mother; and now and then I do in the evening to my father, only he falls asleep generally."—"But that kind of desultory reading is not what I mean," said Mr. Reeves. "Really sensible, useful reading is what I want to see you, and many like you, taking delight in; history, biography, travels, and of course religious reading,—but that I don't think you are so likely to omit."—"Persons like me," said Katharine, "think so much of household duties, that it seems almost out of place, and not exactly a waste of time, but something very like it, to spend our leisure in what can be of so very little importance to us."—"Yet you—I don't mean you individually—think it no waste of time to learn a little French, and a little music, and to make beautiful figures in coloured worsteds, and all those wonderful ins and outs with crooked needles, which are so much the fashion." Katharine laughed. "I dare say it is very ignorant of me not to know the advantage of such occupations," continued Mr. Reeves; "but you must own that they are not more decidedly useful—since you insist so much upon that point—than reading history."—"I quite think the reading history would be much more agreeable, and much more profitable than worsted work and crochet,"

replied Katharine; "but really I scarcely ever do either."—"I quite believe you; I am sure you are an excellent housekeeper, and keep your father's accounts, and make his shirts, and do everything which people say our grandmothers used to do; and I should be the very last person to suggest putting a stop to any of these things. All I beg for is, that if there should be a few leisure moments in the course of the day they may be devoted to regular reading,—what, perhaps, I may call study,—and not merely to amusement. I should like to think that you had always some sensible book in hand; that when one was finished, another was begun. I will tell you one reason why I am so earnest upon this point," he continued, becoming more grave; "it will not perhaps at once approve itself to your mind, but I think you will enter into it when you have thought it over. There is an immense impetus given to education now amongst the lower classes,—they are treading very fast upon the heels of those immediately above them. National education has done this, whether wisely or unwisely I will not pretend to say; but if we wish to keep society in its proper state, we must not let those who are below us in outward circumstances rise above us in intellect and information. If they do they will naturally rebel against our superiority, and desire to take our place. As an instance, in a town like Rilworth a great deal of the work must be done by the help of persons like yourself, very much engaged in daily business, but willing to spare a little time to the poor. Sunday-school work is almost entirely carried on in this way; but it requires more than a good heart to be a really good Sunday-school teacher. There must be thought, and study, and acquaintance with history, and the manners and customs of foreign countries; for though it did very

well in former days to go through a mere routine of lessons, it will not do now. Children whose intellects have been worked during the week will also require a stimulus to their attention on the Sunday ; but I cannot say myself that I know many people able to give it, though I have most kind and useful helpers in the school." Katharine looked puzzled and frightened—the idea was beyond her ; and Mr. Reeves saw it, and said, "Perhaps I ought not to have troubled you with a reason of that kind, which principally concerns myself. You must not think I want you to study and become a learned person, in order to seize upon you for my Sunday-school. I was only speaking generally, and perhaps, even more with a view to large manufacturing towns, than to Rilworth particularly. But for yourself alone, I am sure you would find that anything which strengthens and enlarges your mind, as steady reading does and must, will also help to fit you for the daily duties of life, and make you more prepared for any position in which it may please God to place you. The very effort which thoughtful reading requires is an inestimable benefit. May I give you the book of travels?" he added, with a smile, as Mrs. Reeves and the Miss Lockes entered the room. Katharine could only say, "Thank you very much, sir," and tell Mrs. Reeves, as she wished her good night, that she had had a very pleasant evening.

"We shall triumph over the Union Ball, now, my dear," said Mr. Reeves to his wife, as he sat down by the fireside, when the party had dispersed, and looked complacently round the room. "There is more unity in covering tracts than in dancing the polka together. Unity in work, not in play, that I suspect is the secret."—"Only it is such a very small amount of unity," replied Mrs. Reeves.

“Never mind, it is a beginning; and even if it should never extend further, it is founded on a sure principle, and therefore must last, and have influence.”—“The difficulty is, that unity in work must be exclusive,” said Mrs. Reeves; “people may dance together, whatever principles they hold, but they cannot work. You could not, for instance, have asked dissenters to help you in arranging church tracts.”—“But is there any real unity where there is not exclusiveness?” said Mr. Reeves. “Look at the ordering of Providential arrangements with regard to families, nations, and even the Christian church. Can anything be more exclusive?—Real unity involves unity of feeling,” he continued, after a pause; “feeling is dependent upon principles of faith and practice; principles upon truth; and truth is in its very nature exclusive. I grant you that we cannot ask dissenters to help us in our work; but neither can they ask us; and so we may agree to differ; and in that very agreement we shall find a certain amount of unity, because each will be upholding principles which are honestly believed to be truth.”—“You will never, I am afraid, find any mere worldly people join with you in your theory of unity,” observed Mrs. Reeves.—“Of course not; but then I shall not expect it. You cannot make worldly people one; because, in order to be so, they must move round one common centre; whilst, being what they are, the centre of each is self; therefore there are as many centres as there are individuals.”—“And yet, when one thinks of it, this does not seem to be quite the case always,” replied Mrs. Reeves. “Consider how men of all ranks and all characters, good and bad, unite on certain occasions,—elections, for instance; or even, as one may see every day in a town like Rilworth, when any public work is to be done.”—

“Exactly so; but that is just what I say, they unite for work, and they have, for the time, a common centre of interest. Such unity is true, and legitimate, and useful. The misfortune is, that it cannot last, because, when the object is accomplished, the feeling of unity will die away. If, therefore, we wish for lasting unity, we must have a lasting centre, and lasting work. I confess I see it nowhere except in work done for God’s Glory, and the good of His Church. I think St. Paul teaches us something of this kind,” he added, taking up a Bible; and he turned to the fourth chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians, and pointed to the words, “And he gave some apostles; and some prophets; and some evangelists; and some pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.” — “Yes,” replied Mrs. Reeves, when he had finished reading; “and if the persons you collect together were all simple and good, like Mrs. Forbes and Katharine Ashton, it might be easy enough to produce a feeling of unity, by making them work for a common object. But when one finds forward, pushing people, like Miss Carter, one involuntarily shrinks back.” — “We must take people as they are. There is a great deal of good about Miss Carter, in spite of her forwardness; and if we can work upon that, we may hope by-and-by that the worldly taint which makes her forward will diminish. When people are thoroughly Christian, they become also thoroughly well-bred. They see that God no more intends outward distinctions to be done away with, because, in His sight we are one, than He does that we

should all be equally rich, because we are equally mortal.”—“Then you don’t think Miss Carter will be angry with us because we do not ask her to a regular dinner party?” said Mrs. Reeves.—“She may or may not be; if she is, the fault will be hers, not ours. Regular dinner parties, of which, by-the-by, we have not given one, to the best of my knowledge, for the last twelvemonth, are formalities of the world, to be governed by the rules of the world, like visits, or dress, or any other custom.”—“And balls the same,” said Mrs. Reeves, laughing. Mr. Reeves looked half-annoyed, and half-amused. “I could tell you such absurdities about that ball,” he said; “grave matters, too, which may have grave consequences. There is a complete split, I find, between what are called the Duchess’s party,—young Andrews and his friends, for instance, and the town party; and it is supposed that it will tell considerably on the next election; and that Colonel Forbes will not have half the chance he had; for they say that the grandee supper, as it is called, was his doing.”—“What folly!” exclaimed Mrs. Reeves.—“Yes; but more folly, a thousand times, in those who planned such an absurdity, than in those who carry it out to its natural consequences. Colonel Forbes ought to have known better.”—“I can fancy a man’s making such a mistake,” replied Mrs. Reeves, “because men are accustomed to join with people of every kind in matters of business; and so they may naturally suppose that they would meet just as pleasantly for amusement.”—“He should have consulted a few ladies first,” said Mr. Reeves, with a smile. “Rilworth ladies, who could understand the feeling of the town; and not the Duchess of Lowther, who could know nothing about it. Women are the really difficult people to manage when unity is in question.”—

“Because they are not accustomed to work for a common object, and move round a common centre,” said Mrs. Reeves.—“No; they are essentially individual, and there is really only one principle to unite them.”—“The principle which made us work so diligently to cover your church tracts,” said Mrs. Reeves.—“I hope so. I give you credit for it at least. And now we had better ring for prayers.”

CHAPTER XXI.

DAYS went quickly on, and Katharine began to count how many more must pass before the arrival of Colonel and Mrs. Forbes at Maplestead. Whenever she went with her brother or her father to Moorlands, and this was not unfrequently, she saw something in the way of preparation going on about the house and in the grounds. More gardeners seemed at work, and there were repairs at the lodge, and the chimneys smoked more numerously and constantly, as if the rooms were being well aired. Report said they were to be at home the end of November; but Katharine had heard nothing to be depended upon, and when she had asked once or twice at the Lodge, all the answer she could obtain was, “Can’t say for certain, Miss.” At last, however, a definite idea was given her in the form of a letter from Colonel Forbes to her father, giving an order for some very handsome books, which he wished to have placed in Mrs. Forbes’ morning room before her return on the 8th. There was a pleasant postscript for Katharine in the letter: “If it were not too much trouble, it would be a great satisfaction to Colonel Forbes

if Miss Ashton would be so very kind as to see herself that the books were properly arranged. He should have hesitated to ask the favour, but he believed Miss Ashton would be glad to do anything which might conduce to Mrs. Forbes' pleasure." Katharine's eyes sparkled with delight. Yes, indeed Colonel Forbes was right; she should like nothing better; she would go over that very afternoon. — "Only the books are not ready, my child," said Mr. Ashton, quietly, as he stood by her, holding the open letter in his hand. "So kind of him it is to ask me!" continued Katharine, scarcely hearing what her father said; "I wish he would let me have the whole care of putting her rooms in order for her. Would'nt I work hard!"—"I don't see much kindness, except to himself," said Mr. Ashton: "he wants the books unpacked and put up, and he doesn't like to trust his servants to touch them; that's the long and short of the matter. But, Kitty, you are bewitched with Mrs. Forbes, and the Colonel too, I believe."—"Not the Colonel, father; no, not the Colonel," said Katharine, in a tone of merriment; "only when he asks me to do the very thing I like best."—"But I don't see how you are to be spared from home next week," said Mrs. Ashton; "John was talking to your father and me last night, after you went to-bed,"—"Oh! is that it?" exclaimed Katharine; "I was sure he had something on his mind, by the way he hurried me off to-bed."—"Miss Selly consents to exchange the Miss for Mrs. whenever John chooses," said Mr. Ashton, "and of course John chooses the first day possible, which will be Wednesday week."—"That won't interfere with me," exclaimed Katharine: "Wednesday is the 6th." Then, with rather a vexed smile, she added, "I am glad John was not here to hear me think of myself first; but I do feel,

mother, that he might have told me the day himself.”—“He is a little shy of talking about it with you,” said Mrs. Ashton; “he and Selly both see you don’t half like it.”—“I wish not to show that I don’t, I am sure,” replied Katharine; “and, mother, I really do with all my heart try to think the best of it; and I quite allow Selina is very handsome, and cheerful, and pleasant, when things go smooth; and she is very kind to me always. I am sure there is no reason for me to feel”—the sentence was not finished, for Katharine bit her lip to prevent the awkward rush of feeling which she feared might escape her. “It’s a little hard upon poor John, I must say, Kitty,” observed Mrs. Ashton; “so kind as he has always been to you, and thoughtful too! Only the other day saying that he hoped you would go over to Moorlands whenever you liked; and laughing and saying you should be his bailiff when you were tired of the shop.”—“Did he say that?” exclaimed Mr. Ashton; “then he is a wiser man than I took him for. I would match my Kitty’s common sense against half the experimental farmers in the kingdom, let alone Charlie Ronaldson, who is a quick-witted youth, only rather given to crotchets. Cheer up, Kitty, my child; you shall have a farm of your own to manage one of these days.”—“Thank you, father,” said Katharine, smiling; “and when that happens you shall be my bailiff. But, mother, did John say anything to you about my not liking the marriage?”—“He said he did not like to talk to you about Moorlands,” replied Mrs. Ashton; “and he hinted that Selina thought you looked askance at her.”—“Now, really,” exclaimed Katharine, “that is too bad! I have only been asked to drink tea at the Fowlers’ twice since Selly was engaged, and once then she looked so awkward at introducing me when Miss Lane came in that I thought she

was quite ashamed of me. But, mother, dear, did John say anything else?"—"Nothing that I remember, only whether you would choose to be bridesmaid."—"Of course, I shall," said Katharine; "it is my place; and if I hated the marriage twenty times more than I do, I would not let the world see it."—"Bravely said, Kitty," exclaimed Mr. Ashton, patting her on the shoulder: "if it comes to a fight between you and Miss Selly, remember I back you." Katharine blushed, and looked heartily ashamed of herself. "Oh! father, I do wish I was not so cross; I wish things didn't make me so cross; but,—I won't talk of that though. Mother, do you know what dress the bridesmaids are to wear?"—"And who they are to be?" added Mr. Ashton; "I have not heard that yet."—"Matty Andrews, and Julia Madden, and a cousin of Selly's, and our Kate," replied Mrs. Ashton: "I don't quite know what they have fixed on to wear."—"But I must know to-night or to-morrow," said Katharine; "there will be no time to get the dress made else. I think," she added, in an under tone, "they might have done me the honour of consulting me."—"Well, you had best go and have your quarrel out with Miss Selly," said Mr. Ashton; "I see you are determined to pick a fault in her. I am thankful I am not going to be your sister-in-law, Kitty."—"Indeed, father,"—and Katharine looked very much distressed;—"I do mean to behave kindly, and do all I can to make her and John happy, but you know things are aggravating sometimes."—"Because you women make them so," said Mr. Ashton; "if you had great matters to worry about, you would not trouble yourselves about little ones. What can it signify to you whether you have been consulted about a dress or not, so long as it is ready in time?"—"Nothing, father, nothing;

I was very silly,"—and Katharine shut herself up in close reserve, and determined never again to venture upon the smallest expression of her feelings as to the marriage. Yet it did signify a great deal to her. The neglect might appear trifling to Mr. Ashton, but to Katharine it was another symptom of the unkindness from which she suffered in some manner almost every day. Selina was drawing her brother out of his own family into hers; not perhaps by any premeditated plan,—she had not sense enough for that,—but simply because her pride was great and her will strong. John spent almost every evening at Mr. Fowler's, but Selina made never-ending excuses when it was any question of her drinking tea at Mr. Ashton's. She could find time for a gossiping walk with the Miss Maddens, but she had never a moment to spare for Katharine; and though she would make Katharine useful in working for her, and even allowed her to assist in making up some of the furniture for Moorlands, she scarcely ever asked her opinion upon any point. Katharine was by nature as proud in her way as Selina was in hers: her spirit rebelled against anything like impertinence or neglect. It was only by the greatest effort at self-command that she could refrain from giving quick answers, or making contemptuous remarks. In spite of her best endeavours, the feelings which were so frequently and suddenly excited would occasionally find vent, as they had on that particular occasion; but they were always followed by a bitter repentance. Katharine went to her room now far more angry with herself than she had ever been with Selina, — and yet angry with her too,—and especially pained that her father did not understand her, and her mother did not help her. There was a complete turmoil of conflicting feelings in her breast. She had cause to

complain ; she knew that ; yet, as she said to herself, it was so silly, so wrong, to speak when speaking could do no good, and she had so often resolved not to do it ! It was so weak to break her resolutions in that way ! And, after all, what did she care about being consulted ? It was very little to her whether her dress was to be white, or pink, or blue ; and if her opinion had been asked, it would most probably not have been taken. But Katharine could not reason herself into good-humour ; she had learnt that : all persons with irritable tempers must learn it sooner or later, if they hope to acquire self-command. But she could pray, and she did pray, at first repeating words without being actually able to apply the meaning to them,—her thoughts were so preoccupied, and her feelings so excited,—but becoming gradually calmer as she tried to fix her attention, and at last feeling that the victory was gained, and she could think of Selina charitably, of her father and mother dutifully, and of herself humbly and with sorrow, yet not without a certain consciousness of having been enabled to struggle, and in a measure to conquer, which was a great support to her resolutions.

And then she went out into her district. That was better for Katharine than a sermon. Life there was so real in its suffering, so serious in its events and their consequences, that the trifling worries of a home like hers sank into utter nothingness. The poor shoemaker was dying, his wife nursing him with a despairing hope which would not see the evil that stared her in her face ; and the help that was given could not keep her and her children from heavy privations ; and the past was dreary, and the future at that moment without a ray of light to brighten it. Katharine sat down by the bedside, and heard moans for which she had no

relief, and saw tears which she had no power to dry, and thought with shame of those which she had herself wasted upon the passing annoyances of a moment. And from the shoemaker's she went to another and a smaller cottage, where an only daughter was dying of consumption, killed by hard work and insufficient food; and from thence to a house, respectable in appearance, which was about to be left for a wretched hovel in Briton's-court, because the father of the family had met with an accident, and lost his health and his work; and from thence she visited her first acquaintance, Jemmy Dawes, and listened to his aunt's story of the boy's drunken father, who had brought his wife and the children to ruin; and at last she turned into Woodgate-street, to say a few words to Anne Crossin, the washerwoman, and found her working for her blind husband and her nine children, cheerful, thankful, and hopeful,—and by that time her own lesson of resignation was thoroughly learnt.

The parlour at home was, as it always was after these district visits, a paradise of rest and comfort; and still more resting to Katharine's mind was the volume of travels which Mr. Reeves had lent her, and which she was reading through regularly. She had but one half-hour to devote to it—the half-hour before tea; but Katharine was very methodical in her habits, and when she had made up her mind that the book was to be read, she fixed the time and kept to it. And she was already reaping the benefit, feeling that she was gaining new ideas and enlarging her subjects of thought. Not that it was always easy to read; it was very difficult, indeed, at first, for she had acquired a habit of reading out light books to her mother, without much attention, and it was long since she had applied herself to anything like study. But Katharine, besides being

naturally very intelligent, was blessed with great power of will, strengthened by continual exercise in a right direction. — What she ought to do she felt she could do. Mr. Reeves had told her she ought to cultivate her mind, and she determined that she would do so, first by reading, then by conversation. Katharine found, that when people talked of things they understood, there was a good deal to be gained from conversation. Her father was a very well informed man upon subjects connected with his business, and many others of general interest and there were several persons like him whom she occasionally saw.—It was a pleasant thought that Charles Ronaldson would be drinking tea with them that evening: his conversation was always improving, only Katharine was too much afraid of him to ask questions.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE bridesmaids' dresses were to be pale violet silk, and the bonnets were to be pink satin; and a satin bonnet was Katharine's abhorrence; but she behaved uncommonly well when the unpleasant fact was communicated to her, and only petitioned, rather too urgently since it was all in vain, for a straw bonnet—fancy straw, if necessary,—which might be trimmed with white, and so serve for ordinary occasions. It seemed to Katharine as if she had done nothing but think of, and buy, useless dresses of late. There was the ball dress—the white muslin with the pink sash — lying in her drawer, unthought of; and this dreadful new bonnet was likely, she was sure, to have the same fate. Why did people choose things which could be no

good afterwards? Selina was very little with them now; all her thoughts were of course occupied with preparations; and Katharine could not help contrasting Jane Sinclair's quiet seriousness, when she spoke of the future, and the thoughtful care which could arrange for the comfort of others up to almost the last moment before her marriage, with the whirl of folly and expense in which Selina was involved. But there was no opening for remonstrance; Katharine knew she was looked down upon; and, besides, Selina had an excuse ready for every wish: "She was not likely to be married more than once in her life, and so she had better make the most of the occasion."

Moorlands was beginning to look very comfortable, though there was a good deal still to be done in the way of repairs; but these were chiefly in the outhouses, and could be managed best, John said, after they were settled there; so the ornamental part of the work was attended to first, as being the most pressing. After the wedding it was proposed that John and Selina should spend a fortnight with one of Mrs. Fowler's sisters, who lived at a small watering place about twenty miles from Rilworth; and during that time Mr. Ashton agreed that Moorlands should be made quite ready for them. No one in Mr. Fowler's house talked of anything but the marriage, neither did any one in Mr. Ashton's, except Katharine; and she, though she did not talk, worked, and that most diligently. As far as she could assist in saving John from foolish expense, she was determined she would; and many things which he would have ordered from an upholsterer's were contrived by her and her mother. Selina, too, made her useful as regarded dress; in fact, the last week before the marriage was so fully occupied, that she had no

time for reading, and could not attend to any district business except that which was especially urgent. Katharine found the benefit of all this in its soothing effect upon her own ruffled temper and spirits; whilst she was doing kindnesses, she could not continue to feel unkindly; and John and Selina, and even Mrs. Fowler, were at last aware that Katharine would make a very useful, sensible, good-natured sister-in-law, and, in consequence, began to show her more attention. Mrs. Fowler asked her to drink tea, and said something civil about her to her mother, though it was a little too condescending in style to please Katharine's taste. One thing she was beginning to perceive, and it made the future seem more easy: usefulness was what she was intended for in life, evidently; her quickness in work to be done by the hand, and her quiet, domestic tastes, all tended that way. If, therefore, she wished to do good to John and Selina, or to any one, she must not try to be agreeable to them, or to humour their tastes, and be like them,—she must simply content herself with being useful.

And with this determination to be useful, Katharine put on her violet silk at half-past eight o'clock on the morning of her brother's wedding-day, and went up to Mrs. Fowler's to know how she could best assist everybody. Such a curious contrast the whole thing was to Jane Sinclair's wedding! The comparison was continually in Katharine's mind. Selina so excited, and Mrs. Fowler so bustling! and nothing, as it seemed, to be found in its right place; and not a fourth part of the breakfast preparations ready: Katharine offered to take upon herself that department, and actually went into the dining-room and assisted in putting the dishes upon the table, and twice went up and down the street to fetch things which were wanting

from her own home, putting a shawl though over the new silk, and borrowing an old bonnet of Selina's, that she might not have the little boys pointing at her for a bridesmaid. And then she and Mr. Fowler consulted about the quantity of wine which would be required; and she went with him to the cellar, and stood at the door, and loaded herself with black bottles, and took care that they were properly decanted, all the time feeling that the new silk dress, though she had put an apron over it, was sadly out of place, and would very likely be spoiled. But all was ready at last, and then Katharine went into the drawing-room to meet her violet sisters, Miss Julia Madden and Matty Andrews, and the cousin Constantia, who had arrived the night before, expressly for the occasion, and had just made her appearance from her bed-room; and no one, except Mrs. Fowler, knew that she, like them, was not fresh from an elaborate toilet.

Numerous were the guests; very gay the dresses; very well decked out the carriages and servants. Selina kept them all waiting about twenty minutes, and then appeared veiled and wreathed in true bridal fashion, and looking very handsome, very merry, and very much at her ease; and the party drove off to the church, and as they went up the church-yard a number of little children threw the scattered remains of dying autumnal flowers into the path, and held out their hands for half-pence. And then,—it was a solemn service,—it can never be otherwise; but it seemed to Katharine wonderfully soon over, and in another half-hour she was sitting at Mr. Fowler's breakfast-table, listening to the cheers and speeches in honour of Mr. and Mrs. John Ashton.

A long afternoon that was! It would have been in-

terminable but for the necessity of cutting up wedding cake, in three-cornered slices, and packing it in white paper, and tying together glazed cards with satin ribbon and silver thread. That, happily, was something to do, and the bridesmaids were indefatigable for about an hour ; but after that time their energy began to flag, and at length failed so entirely that Katharine and Mrs. Fowler were left to complete the work, whilst they went home to rest and prepare for the evening party. Katharine folded, and sealed, and directed till five o'clock ; then sat down to dine upon cold mutton with Mr. and Mrs. Fowler, in the back parlour ; then helped to put the drawing-room in order for the evening guests ; then went home to array herself once more in white muslin and a pink sash, came back and danced three country dances, and two quadrilles, and about twelve o'clock walked home with her father and mother, and wished them good night with a yawning ejaculation :—" Oh ! mother, dear, aren't you glad that marriages don't come every day ?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

AND the next business was to go over to Maplestead, to arrange the books for Mrs. Forbes. That was the pleasant thought which suggested itself to Katharine, when, tired with the wedding exertions, she awoke at a late hour the following morning. The books had arrived only the day before, and had been sent over in readiness for her unpacking. There were a good many of them, and Colonel Forbes had written again about them to Mr. Ashton, and expressed a fear that Katharine might find the

task she had undertaken a little troublesome, as he imagined that the books in the morning-room would require a completely new arrangement. But Katharine was not inclined to think anything a trouble which could please Mrs. Forbes, and it so happened that the occupation came just at the right moment, when she was feeling a little jaded, and was suffering from the reaction of a week of excitement, so that common duties would have been rather irksome.

Breakfast was not over till after half-past nine o'clock, and then Katharine attended to all her little household duties, and took care that nothing should be wanting for the comfort of her father and mother during the day, and about eleven set off for her walk. It was a calm, warm, December day—misty, yet with occasional gleams of brightness—almost a remembrance of summer; and Katharine very much enjoyed her quiet walk on the beautiful Maplestead Road. She was tired, but not so much physically as mentally, and the silence and solitude were very refreshing. It would have been a good occasion for thought with many, but Katharine had not yet learnt to think; she was laying up materials by quick observation, but she was as yet too eager, too rapid and interested, in all she did or saw—the world was too vivid a reality to give her much power of real thought; only, at times, there came that sudden questioning,—that longing to understand the mysteries of life,—that keen perception of the awful depth of misery, and height of happiness, involved in a state of probation, which made her, as it were, pause on the journey of existence, and look round for some one to assist her in bearing the burden of its responsibilities.

Some such feeling came over her mind on this day, as she entered the hall at Maplestead. She

had never before been in any place like it. She had never seen anything so handsome and imposing. It was low, but that she did not notice; it was the vastness which struck her,—the richness of the carvings,—the solemnising effect of the deep windows, and the coloured glass, marked with the arms and crest of the old family of the Clares, from whose possession the place had lately passed, on the death of the last direct representative of the race, a solitary, and, as report said, miserable and miserly old bachelor. The buried hopes of the dead seemed struggling with the bright happiness of the living. Katharine, as she looked around, thought of Jane Forbes returning to this place as her home,—to concentrate in it all her interests,—to fill it with associations of joy,—to make it a scene of peace, and usefulness, and love, and then, like those who had gone before, to pass away,—to be forgotten,—even as if she had never been. It seemed very strange, very wonderful. But for the evidence of her own feelings,—the indestructible consciousness, that life is inexpressibly, unspeakably valuable—Katharine could have gazed on all she saw with indifference, and believed that life was nothing but a dream, its interests unsubstantial, and the necessity for any work which was so soon to be destroyed a vain delusion. There was no one then at hand to remind her, that, as we work upon the outer surface of the world which we see, we are at the same moment indenting ineffaceable lines upon that true and spiritual world which lies beneath it.

The housekeeper, who received her in the hall, according, as she said, to her master's orders, saw that the size of the place, and its beauty, gave her pleasure, and offered to take her over the house; but Katharine had come for business, and she was not to be turned aside from it. "The days

were short," she said, "and she was later than she had intended; so, if there was no objection, she would go at once to the morning-room, and see what was to be done; and then, if there was time, she would go over the house before she went home; or, if not, she might have an opportunity another day."

The housekeeper approved, and led the way up the old-fashioned, shallow steps of the broad oak staircase, which gave Katharine a longing impulse to run up two stairs at once, and reach the top in half the time taken by her stately and portly conductress. Two long, narrow passages diverged from the open lobby at the head of the stairs—the east and west galleries, as the housekeeper called them, when she grandly pointed them out to Katharine; but the morning-room opened upon the lobby, and into this she was ushered at once. Much more like Jane this was than the hall: the windows were large and modernised, and the ceiling was not so low, and the furniture not by any means so old-fashioned, and Katharine felt the awe which had crept over her considerably diminished. The housekeeper promised to send a man directly to unpack the boxes, and offered luncheon, and did, in fact, everything which civility could require; and Katharine took off her bonnet and sat down to rest for a few minutes before she began her work. She was looking round the room, thinking how pretty and pleasant it was, and fancying—not exactly wishing, but fancying—how she should like to be in Jane's position, when the housekeeper came back, bringing in her hand a little note. She was full of apologies: "The note had come the evening before, inclosed in one to herself from the Colonel. She ought to have brought it to Miss Ashton at once, but she had forgotten it at the first moment." Katharine received the note

with pleasure, thinking, of course, it was from Jane; but no, it was in Colonel Forbes' handwriting, and only contained a list of books, placed as nearly as possible in the order in which he wished them to be arranged. The housekeeper went away, and Katharine laid down the note; but, on taking up the paper once more, she saw written on the other side: "Will Miss Ashton be kind enough to see that these directions are fully attended to, and that the room is ready for the reception of Mrs. Forbes on the 7th."—"To-day!" exclaimed Katharine, involuntarily, as she started from her seat; and without pausing to consider, she rang the bell. A housemaid appeared, and Katharine begged again to see the housekeeper; and in her impatience to begin her work, as the man promised had not made his appearance, she knelt down on the floor and tried to unfasten the cords of the book-boxes, but they were quite beyond her strength, accustomed though she was to work of the kind. She was nearly out of breath when the housekeeper appeared. "Colonel Forbes says he is to be here this evening," she began, in a complaining tone, as if the housekeeper and the Colonel had been plotting against her.—"Yes, Miss Ashton, this evening; we expect the Colonel and his lady about six o'clock," said the surprised Mrs. Brown.—"But you never told me so," continued Katharine, in the same tone, and pulling as she spoke at the cords.—"I thought, of course, Miss Ashton, you knew. The Colonel said he had written to you."—"But I shall not be ready; it is impossible I should be," observed Katharine: "I quite reckoned upon their not being here till the 8th. I am sure Colonel Forbes said so."—"The 8th was the day fixed at first, and then it was changed to the 7th, Miss Ashton; but can't the maids come and help

you?" Katharine looked despairingly at the list. "And all the books are to be arranged," she said; "the old as well as the new: they are all marked down." The housekeeper smiled. "Oh! yes, Miss Ashton, of course they are. The Colonel never has anything done without knowing how; little matters or great, it's all the same. But don't fret about it," she continued, good-naturedly, seeing Katharine's face of vexation; "there are two of the maids doing nothing, and they can quite well make themselves of use. I would come myself, only, really, I have half a hundred things to look to." Katharine was glad of the idea of assistance; but then she recollected her father's remark, that the Colonel did not like the servants to touch his books. She must do it all herself; there was no help for it; but, would the man come and unfasten the cords? It seemed as if there was a spell against that first necessary step. The housekeeper agreed that, if the Colonel had said Miss Ashton was to do it, Miss Ashton must do it, and she departed. And again Katharine sat down, not to rest, but to beat her foot upon the floor in impatience, and then scold herself for naughtiness, feeling all the time as if in some way she had put herself into the power of a master, now that she had once engaged to work for Colonel Forbes. The boxes were unfastened at last, and Katharine began her task, energetically but methodically, feeling that it was very hard work—especially hard after the labours of the preceding day, and the unusually short night's rest—but not daring to leave off: why, she did not exactly ask herself. Partly, it certainly was, because she would have been sorry that Jane should return and find her room not ready; but partly also, perhaps mostly, because she could not possibly displease Colonel Forbes.

She worked till it grew dusk, and dusk came

alarmingly soon, especially in that room looking to the east, and with the trees of the park rather shutting out the sky. The housekeeper had sent her some luncheon, but she had scarcely touched it; all she thought of was the necessity of finding vol. ii. and placing it next to vol. i., and taking care that there should be no book turned upside down, no mistake made in titles. At last, as the clock struck four, she began to think of herself and to feel rather exhausted; and she left off for a few minutes and ate the remainder of the sandwiches, and drank the wine which before she had refused. Mrs. Brown had said she expected them about six, but having been once deceived in her calculations, Katharine could not feel quite secure that they would not, by some unforeseen arrangement, arrive sooner; and she listened to every distant sound, and even to the moanings of the autumnal wind, thinking that they were surely at hand, and that she should be called to account for her unfinished work. At last it grew so dark that she could not see to finish her work without candles, and then she recollected her walk home—a difficulty not easily to be surmounted. Her father would be displeased if she went back late alone, and yet she had no one to accompany her. Even if she set off at once, she could scarcely reach Rilworth before it was quite dark; and then to leave the room in such a state—books lying about, packing boxes, paper, dusters—it would put Colonel Forbes in a frenzy to see it. No, she must remain where she was—she must wait and trust that some way would be found of sending her back; and in the meantime she determined to write a note to her mother, and ask to have it sent into Rilworth, to let her know how she was circumstanced. The idea was no sooner approved of by Katharine's judgment than it was acted upon.

Mrs. Brown was summoned, the note written, and dispatched; candles were brought, and again Katharine set to work. The housemaids also were sent to assist her by putting the room in order, and carrying away the boxes and loose paper; and there really appeared to be some chance of being ready by the right time. "There is a carriage—I am sure I hear a carriage," said Katharine, laying down a set of small, beautifully-bound volumes of Racine, which she was just going to place upon the top shelf. "Oh! no, miss; no carriage," said the upper housemaid; "the wind always makes that kind of growl when it's getting up." Katharine moved the step ladder, mounted it with the books in her hand, and listened again. "It is coming nearer; I am certain it is in the avenue."—"Dear no, miss; it is always so," was the reply of the impassive housemaid, who had no cause to fear reproof. Not so Katharine. She cast a despairing glance around the room: "You have not half-done what I wanted," she said impatiently; "can't you carry off all those paper shreds, and that rope in the corner? Just look, the room is in a complete mess."—"Never fear, miss; it will all be right. Here, Fanny;" and Fanny, the slowest of the slow, waited to be spoken to twice, and then said she would come, and remained to roll up a ball of twine, till Katharine, with her patience utterly exhausted, rushed down from the steps, collected every scrap of rubbish she could find, filled the girl's apron, and bade her carry it off instantly; and, mounting the steps again with some volumes of Racine in her hand, lost her balance, and trying to regain it scattered the volumes on the floor.

"They be come, Esther, and you be wanted." The provoking Fanny put her head in at the door,

and vanished again in an instant, followed by Esther. Katharine sat down upon the upper step of the ladder, and felt almost inclined to cry; but she conquered the silly feeling, and tried to finish what the housemaids had left undone. She could not help, however, pausing every now and then to know what was going on in the house, for there was a considerable bustle—distant voices, doors opening and shutting, servants coming up and down the stairs with luggage; and every moment she expected to see Colonel and Mrs. Forbes enter the room. How cordially she wished herself at home! It would seem quite like an intrusion for her to be there just at the moment of their arrival, and they might—or at least the Colonel might—fancy it was done on purpose. As for making the room look as it ought to look, it was perfectly hopeless; and Katharine was becoming so tired and confused, that she gave herself twice the trouble that was necessary, because she could not decide what to do; and so began one thing, and then left it and went to another, and came back again to the first, and in the end scarcely advanced at all. If it had been Miss Sinclair whom she was expecting, what a trifle all this would have seemed! But Mrs. Forbes—that made a most astonishing difference.

She heard them at length come up the great staircase—she heard Jane's sweet voice speaking to the housekeeper, and she caught a few softened tones from Colonel Forbes, addressed apparently to his wife. They were coming, certainly, they must be coming; and Katharine snuffed the tallow candle as the last hope of doing something to make the room comfortable. But there was a little respite; Jane went to her own apartment, and Katharine worked on again, and thought she was growing quite callous, till some one touched the handle of

the door, and then, as she was kneeling on the floor, she turned her head round suddenly, and saw Colonel Forbes.

He did not see her at first, but she saw him quite plainly—too plainly. He did not exclaim at all, but he walked up to the fireplace and rang the bell violently, and then stood on the hearth-rug with his arms folded. Katharine came forward as bold as a lion in appearance—as timid as a frightened hare in reality. He started as she came into the light, bowed, and, in the stiffest, coldest manner, thanked her for the trouble she had taken. Such a very peculiar emphasis there was on the word trouble! Katharine felt offended, and replied, “that he could not think from what he saw that she had taken any trouble, but there had been some most unfortunate mistakes.”—“Oh! pray don’t distress yourself to explain; pray don’t think it of any consequence.” and the bell received another violent pull. The first was answered almost at the same moment. “Send the housemaid here to remove all this rubbish, and let candles be carried into my study.” He walked up to the bookshelves, and on his way stumbled over an unfortunate volume which had fallen from Katharine’s hand, and which she had not perceived. One of the leaves was crumpled, and he brought it to the light, inspected it, but made no observation; and then, taking up the candle, walked carefully round the room, kicking at every piece of paper which lay in his way, and stooping down, evidently with the idea that he should find some more of his beautiful books in the same unseemly position.

It really was to Katharine the most uncomfortable moment she had ever experienced; she did not know whether to stay or go—whether to apologise and explain, or remain silent. She was debating

still, when her difficulty was solved, for Jane entered the room. Katharine's impulse was to rush up to her; but she was stopped, for Jane's first thought and first glance were for her husband, yet her first words, accompanied by a kind though rather nervous greeting, were for Katharine. "How good it was," she said, "to be there working so hard and so late." She had heard all about the mistake from the housekeeper, and she was so sorry. She should not have thought of giving such trouble herself. It was Colonel Forbes." A pause, and a second glance at her husband. She went up to him, "Dear Philip," and her hand was laid fondly on his shoulder, "we will all work hard together to-morrow." He could not resist her smile, and when he looked at her he smiled too, but he said nothing to Katharine. "We have kept Katharine so late we must send her home in the carriage," continued Jane; "the horses will scarcely have been taken out." Still the Colonel was silent. "If I might have any one to walk with me," said Katharine, "that is all I should want; and I might stay then later and finish my work, if there was no objection." She said this to Jane, but it was answered by Colonel Forbes; "You are very good, Miss Ashton, but I see no necessity for giving you more trouble; we will take care that you shall have a safe escort." He re-opened the injured book and once more held it to the candle. Jane snuffed the wick, which had again become deplorably long, and laughed faintly, and said, "It is not a very splendid light, had we not better go down stairs?" He laid the book on the table with the air of a martyr, and left the room with a cold "Good evening, Miss Ashton," and "thank you. Jane, are you ready for dinner?—It wants but three minutes."

"I must not keep him," said Jane, in an accent

of relief, as soon as the door was closed; "but, dear Katharine, I am so infinitely obliged to you, and so distressed at the annoyance you have had.—Don't think about that, pray," she added, as Katharine's eye rested upon the unhappy volume of Racine; "the crease will soon wear out, and Colonel Forbes will forget it to-morrow. What I want to arrange now is about your going home; you can't really walk. I wish—but can't you sleep here? can't we send word to your father and mother that you will sleep here?"—"Oh, no!" Katharine rejected the idea in a moment. "She did not in the least care for the walk," she said. "She would rather walk indeed."—"The second bell!" exclaimed Jane. "I must not wait a minute. Dear Katharine, thank you a thousand times; please settle whatever you like with the housekeeper. I shall come and see you the very first day I can. Thank you, once more, so very, very much; I would wait if I could, but I must not." Jane gave a parting most affectionate shake of the hand, and Katharine was left in the still untidy room, with the candle nearly burnt to its socket, to determine for herself what was to be done. She felt very angry, very proud, as much so with Jane as with the Colonel, in the first moments of petulance. What signified kind words when kind deeds were wanting? The carriage!—she would sooner set off by herself and walk alone to Rilworth, and trust to make her excuses with her father than accept one out of twenty carriages if they were all at the door waiting for her; and as to sleeping in the house, sooner than put herself under the obligation, she would beg for a bed at the lodge. Yet something in her heart reproached her as she thought this—a recollection of the parting kiss on the wedding day—the kiss which

she had felt at the time would bind her to Jane for life. No, she would not be hard upon her, she would wait and not judge; but she was disappointed bitterly, that she could not help. And now what was to be done? Katharine thought she heard a housemaid coming up the stairs, and went out to see, but she met one of the men-servants bringing her a message from Colonel Forbes: "It was raining a little, and if Miss Ashton did not object to go home in the tilted cart, it was quite at her service;" and there were a few pencil lines scribbled by Jane on the back of a letter.—"Dear Katharine: Shall you mind the cart very much? I could not get anything better, because Colonel Forbes says the horses have been such a distance; and will you object to having tea in the housekeeper's room? she will be charmed to make you comfortable. So many thanks for all you have done. Affectionately yours, J. F."—If it had been a wheelbarrow which was offered her, Katharine would not have cared then. She felt that she had been unjust. Jane Forbes was still Jane Sinclair, and could not forget her comfort. She went to the housekeeper's room and had her tea, and rested in the armchair, and was waited upon very kindly; and then the tilted-cart came to the door, and Jane hurried out from the dining-room to bid her once more good-bye, and she was driven home safely.

A great many thoughts, and fancies, and cogitations filled Katharine's mind that evening; but one was uppermost—for what inducement would she consent to change places with Jane Forbes?

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE next morning Katharine was lingering after breakfast, amusing her mother with her little adventures of the preceding day, when Mr. Ashton came in from the shop, bringing news from Maplestead: "That set of Racine returned, Kitty; sent in by a servant, with a note, begging that I will try and dispose of it for Colonel Forbes as a second-hand book, as it has been injured, and procure him another copy. What can be the meaning of it? Is it my fault or theirs, I wonder." Katharine coloured with vexation, but could not help laughing. "It is my doing, father; all owing to that unfortunate downfall. But can you imagine a man's being so particular?"—"You don't understand what gentlemen are with their books, when they care for them at all, Kitty," said Mr. Ashton. "It is very provoking; and the Colonel won't look very pleasantly on you, child, for giving him the worry."—"No," said Katharine, becoming more vexed as she gave the subject further consideration;—"and he is not a man to make an apology to. Do you think, father?" She stopped in the middle of her sentence, afraid to mention her wish; but she was helped by her mother: "If the Colonel really does feel it's Kitty's doing, Mr. Ashton, the shortest way would be to take the books back and sell them second-hand for ourselves, and get him another copy at our expense. It wouldn't be such a very great loss."—"More than you think for, my dear," was the reply; and Mr. Ashton, who would have been just the person to propose the plan himself, after the deliberation of another five minutes, was now exceedingly annoyed

at having it suggested to him. "I don't see," he continued, "why I am to be made to suffer from Kitty's carelessness. If she spoils books she must pay for them. I declare I have a good mind to take the money from the next fineries she wants." Katharine did not say that was just what she would wish, because she knew that argument would make him more angry than contradiction. She allowed him to give vent to a few more hasty words, and then she said: "If I might walk over to Maplestead this morning and see Mrs. Forbes, I might make an apology to her at any rate."—"Perhaps that would be the best way," said Mrs. Ashton; "at any rate you would see then whether the Colonel is really very much put out."—"Aye, go," said Mr. Ashton, his brow, in spite of himself, relaxing into good humour; "but mind you tell her that you are to pay for the books yourself. I protest you shall. I won't bear waste and carelessness from any one." Katharine gave him a kiss, and he returned it with the assurance that she was the most good-for-nothing child in Rilworth; and then he went back to his shop looking as pleased as if nothing disagreeable had occurred, and Katharine turned to her mother to thank her for coming to her assistance. "Your father is not in earnest about your paying for those books, Kate," said Mrs. Ashton; "it's only just his fancy of the moment."—"I know that, mother, though I should be very willing to do anything I could about them: but what I really care for is putting Colonel Forbes out. Yet I don't think he can be angry any more when I have explained what is to be done. He won't think it a liberty though, will he?" she added, becoming alarmed at her own temerity. "He can't very well do that," said Mrs. Ashton; "but at any rate Mrs. Forbes will help you out of your difficulty; as for him, there

is something in his mouth which I don't quite fancy."—"There is something in every feature which I don't," exclaimed Katharine; "but," recollecting herself, she added, "that is only my prejudice, though, mother. People say he is very good, and I am sure Mrs. Forbes thinks him perfection."—"Wait till she has tried him for a twelve-month, Kitty," said Mrs. Ashton; and Katharine thought to herself, though she did not say it, that a shorter time than that would suffice for her.

She prepared for her walk to Maplestead almost immediately afterwards, hoping, as she said, to be back in time for dinner, but at the same time begging her mother not to wait for her. She had a little district business to attend to besides, so she might be detained; and dinner did not signify: the house-keeper at Maplestead would be sure, she said, to give her some bread and cheese. Just, however, as she was going out of the door, one of the poor shoemaker's children stopped her, with the intelligence that "father was worse, and mother would like to see her." There was no resisting such an application, and Katharine hurried to Long-lane. The case was one of more apparent than real danger; at least at the moment. Katharine, inexperienced though she was in illness, soon saw that. She could only recommend that Mr. Fowler should be sent for; and promise some strengthening broth in the course of the day, though feeling in her own mind that she might be rather puzzled to procure it without giving her mother and the servant more trouble than she liked. The Miss Ronaldsons' back door reminded her that broth of some kind was generally at hand in their house, and if they had it they would be sure to give it willingly. She was sufficiently at home now to enter by the kitchen; and she made her way to the parlour, and knocked at the door. The "come

in" was not quite as instantaneous as usual. Katharine heard smothered voices, and a little pushing aside of chairs. When the door was opened she found herself not only in the presence of the Miss Ronaldsons, but of Charles, his mother, and Mr. Reeves. It was impossible not to remark the startled yet almost amused expression of each face, Charles Ronaldson's only excepted. He coloured crimson, caught up his hat instantly, and after waiting for a few minutes and being told by Katharine that Colonel and Mrs. Forbes were returned, and that she was going over to Maplestead, he shook hands with her, and muttering something to his aunts about seeing them again before he went, hastened out of the room. Mrs. Ronaldson was a gentle-looking, elderly woman, with an anxious expression of countenance. Katharine had never seen much of her before, but she was pleased now with her very kind manner; there was something of peculiar interest about it, which was winning, without any attempt at being so. Time was precious, but Katharine did not like at once to say what she had to say, and then go. It seemed necessary to ask about Miss Ronaldson's pain in the chest, and Miss Priscilla's rheumatism; and inquiries were to be made also for Mrs. Reeves; and now that she had an opportunity of speaking to Mr. Reeves, there were several parish matters to be mentioned; all this kept her more than twenty minutes longer than would otherwise have been necessary, the broth matter having been settled as soon as mentioned, and the servant dispatched with a jug containing enough not only for the poor man, but for half his family besides. Katharine did not at all dislike her little visit, they were all so kind to her, only they were rather too attentive, and would listen to every word she said, Mrs. Ronaldson especially. Even Mr. Reeves

had something peculiar in his manner, and every now and then the corners of his mouth lengthened, and he bit his lips as if almost unable to restrain a smile.

As Katharine stood up to go every one else stood up too; and Miss Ronaldson quite grasped her hand: "Good-bye, my dear; be sure you come again soon, we shall always be delighted to see you, shan't we, Prissy?" and she looked round a little tremulously at her sister. "I may tell you—it's no secret—do you know, my dear, our nephew Charlie has had a fine situation given him?"—another doubtful glance at Miss Priscilla—"given him by the Duke of Lowther. Three hundred a year at once, and in time may be a great deal more," said Miss Priscilla, solemnly; "Yes, my dear, yes." Miss Ronaldson looked much relieved at this public testimony of Miss Priscilla's approval of the subject she had chosen. "Three hundred a year at once, and the last agent made the place worth six, they say. It's for the Duke's estates in the north."—"A great blessing for my dear boy, indeed," said Mrs. Ronaldson, "only it will take him so far from his friends."—"Yes, unless he can get new friends," observed Miss Ronaldson. "There's nothing like family happiness, is there, my dear Katharine?"—"No, indeed," replied Katharine; "I do hope Mr. Ronaldson will have that wherever he may be."—"Yes, we all hope it, we hope it very much, my dear. Mr. Reeves knows we hope it." Mr. Reeves smiled a very odd smile, which was almost a laugh; but his voice and manner were very earnest as he said, "One is afraid to hope too much; but whatever his happiness may be he will deserve it, as far as a human being can." Katharine thought them all very odd; she did not know whether they were going to laugh or cry, but she was not inclined to do either herself,

only she was very glad that Charles Ronaldson was to have three hundred a year.

“Such an odd feeling it is to change suddenly, as one does, from one set of ideas to another,” thought Katharine, as she stood at the hall door at Maplestead. The district and the Miss Ronaldsons and Charles, and his situation, were then like things of a year gone by, compared with Jane and the Colonel, and the spoilt volume of *Racine*. She began to be very nervous now that the moment for making her apology was so near, and to wish that the Colonel might be out, and she might say what she had to say to Mrs. Forbes alone; yet it was interesting to her to be there, she wanted to see Jane again, to accustom herself to look upon her as the mistress of Maplestead, and to settle if she could the last evening’s impressions, which were so strange and disagreeable, that she could not now thoroughly divest herself of the idea that Jane was altered.

The ring at the door was answered by a tall footman, and Katharine was ushered grandly up the great staircase to the morning-room—a very different room from that which she had left on the preceding evening. No traces of boxes, or shavings, or paper; it was astonishing to think how the slow Fanny must have worked, under the influence of the Colonel’s eye. And there were the bookshelves in perfect order,—only one gap on the top shelf; but that was sufficient to make Katharine’s heart sink a little. But Jane came into the room, and everything like fear was forgotten. She was looking almost beautiful, a bright glow of pleasure tinging her pale cheek, her soft eyes lighted up with the animation of pure happiness, and her slight and most graceful figure set off to the greatest advantage by the folds of her rich silk dress. Yet she was altered in a way rather to be felt than described; her step,

as she entered, was firmer, her manner more self-dependent; she was the mistress of Maplestead. But she was unaltered in her simplicity, her truth, and affection; and when she made Katharine take a place on the sofa beside her, and relate everything that had happened since she went away, the errand, and the apologies were forgotten, and Katharine talked as fast and as eagerly as if she had been sitting, as in old times, with Jane Sinclair, in the parlour behind the shop. It was long before they reached the subject of the spoilt book, so much was to be said about affairs of the poor, which concerned them both, and so much of the affairs of Katharine's family, which Jane was interested in hearing; and in the midst of the conversation, just as the important point was reached, Colonel Forbes came in.

It all flashed upon Katharine then in an instant;—that Jane was not the companion of her school-days, the friend who gave her a share of her confidence, but the wife of a man of fortune and position, destined to move in a sphere far above her own; and it flashed upon her too that she was in disgrace, and was come, like a naughty child, to say that she was sorry. If she had not been a little cross with Colonel Forbes, she might have been very much embarrassed. He bowed, stiffly but politely, and then addressed Jane: “I want you, my love; are you ready?”—“I shall be presently; do you want me very much?”—“Stone, the gardener, is ready for us,” he said, with an accent of impatience. Katharine felt she was in the way. “I must go,” she began, and she rose from her seat; but Jane made her sit down again.—“You have had such a long walk, Katharine, you must have something before you go back. Philip, will you ring the bell?” The Colonel did as he was told, and then came back to

Jane's chair, and stood behind it, doing nothing. "Just go out to Stone, and tell him your notions, and then I will come to you," said Jane, looking up at him.—"I can better wait for you, my love."—"Pray don't let me keep you," said Katharine; "I don't want anything, I assure you, and I am not at all tired. I only wished to say to Colonel Forbes,"—the Colonel was all polite attention,—Katharine felt her colour rise most painfully,—"I am very sorry, and my father is extremely vexed about the book, sir." She grew bolder when she had begun, and went on unhesitatingly: "My father will procure another copy immediately." Colonel Forbes bowed. "You are not troubling yourself about that unfortunate book?" interrupted Jane; "indeed it does not signify in the least, does it, Philip?" But "Philip's" face did not show any signs of agreement. He merely answered, however, in a constrained tone, that if she did not consider it a matter of consequence, of course it was not so. Jane turned round to him with one of her sweetest smiles: "You were fretted because it was a present to me; but you don't imagine I value the thought less;" and she put her hand in his affectionately. The clouded brow became smooth again.

"It would please my father, and satisfy me to procure another copy on our own account," said Katharine; "and the one which has been injured will sell very well as a second-hand book."—"Oh! no, no," exclaimed Jane; "indeed, I can't hear of such a thing, when you were working so kindly for me, and the injury so very trifling as it is; indeed it can't be."—"No, indeed it cannot," observed Colonel Forbes: "I returned the book to Mr. Ashton because it happened to be of no use to me, being injured, and I thought he might sell it;

but I meant to have called to-day to explain the matter. I had not the least idea of putting him to any expense.”—“It would be very trifling,” persisted Katharine, “and I should be more happy.”—“Excuse me, Miss Ashton, it cannot be. I think, my dear,” and Colonel Forbes turned to his wife, “I think that bell can scarcely have rung.”—“I hear some one coming,” said Jane, and immediately afterwards the servant entered:—“Bring luncheon for Miss Ashton instantly,” was the Colonel’s order. “Only a biscuit, if you please,” said Katharine, longing to get away. “But that won’t be enough,” exclaimed Jane; “you must have a sandwich. Bring up some sandwiches as soon as you can.”—“And tell Mr. Stone not to wait,” said the Colonel, decidedly. “Now, please not, dear Philip,” exclaimed Jane, trying not to speak as if she were annoyed; “if you will only go to him, and begin giving your directions, I will be with you in a very few minutes.” Colonel Forbes did not revoke his word; and the servant, who had been standing with the handle of the door in his hand, waiting for some certain orders, went away. Jane did then look grave, but not at all angry. She went on talking to Katharine; but she could not prevent herself from showing, by frequent glances at her husband, that her attention was distracted. Colonel Forbes seated himself at a little distance from them, apparently with a view not to disturb them, and took up a book. Katharine could not talk at all now; she could not for a moment forget that he was in the room, and the appearance of the sandwiches was a great relief. Yet she ate scarcely any; certainly not as many as she needed, for it was her dinner-time, and she was very hungry; but though Jane pressed her, and said she had no appetite, Katharine could only be prevailed upon to go through the form of

luncheon. When it was over, she fastened her bonnet, took up her gloves, and was about to say good-bye, when it flashed upon her that she had really made no great effort about the book, which was the true object of her visit. She introduced the subject again; and Jane, beginning to understand it better, asked, in great surprise, whether the books had actually been returned. "Oh! yes," replied Katharine; "this morning; did you not know it?"—"I! no, indeed; the subject was never mentioned to me. Philip!"—the Colonel laid down his book, and listened—"you don't want really to return the Racine, do you?—it could have been merely a fancy of the moment."—"I don't know what fancies of the moment are," he replied; "when I do a thing for once I do it for always."—"But it seems—indeed, I think you are too fanciful. Why should not the book do perfectly well for me?"—"I wish to have everything about my wife perfect," he replied. Jane said nothing more. Colonel Forbes saw that Katharine was vexed, and strove to assure her by the most polite phrases that the affair was a matter of indifference to him, as he could easily procure another copy; but Katharine could see underneath the surface that it was a sore subject. She was anxious now to go, feeling every moment more uncomfortable. Jane went with her downstairs, and they stood together, talking, for a few seconds in the hall. Jane's last words were: "I am afraid I must leave my district to you entirely, Katharine, for another fortnight or three weeks, at least; I shall be so incessantly engaged, and you know I cannot leave Colonel Forbes." No: Katharine had never felt that necessity so strongly before. "I will settle, as soon as I possibly can, what share I can take in the work; but I must first see what

he wants me to do at home." Certainly a most wife-like, submissive idea.

Katharine had no fault to find with it ; but — was Jane going to be happy ?

CHAPTER XXV.

A QUESTION for time to decide. But Katharine was by nature very impatient. She could not bear, and she had as yet scarcely learnt that she ought to try to bear, suspense, either for herself or for those she loved. She thought about Jane's prospects all the way home, and put herself, in imagination, in the same situation, and in a great many other situations, some extremely improbable, and none of them, perhaps, such as were likely to befall Jane ; but they were, in Katharine's mind, different phases of married life, and this day she did not feel as she had done when at Moorlands she envied John and Selina. On the contrary, her own lot — its freedom and independence — stood out in brilliant light, compared with what she felt would be the irksomeness of such a perpetual restraint as that to which Jane submitted so willingly. Love ! that, of course, made the difference. Jane loved her husband, and therefore could bear anything from him. But it was very strange that she should love him, — very strange that she did not see, as Katharine saw, that whether Colonel Forbes followed her wishes or opposed them, petted or thwarted her, it was simply and solely for himself — that his affection for her was but another form of self-love. It was rather frightening to a person looking calmly on, to see how another might be

deceived, and that other not a silly, frivolous, vain girl, but a sensible, single-hearted, devoted woman. Katharine never felt more anti-matrimonially disposed in her life. She was very much tempted to go home and talk it all over with her mother; but that would be wrong—it would be exciting suspicion, almost betraying confidence—so she resolved not to touch upon the subject, or say one word about her visit beyond what was absolutely necessary, lest she should be led on further than she intended. Katharine's conscientiousness helped her there; she had learnt from it to keep at a safe distance from that which might be even the lightest form of known evil.

Yet it was a considerable comfort to her to find, when she reached home, that she was out of the temptation of saying incautious words just at the moment when her thoughts and her heart were full. Her mother was gone over to Moorlands with Mrs. Fowler, to prepare for John and Selina's reception, early in the next week, and her father was busy in the shop. She took off her things, and sat down to work, liking the rest and quietness very much, and still with an inward self-congratulation that there was no Colonel Forbes to insist upon her going out when she wished to stay in, or to stay in when she desired to go out. That back parlour was a very still, pleasant room; none of the street noises could be heard in it, and Katharine took no notice of the murmur of voices in the shop. She did not even hear a bell ring, so deep was her reverie; and twice there was a knock at the parlour-door before, thinking it was the servant, she said "Come in." The door was opened quietly, and with some doubt even; but it was a man's step which made Katharine look up from her work, and smile and exclaim, "Oh! Mr. Ronald-

son, is it you? How you startled me!" It might have been thought that she had startled him, he looked so very ill, so deadly pale. Katharine noticed it, but she did not quite like to ask him what was the matter; and he seated himself, and she went on with her work. "Mrs. Ashton is gone over to Moorlands, I think?" he began.—"Yes, with Mrs. Fowler. John and Selina are to be at home rather earlier than they intended, so there is a good deal to be done."—"Yes, of course; I thought you might have waited at Maplestead, and returned with them."—"I did not know they were to be at Moorlands, or I should have gone there to meet them," said Katharine; "it would have been better driving home than having that long walk."—"Along the dusty road? yes."—"But it is not at all dusty," exclaimed Katharine, laughing; "you forget the rain we have had lately."—"Oh! yes, I did forget. Did you find Colonel and Mrs. Forbes at Maplestead?" Katharine could with the greatest difficulty keep her countenance; it seemed such an absurd question after their morning meeting. "I thought," she said, "that I told you I was going over on business to them, when I saw you at your aunts' this morning."—"Did you? I think I remember. Yes, I do remember, now. Did you stay long with my aunts after I left you?"—"Longer than I intended," said Katharine; "but there is always so much to say to them, and I was so glad to meet Mrs. Ronaldson there too: it is very seldom we have the pleasure of seeing her."—"No; she goes out very little, not so much as she should. But—I suppose my aunts did not tell you—that"—he hesitated, and his old shy manner returned so painfully, that Katharine felt herself bound, in charity, to assist him. "They told me that we were soon to lose you entirely as

a Rilworth person, Mr. Ronaldson. Your friends will be very sorry; but they cannot selfishly wish it otherwise, since the change is to be so much for your advantage.”—“My friends!” he repeated, in a tremulous voice; “I can scarcely flatter myself that I have many.”—“But those you have—ourselves, for instance,—I am sure we shall miss you very much, Mr. Ronaldson.” He looked up quickly, then bent his eyes again upon the ground. Katharine was working steadily and diligently, as if all her interest in life was centred in her mother’s new apron, which she was hemming. “I may be alone,” he replied; “my mother talks of remaining with my aunts.” Katharine looked very much surprised. “It is a long distance for her to travel,” he continued; “and I may be obliged to move again before long: the Duke may wish it. My mother is too old to bear the change, unless it is absolutely necessary. Mr. Reeves, too, considers it will be best, at least for a short time, till I am permanently fixed.”—“Your mother will join you,” said Katharine, in a tone of compassion; “she will never leave you by yourself.” He tried to smile, but it was an effort. “I am very sorry for you,” said Katharine, gently.—“Are you really sorry, Miss Ashton? it would be an unspeakable comfort to think so.” Something in this speech made Katharine’s cheek burn, and her heart beat quick and faint. She was very angry with herself, and the needle went faster than ever. A reply was waited for, and she was obliged to speak. “It would be very strange and unkind of me if I were not to feel for you, Mr. Ronaldson, when you have been with us so much lately, and have been such a help to us. I don’t know what my father would have done without you.”—“I am very glad to have been of use to Mr. Ashton. I should have been more glad

to have been of use to you, Miss Ashton." Katharine could not answer then; her heart grew sick with a conviction of the truth, to which she had shut her eyes. Oh! if she could but stop him!

But it was too late. He walked to the window, and stood for one second silent; then returning to Katharine, he said, with that stern self-command which knows that the very least weakness will be ruin: "Miss Ashton, you once told me that if I had anything to say to you, I might say it plainly, without reserve. I am going to leave Rillworth, to form a new home; it will be no home to me, unless"—he took her hand eagerly, and his voice sank almost to a whisper, as he added, "Would you, could you share it with me?" Katharine withdrew her hand, and her cheek became perfectly colourless. She turned away, and tears rushed to her eyes. "Oh! Mr. Ronaldson," she exclaimed, "why did you ask?"—"Because life's happiness depends on the answer," was the reply. Katharine leant her head upon her hands: her whole frame trembled with agitation. How many, many thoughts, hopes, dreams of happiness, rushed as a torrent through her mind! Yet she looked up again, and answered firmly: "Do not be angry with me; it cannot be." He leant for support against a chair, but he did not speak. "I could not be untrue," continued Katharine, gathering courage; "I could not feign feelings which I have not."—"Feign! no: Heaven forbid! but, oh! Miss Ashton"—and his voice became broken and hollow—"is it quite?—are you so very sure?"—"Very sure," interrupted Katharine; "very certain, that for your happiness and for mine, the subject must never be mentioned again." He seemed as if he scarcely understood her meaning; his eyes were fixed, his lips blanched. "It would be so wrong

to deceive you," continued Katharine; "it is so much better to say the whole truth at once."—"Yes; better, indeed, if—but Katharine—let me call you Katharine this once,"—and as he turned aside his head, Katharine saw a tear roll slowly down his cheek,—“to have cherished a hope for months and months; to have thought of it at first as a vague dream for the end of life; to have had it fostered and nurtured;—unconsciously indeed,—I feel, I know now that it was unconsciously,—but still to have had it nurtured; and suddenly, at the very moment when the power of realising it is put within my reach, and all whom I best love and honour sanction my choice, to feel that it is a delusion—a nothing,—that life must henceforth be a dark, lonely journey!”—"Not dark and lonely, I trust," interrupted Katharine, kindly; "you will find some other far better than I am, far more deserving of your affection."—"Thank you," he replied, with a pained look, which went like a dagger to Katharine's heart.—“It is very cold in me—very unkind; I feel it is,” she exclaimed; “but, Mr Ronaldson, would it not be more unkind to mislead you? Must it not be infinitely better to endure any suffering now, than to wake up, when it would be too late, to the knowledge that one had made a mistake?”—"That could never be with me," he said quietly.—“Forgive me,” replied Katharine, “if your affection were not returned, it must be, and”—"You would never be able to return it," he added. Again a tear gathered in his eye, and was kept back only by the effort of his strong will. Katharine's heart smote her. So good, so clever, so superior in education and principle, why could she not love him? For one instant she thought of herself as his wife,—home, friends, associations, all gone from her,—his wife! no one

besides to look to, to lean upon,—and her heart sank. It was a sufficient answer to satisfy her conscience. “Mr. Ronaldson,” she said, “if any pain which I could bear would save you pain, I would take it thankfully; whatever it might be, it seems that it would be less than what I now feel; but the sorrow you may endure at this moment will pass—the sorrow which you would have to endure if, feeling as I do, I were to consent to be your wife, would never pass.”—“Not if it were impossible for you to change,” he replied; “but there have been,—I have heard of such cases myself,—I have known persons whose feelings were as nothing at the beginning, yet who have been won by devotion—long, lingering, steadfast devotion; and, Katharine, were it to be at the price of the labour of my life, were it to be only the reward of my death-bed, the happiness of knowing you were mine would be cheaply purchased.”

“If I could be yours in heart,” said Katharine, thoughtfully. He read something of hope in her manner; he heard, or fancied he heard it in her tone; and earnestly, beseechingly, he implored her to give him but the trial, to suffer him to write to her, to think of her, to leave her free as air, but to consider himself bound, as indeed he ever must be. It would be the support, the guiding star of his life. And Katharine listened, and trembled, and felt weak, oh! very, very weak—so weak that, if a clergyman had been at hand, she would almost have consented to marry him on the spot, to save herself the pain of refusing; but the same vision of home given up for him came before her again, and, terrified at the influence which compassion, she felt, was beginning to exercise over her judgment, she turned shudderingly from him, and entreated him to leave her.

Her manner was such, then, as to admit of no hope. "It is enough," he replied; and something of a man's wounded pride at being rejected mingled with the tone in which he spoke: "I will never intrude the subject upon you a second time."—"We part friends, Mr. Ronaldson," said Katharine, giving him her hand. He took it, and pressed it to his lips: "We shall not meet again, Katharine. Pardon me—Miss Ashton always from henceforth." A wintry smile curled his lips; he could scarcely add, "God bless you." Katharine pressed his hand warmly, but she could not trust herself to reply; and when the door closed behind him, she rushed to her chamber, and, kneeling by her bedside, burst into an agony of tears.

CHAPTER XXVI.

FIVE years have passed. There is a change in Rilworth—a change in its inhabitants: old houses have been taken down, new ones have been built; the market-place has been enlarged; the Mechanics' Institution removed from Corn-street into High-street; Mr. Andrews, the retired auctioneer, is dead, and Mr. George Andrews is said to have greatly increased his fortune by entering into some extensive manufacturing speculations, consistent with his anxious desire to live at the same time as a private gentleman. Mr. Lane, too, is dead, and Mr. George Lane, his son, has succeeded him in his business. The Miss Lanes and their mamma, have a small cottage, about half a mile from the town, and may be seen every day walking up and down the raised foot-path on the London-road,

with their friend, Miss Andrews. Mr. Madden has met with great misfortunes, and the family pride is so reduced that Mr. Henry Madden has entered Mr. Ashton's shop in the hope of one day being his partner. Mr. Dobson has prospered so much that his little china shop has become a repository for Bohemian glass and ornamental china. Mr. Carter, too, has contrived to metamorphose his long dark passage, between narrow counters, into a splendid show-room, hung with shawls magnificent in hue and soft in texture, mantillas tempting to every taste, ribbons of all the colours of the rainbow, and silks which a queen might envy. Miss Dyer has enlarged her business in the lace department, and hangs white veils, and berthes, and polkas, upon tall stands in the downstairs apartment; whilst Mr. Green, the jeweller, has attached a fancy bazaar to his former insignificant business, and sells useless fineries, and charitable luxuries, at as dear a rate as any monopolist in a half-fledged watering place.

And there are changes less seen, less thought of; it may be, in the eyes of many, less important. Poverty, and sorrow, and sickness, have done their work in the back streets and the dark courts and alleys of Rilworth. Vagabond boys have ripened into early profligates; girlish vanity and the constant sight of evil have tainted to the very heart's core those whose childhood promised innocence; mothers' hearts have sickened, and their strength has failed under the burden of the daily calls for help which they could not give; fathers have grown reckless, or given themselves up to moody apathy, because in their youth they had never been taught upon Whom to cast their care; and souls have departed from this world to carry the account of their stewardship before their God, and to learn what

before they never would believe, that "God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil." It is a sad view, but a true one. There is another brighter, and not less true. Evil meets us upon the surface, goodness instinctively shrinks from display.

There has been much good in Rilworth during these last five years. No parish could be under the influence of a man, sensible, hard-working, devoted as Mr. Reeves, and not derive good from it. He might not be faultless; his manner might be quick, his temper inclined to impatience, his sermons might not be exciting, his plans not always formed in perfect wisdom; but he was earnest, sincerely earnest, in thought, and word, and action: and when all other powers have been tried, and failed, it will be found that earnestness is the fulcrum upon which to rest the moral lever that is to raise the world.

And so there are comforting spots in Rilworth, even in those back streets and crowded alleys. There are sufferers lingering in mortal disease, yet uttering no word of repining; children practising at home the lessons which care and love have taught them at school. There are grateful hearts and grateful prayers for the kindness which, winter after winter, has provided protection against the inclemency of the weather. There are struggles against temptation endured bravely, and ending victoriously, because the clergyman's warning has been given, and his words, through the mercy of God, have sunk deep into the memory, and been recalled in the hour of trial. And there are many, various in age, and differing in degree, working, under regular guidance, with a common motive, a common hope, even that they may one day listen re-

joicingly to the words, Come, ye blessed children of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

One there is to be seen almost daily, walking slowly and thoughtfully by the respectable houses in Woodgate-street, threading the intricacies of Briton's-court, looking anxiously at the dingy cottages in Long-lane. She knows every child by name; she has a word for every bustling woman, or sickly girl; her knock is answered almost before it can be heard, for many are looking out for her, to give them a word of comfort or advice; and few indeed there are who would repel her even with a cold answer, none who would treat her even with a word of incivility. Five years ago Katharine Ashton's cheek was bright with the first vividness of youth and hope: there is a slight deadness upon it now. The colour is softened and less changing; the eye is still very quick, but the words are uttered less rapidly. She laughs cheerfully when there is a cause, but she has lost the childish lightness of heart which could laugh at seeming nothings. She was never, strictly speaking, pretty; but youthful spirits, and kindness, and intelligence, often made her attractive; and she is attractive still, though in a different way. The gleam of thoughtfulness, which once came fitfully over her mind, has become its settled inhabitant. She has learnt something from reading, much from observation, more from the teaching of her own experience. Life is a mystery; but she holds in her hand the key that is to solve it; for the balance between earth and heaven, once decided by duty, is now weighed down by love;—and power, and energy, and affections, are devoted where they can never be devoted in vain.

We will look at her whilst she sits, as in the

old times, at the breakfast-table, in the back parlour, with her father and mother. Very little changed that parlour is ; there are the old curtains, the old carpet, the old book-case, the same table with the blue and white breakfast-set, the same old-fashioned milk-jug, and grotesque sugar-tongs. The carpet, indeed, is faded, but it has been covered with a drugget of nearly the same colour, so that the difference is not remarked ; and, though Mrs. Ashton says that the leathern arm-chair in which her husband sleeps so comfortably every evening, is nearly worn into holes by the constant pressure of his head and the rubbing of his elbows, yet there is no talk of purchasing another, for Katharine has spent some leisure moments in knitting a covering for it, and Mr. Ashton declares in consequence that it will serve his purpose for twenty years to come. He is fond of that expression ; perhaps it strengthens him against a secret misgiving, and makes him feel more sure that he really has twenty years more of life to come. Why should he not have ? His intellect is clear, his step steady, his pulse regular, his appetite good. He has passed but fifty-seven years in the world, and the men of this generation are often known to live far beyond the three score years and ten of the Psalmist. Mrs. Ashton is perhaps more altered than her husband. Her hair has become very grey, and that makes a great change in a woman. " Old Mrs. Ashton," she is sometimes called. That may be only in contradistinction to her gay daughter-in-law ; but it may be also, for the term is sometimes used by strangers, because she is really looking old, anxious, less able to cope with the difficulties of life. But all these are outward changes : they are of very little consequence. Katharine could not smile so pleasantly, and talk so unreservedly and happily,

if all were as it once was within. The eagerness of youth, and the steady purpose of age, cannot, indeed, meet on all points; but Katharine has much more sympathy now on the subjects nearest her heart than she ever had before; and if Mr. Ashton cannot entirely give up his suspicions of district societies, and Mrs. Ashton cannot always see why Katharine should care nothing for amusement, like other young persons of her age, they are both in heart conscious that there is very much in the past for which to lament, and are desirous, heartily desirous, as far as in them lies, to place their influence in the scale of good.

“Mother,” said Katharine—she might have made precisely the same speech, in precisely the same tone, five years before—“shall you and I go over to Moorlands this afternoon?”—“Well, I don’t know, Kitty; I hadn’t thought about it.”—“Selly might be glad to have us, for little Clara is fretful with cutting her teeth, and the baby keeps her awake at night.”—“And Master Johnnie takes advantage of nurse being engaged, to set up a commotion in the nursery, I’ll venture to say,” added Mr. Ashton. “What a fellow that is for spirit!”—“Rather too much so,” observed Katharine; “he wears Selina out.”—“Because she is such a bad manager, my dear,” replied Mrs. Ashton.—“I can’t think what she is to do when those children grow up, if they are so unmanageable now they are young.”—“They will go to school and be flogged into obedience,” said Mr. Ashton; “that is the only thing to be done with them. But, wife, if you go over to Moorlands, what am I to do?”—“Drive over in the chaise at six o’clock, and you will be there just in time for tea,” said Mrs. Ashton.—“And leave all my affairs to young Madden?” said Mr. Ashton; “one good thing is, he has a capital head for

figures."—"Oh! yes," said Katharine, "he will do quite well; and the hope of being partner some day will be sure to make him attentive."—"That is a long day to come, though," said Mr. Ashton, with an air of consideration; "but certainly, if he is ever to do anything by himself, he must begin practising. So you think, Kitty, I may dispense with the shop for this evening, and find my way over to Moorlands?"—"Certainly," said Katharine, smiling; "there is nothing to hinder you, and I think, somehow, father, that Moorlands wants you even more than the shop."—"Maybe," replied Mr. Ashton, and a shade passed over his face, and he was silent for an instant. Then he added abruptly: "Has John heard from Charlie Ronaldson, do you know?"—"I don't think he has," replied Katharine; "he wants to hear dreadfully."—Mr. Ashton rose up from the breakfast-table, and went to the door of the shop. "Wife," he said, turning round, "tell John he mustn't conclude that bargain for the new threshing-machine till Ronaldson writes."—"Very well," was the reply; but Mrs. Ashton had noticed that all was not "very well," and she remarked it to Katharine when the door was shut.—"I wish, Kate," she said, "that Charlie could find time to run down. He has never been here once since he went away, in spite of all the interest he seems to take in Moorlands. It would be twenty times better than writing. He would see into the state of affairs at once, and I don't think your father quite understands it."—"No," said Katharine, "I don't think he does; but, mother, I shouldn't like to be the person to tell him so."—"It was always his fancy—farming," continued Mrs. Ashton: "I thought how it would be when Moorlands was taken; yet it has been a wonder to me for the last twelve-month that he should allow John to go on with it.

But I suppose Selly's at the bottom of it, she won't think of leaving the place."—"Perhaps so," was Katharine's reply; she did not trust herself to speak of Selina.—"And if Charlie Ronaldson could but come here," continued Mrs. Ashton, "he would give your father good advice, and he and John both would listen to him. I do wish he would come; but there is no chance of that, I suppose, till after he's married. Mrs. Ashton sighed. Katharine knew the sigh, and its meaning. She kissed her mother, and almost immediately afterwards left the room.

CHAPTER XXVII.

YES, Mrs. Ashton sighed now. She had not sighed five years before, when Katharine told her that she had refused to be the wife of Charles Ronaldson. Katharine was very young then, and life was bright, and Northumberland was far off, and three hundred a-year was nothing so very wonderfully tempting in the way of income. There might be many more advantageous offers for Katharine, and she might settle near Rilworth, as John had done; so Mrs. Ashton was very kind and contented, and persuaded her husband that Katharine must know her own mind best, and that there were other persons in the world quite as good and with even better prospects than young Ronaldson; and Mr. Ashton, also in his good humour and good-nature, took the affair very quietly, and was only thankful that his Kitty was not going away from him to settle in the wilds, as he considered them, of a northern county.

But times were changed since then ; Katharine was five years older, and though she had had several other offers, none had approved themselves, either to herself or her parents ; and business affairs were not as satisfactory as they had been, for John schemed and speculated at Moorlands, and made his father pay for the speculations. Selina, too, received very little help from her own family, and came upon Mr. Ashton for endless expenses—doctor's bills, children's dresses, things which she said, and said truly, it was impossible to do without, only, as Katharine sometimes thought to herself, if Selina would but keep from expenses which were avoidable she would never be distressed for those which were unavoidable.

But be this as it may, expenses certainly did increase, and money to meet them did not, and Mrs. Ashton cast many an anxious look to the future, not for herself but for her children ; and when she heard that Charles Ronaldson was doing well in the north, making an income not of three but of five hundred a year, and that his mother, who had gone to live with him, had a pretty home, and every comfort and even luxury of life about her, and was known to have but one wish, that her son should be happily married, it is not strange that she should sigh, and, forgetting what her own personal loss would have been, think, with something like cross regret, that if Katharine had chosen it, all this might have been her own.

But Mrs. Ashton's sighs were not the important matter. Did Katharine sigh likewise ? Human nature is very perverse ; that which we reject when within our reach is often lamented as a loss when we have cast it from us. Yet this would not be a true description of Katharine's feelings. She did not regret or lament at all at first, except on

Charles Ronaldson's account ; she had done what she believed to be right and honest-minded — she had no feeling for him beyond that of respect, and she had no idea that she could ever change. If she had allowed him to write to her, to visit her, to pay her the attentions which he would have desired, even while leaving her nominally free, he must have been encouraged to hope, and Katharine at the time had no hope. The more she had seen of him the more she had learned to be afraid of him ; she could not talk freely and happily to him, his mind seemed so much beyond hers ; it was only by a mental strain that she could reach up to him ; and the thought of this continued effort for life, to her, who had been free as air in thought and word, and almost in action, was unendurable.

But a mind like Katharine's grows very rapidly, especially when there is a daily labour of self-cultivation. At nineteen she did not understand Charles Ronaldson ; she liked him very much, she thought him very superior, but at the same time extremely alarming. She was pleased to hear others talk to him, but she never wished to talk herself. At four-and-twenty she felt that if she could see him she could say things to him which she could not say to any other person ; — that was, always supposing he was unchanged, and this there was little reason to doubt. His kindness of heart certainly was as great as ever. Even though living at such a distance, he was John's chief adviser and help, and his sympathy with all their family trials was apparently increased. Katharine often felt that if he were at hand to be consulted by word, as well as by letter, she should have little fear of any blunders being committed by either John or her father. She had learned to look upon him as their great stay, for she found that whenever his opinion was set aside disaster was sure to follow ;

yet still it would not be true to say that even now she repented the decision which had separated them. It was impossible to regret that which at the moment had been right. Neither did her thoughts turn to him with anything like affection. She would have been well pleased to hear that he was married to another — at least she said so to herself, whenever his prospects were talked of; and if the shadow of a contrary feeling crossed her mind, it was only a shadow, a something which she did not realise to herself, it was so slight, and so transient.

And so Katharine did not echo her mother's sigh now, save for her mother's sake. The news that Charles Ronaldson was to be married had reached them only a few days before. It was a report brought by Mr. Henry Madden, from London. How it reached London no one knew, and the event was so probable, that no one thought of inquiring. The lady was said to be rich and young, and her name was Smith. That opened a wide field for conjecture. The Miss Ronaldsons professed to know nothing about the matter for certain, though they had heard there was a Miss Smith living in their nephew's neighbourhood; but they were old ladies who were supposed to have learned, by the experience of upwards of sixty years, to keep their own counsel; and so it was an acknowledged fact at Rilworth that Miss Smith was to be Mrs. Ronaldson.

But Katharine did sigh, though not for Charles Ronaldson. She thought of John, and Selina, and the wilful little Clara, and the unmanageable Johnnie, and the fretful, sickly, tiny baby, who seemed almost smothered by his grand name of Constantine. The evils which she had dreaded in the far distance seemed coming very near. John was sanguine of ultimate success, and Mr. Ashton was very unwilling to acknowledge that

the farming scheme was a failure; and when things went wrong, Katharine was always told that the season had been bad, or that political causes had burdened the agricultural interest; but politics and the seasons influenced other farmers likewise, and yet they were not like John, always behindhand with their rent, always wanting ready money for present outlay. She could do no good by fears and complaints, so she said nothing; and, true to her principles of usefulness, only tried to better the condition of the family by her own care and diligence. But a visit to Moorlands was never a pleasant prospect. Selina was dependent upon her in various ways, and therefore, for her own sake, was tolerably kind; and John, beginning to feel the value of his sister as his opinion of his wife decreased, always gave her a hearty welcome; but it was no holiday to Katharine to be there. She was generally engaged in the morning in helping to settle John's accounts, and hearing all his troubles, and giving him what advice she could to help him in his difficulties; and in the afternoon Selina took advantage of her being there to leave the children to her care, whilst she drove into Rilworth to pay gossiping visits; and in the evening there were baskets-full of children's clothes to be looked over and mended, and Katharine worked diligently at darning and stitching till ten o'clock, whilst Selina generally spent her time at the manufacture of some new piece of finery, and John fell asleep in his arm-chair.

And what was to be the end of all this? Katharine was learning not to ask or think, but to suffer herself to be led on day by day, looking only at the step before her. Yet sometimes, and so it happened on this day, the mist over the future seemed to float away, and show only greater gloom beyond.

She prepared to walk over to Moorlands after

packing up several little useful things to be brought over by Mr. Ashton in the chaise in the afternoon. The chaise was one of the luxuries consequent upon Moorlands; Mr. Ashton had felt himself obliged to have one as soon as his son lived in the country. Mrs. Ashton talked of remaining at Moorlands for a day or two, and Katharine knew that she would probably be expected to do the same. They could not live at John's expense; so their own larder was emptied, and a ham, a new cheese, and some jam and marmalade for the children, were put aside, and half-a-dozen bottles of wine taken out of the cellar—not that it was supposed that Mrs. Ashton and Katharine would eat and drink to the same amount, but it was helping poor John; and upon this principle the Moorlands visits were always carried on in a lavish scale. Katharine would have had no objection to this, but that similar generosity was never shown by any of Mr. Fowler's family, who, on the contrary, were generally invited to dine immediately afterwards, and entertained at Mr. Ashton's cost.

"If it was for any good!" thought Katharine to herself, whilst searching in the cellar for a bottle of choice port wine, which Mr. Ashton had particularly begged might be sent over; "but it will not save them in the least. There will be a great dinner given after we are gone, and the port wine will be drunk by Mr. Fowler and George Andrews. Oh! the marriage!"—an ejaculation which was perpetually rising in her mind, though it never escaped her lips.

"I am ready, Kitty, my dear," called out Mrs. Ashton from the head of the stairs, whilst Katharine was still in the cellar. "Coming, mother, directly. Susan, where's the wine basket? Mind you don't forget to keep it in a cool place, and to

put it in the chaise by-and-bye, and the ham ; it ought to be taking coals to Newcastle," she added to herself ; " but that's not the case, unfortunately." Mrs. Ashton came down the stairs. " I have been thinking, Kate, that that striped gingham of yours would cut up very well into frocks for Clara and baby. Wouldn't it be a good opportunity of taking it over and helping to make them?"—" Yes, if they are to have it, mother," said Katharine, laughing ; " but I had not quite made up my mind to part with it."—" Oh ! nonsense, child ; the dress is as old as the hills, and Selly said only on Saturday, when she was here, what a bill she was running up at Carter's for the children ; it would save her a world of trouble and expense."—" But if I am obliged to have a new dress to replace it, there won't be much saving," said Katharine.—" Not to you, child, but to poor John ; and you know he wants it so much, and your father will be sure to give you half-a-dozen new dresses if you ask him."—" The poor little things are welcome enough to the old gingham, I am sure," said Katharine ; " but, mother, I don't think it is a good plan to let Selly feel that she has only to mention a thing and she has it ; and her own family ought to do something for her, they don't really help at all."—" It is not for Selly, it's for poor John," said Mrs. Ashton ; " he is so pressed for money just now ; and he will be in a fever if he finds a long bill from Carter's coming in for the children's clothes."—" One might as well buy them new frocks," said Katharine ; " it would be as cheap." But Mrs. Ashton exclaimed vehemently, " Buy new dresses ! no ! that would be an extravagance. A cast-off dress like the striped gingham is all very well ; but if we are to be always buying new dresses for the children, we shall be ruined." Katharine

considered for a moment whether it were worth while to debate the point, and having made up her mind that it would be practicable to give up the dress to the children and do without a new one herself, she brought it down and put it with the other valuables which were to be taken over to Moorlands in the chaise. Mrs. Ashton was satisfied then ; and having twice looked round the larder to see that there was nothing else which could be spared, set off for her walk.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

It was a very hot, dusty day. Katharine had seldom been so tired ; and by the time they reached Moorlands she had a very bad headache. They arrived just at dinner-time. Selina was standing in the porch looking out for the chance of visitors. She was handsome still, but it was a beauty which had lost every real charm. Her complexion was faded, and she had grown stout and coarse-looking ; and her showy gown, and the cap with artificial flowers, at one o'clock in the day, gave Katharine a shock as she came in sight of her, though she had long been accustomed to see the same thing. "How d'ye do, my dear ?" said Mrs. Ashton, kissing her ; "how's John ? and where are the children ?"—"John is about somewhere, I believe," said Selina, carelessly ; "and the children, I hope, are asleep ; they have been rioting in the drawing-room till they are tired out."—"Then I hope Clara is not very bad with her teeth," observed Katharine.—"Oh ! yes, she is ; as bad as bad can be. Papa was over here yesterday, and he says that if we don't

take care she will have fits ; but there's no doing anything with her, she won't take medicine." Katharine did not say that she ought to be made to do it, but it was put down in her memory as one of her own duties to see that direction enforced. "It's tremendously hot, isn't it?" said Selina, leaning against the porch ; "there isn't a breath of fresh air, and there's John hard at work in the hay-field ; I wonder how he bears it."—"Very well, I should think," said Katharine ; "with the prospect of a good crop."—"Oh ! as for that," said Selina, "he is so terribly down-hearted, I don't think he cares whether it is a good crop or a bad. We have had the Colonel here this morning."—"Colonel Forbes?" asked Katharine.—"Why, yes, Kate ; what other Colonel is there to have ? But won't you come up in the drawing-room ? It is all in a litter, but you won't mind that." They went upstairs, stumbling upon a dustpan in the way, which made Selina begin a complaint of the new maid, who was, she said, as dull as a post, and as obstinate as a pig. Katharine did not inquire more minutely into her demerits, she was so anxious to hear more of Colonel Forbes' visit. Possibly Selina was not equally willing to tell, for when they went into the drawing-room she devoted her attention entirely to the state of the room, bemoaning her hard fate in having children who would leave broken toys on the floor, romp upon the sofa, put the chairs out of their places, and strum upon the piano when her back was turned. "That's master Johnnie's doing," she said, striking a cracked note ; "I found him at it directly after breakfast. There he was perched upon the stool, and hammering with all his might. If he has been told once he has been told fifty times not to touch the piano."—"Why don't you keep it locked, my dear?" said Mrs. Ashton.—

“Why, there’s no use in it, then,” replied Selina; “I always put it open, with music upon it, for look’s sake.” Katharine could not help smiling, though not a very happy smile. How many things at Moorlands were done for “look’s sake!”—“And now tell us, Selly,” said Mrs. Ashton, when, after collecting the toys, arranging the chairs, and smoothing the sofa cushions, something like an appearance of neatness had been restored, “what did the Colonel say this morning?”—“You had better ask John,” replied Selina, still moving about the room, and picking up shreds of paper and thread from the carpet, as if seized with a mania for tidiness; “he is not so over-communicative to me.”—“John, or the Colonel?” inquired Katharine.—“Why, both of them,” replied Selina; “and yet I think there is something due to me,” she added, bristling her head, “if it’s only from respect to my father, who has attended the Colonel and his family for these six years or more. He might have paid me the compliment of at least talking the matter over with me. And John to be so close! I can’t bear it, and I vow I won’t bear it; it’s too bad.”—“But what is the matter, my dear,” said Mrs. Ashton; “here, come and sit down,” and she pointed to the sofa; “just rest yourself, and don’t flurry, and tell us what it is. Ten to one but Mr. Ashton will find some way of helping poor John out of his scrape if he has got into one.”—“Yes, it’s all done for John,” exclaimed Selina, indignantly; “poor John, indeed! and nobody thinks of me, slaving from morning till night with the children, and no maid, or as good as none, and not able to go and see a friend, or ask a friend to come and see me. I, who was brought up with such different expectations!”—“But if you would tell us about Colonel Forbes,” said Katharine, quietly,

but with an evident anxiety in her tone.—“Well, then, there’s nothing to tell,” said Selina, impatiently, “only the Colonel is going to raise the rent, and if so John says we can’t stay.” Mrs. Ashton’s countenance changed, and Katharine said, gravely, “That’s a serious matter; I suppose, indeed, you can’t stay then.”—“And why not? I should like to know,” exclaimed Selina. “Here we have got a good house over our heads, and a garden, flower-garden and kitchen-garden both, and we have done loads to the place, actually spent a fortune upon it; and what right has Colonel Forbes to raise the rent?” Not very logical reasoning, as Katharine perceived; but she replied to the most obvious meaning of the remark: “As to spending a fortune, Selina, you must remember that you have been paying diminished rent up to this time on account of having spent so much.”—“Yes, nominally; as if the difference of rent would make up for all we have done! Why, there are the outhouses, and all the offices, and the new day-nursery, and the greenhouse.”—“I suppose Colonel Forbes will say that the day-nursery and the greenhouse were fancies of your own,” replied Katharine. “You know it was never imagined they would be necessary at first.”—“That means that I ought not to have a drawing-room,” said Selina; “I who had been used to one all my life. It may be very well for you to talk, Katharine, bred up, as you were, in a back parlour, and never accustomed to anything else; but it’s different with me, I’ll assure you.” Katharine suffered the angry feeling to exhaust itself in a toss of the head, and only replied, “I suppose it is no use to trouble ourselves now as to what was or was not necessary; but I am afraid it is plain that if Colonel Forbes does raise the rent it will be impossible for

you to stay, or at least to live as you do now.”—
“And what do you mean us to do then?” inquired Selina.—“Of course I can’t say; it is for you to decide; but I should have thought you might find some smaller place; or if this was not desirable, it would be necessary, I suppose, to retrench here.”—“A smaller place!” exclaimed Selina, putting away from her the disagreeable idea of retrenchment; “why this is not large enough for us.”—“Not when we all come and take possession of it,” replied Katharine, trying to smile. “But you know, Selina, you are not bound to be so hospitable.”—“That won’t do, my dear,” observed Mrs. Ashton, decidedly. “Your father never will approve of John’s having a place which won’t take him in, and where he can’t see the children.”—“And I’m sure John won’t approve of it either,” added Selina. “He is always saying that he can’t get on without his father’s opinion, and that he wishes that he was living with him. And as for the children, they would break their hearts; Johnnie wakes up sometimes now in the night, and calls for grandpapa.”—“But, my dear Selina,” observed Katharine, “all these are very fair reasons, if the question were one of choice; but if you can’t afford it, there is no choice.”—“Only, I suppose,” muttered Selina, as if rather ashamed of what she was saying, “that if we consult your father’s pleasure in staying here, he will consult our pockets by helping us with the rent.” Katharine felt so extremely angry, that she would not allow herself to reply directly, and before she could speak, Mrs. Ashton had interposed her word: “To be sure, my dear, that seems but fair, and an easy way of settling the matter, if Mr. Ashton can afford it.”—“Yes, if he can,” said Katharine, quietly. Selina turned round upon her rather sharply: “Why, you know, Katharine, it

won't be a question of more than twenty or thirty pounds a year, and it is absurd to say that a man with a business like his can't afford that." — "Yet even then it might not be desirable to remain," said Katharine, "if the place is too expensive." — "I don't know what you mean by a place being too expensive," replied Selina; "we must eat and drink, and the children must be clothed, wherever we are." Katharine would not argue the point; she knew it was worse than useless, and looking at her watch, asked if it was not dinner-time? "Yes, all but—that is, it ought to be; but I suppose Nancy won't be ready, she never is. I wish, Katharine, as you go upstairs, you would step into the nursery, and tell nurse to go down and help her a little; and perhaps you will take your bonnet off there, and just stay and watch the children." Katharine went; angry with herself for the inclination she felt to refuse whatever Selina asked; and there she remained for nearly half an hour, nurse taking advantage of the liberty given her to transact a little business for herself, instead of helping the other maid. When, at length, Katharine went downstairs, taking little Clara with her, pouting and crying in the wretchedness of having just waked up from sleep, she found the badly-dressed dinner half-cold; but such things were but trifles; a much more important matter was John's grave face, and his unusual silence, which Katharine and her mother vainly endeavoured to break. Katharine could not go out again that afternoon, Selina kept her fully employed; but she was pleased when five o'clock arrived, and she could listen for the wheels of her father's chaise. From him she always had an attentive hearing for whatever she might say, and there was a great satisfaction in feeling that he had a confidence in her judgment. True, she

had never yet ventured to try it too far, by thwarting his favourite notions ; but this day she resolved to be bold, and discuss with him openly the advantages and disadvantages of keeping John at Moorlands. That there were advantages she was quite willing to acknowledge. If John undertook a new farm he might be obliged to lay out more money upon it, and Moorlands, as it was, suited him in everything but the expenses, which were principally incurred by Selina. These would be the same everywhere. If she could be persuaded to give up her greenhouse, and her fine dresses and parties, and work for her children ! But that was a hopeless wish, and Katharine, as she thought of the future, felt more desponding than ever. When the children were gone to their tea, and Mrs. Ashton and Selina were having a little conversation about Rilworth matters in the drawing-room, Katharine walked down the lane alone. It was an extremely beautiful evening, and the country was looking lovely, the trees luxuriant in foliage, and the fields about the farm and the glades of the park at Maplestead glittering in lines of yellow light. Katharine felt that she was very fond of Moorlands, notwithstanding its annoyances. It had become full of associations, not all pleasant, yet resting-places for memory, and recalling many thoughts and resolutions which were eventful epochs in her own mental history. She felt that she should be very sorry to have no more interest in the place, especially sorry for her father. He had, in a great measure, made it what it was, and it had given him many hours of pleasant and innocent relaxation. Katharine valued them for him even more than he could value them for himself. She saw how they soothed any irritable feelings aroused by business, and awakened his mind to better and holier

thoughts than were suggested in the bustling influence of Rilworth. The Sundays in the country had been especially pleasant to him, and Katharine felt now how much there would be to regret in the quiet walks which they had lately often taken together, and which had given her a satisfaction never so fully realised as then, when she thought she might be about to lose them. But one blessing she had derived from them which nothing could take away,—she understood her father better, and he understood her; he had grown younger, as it were, under the influence of her simple earnestness and loving faith. Hopes and wishes,—the bright hopes and purer wishes of innocent and holy childhood,—had sprung up again in the heart of the shrewd, hard-working, yet always kind-hearted and upright man of the world; and these were never likely to be buried again, whatever might be the outward circumstances of his condition. All this Katharine felt deeply, and most thankfully; she did not see the share which had been permitted to herself in the work, for the direct influence she attributed to Mr. Reeves; and certainly there was much for which she was indebted to him: but from whatever cause the alteration arose, it made her much happier in her home, and caused her to look with regret upon the prospect of any change that might interrupt the peaceful intercourse with her father which she had lately enjoyed.

And the glorious beech woods of Maplestead brought another regret. Katharine felt it, as she caught a glimpse of the house through the trees, and saw the sun's rays lighting up the large window of the morning-room, where Jane was probably at that moment sitting. A keen, sharp pang it was,—the sting of many mingled feelings; affection, and disappointment, and vague foreboding

anxieties; but she had no leisure to analyse them; her father's chaise turned into the lane; and calling to a boy to take the horse, Mr. Ashton alighted and walked with her towards the house.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THAT evening Colonel Forbes and Jane were alone in the drawing-room at Maplestead; an unusual occurrence. They were very seldom alone now. Colonel Forbes was the member for Rilworth, and parliamentary interests make sad inroads upon domestic comfort. He was just what he had been five years before; Jane was thinner — paler she could not well be. She was working—ornamenting a frock for her little boy—she could not work for the poor in the drawing-room, her husband did not like it. Colonel Forbes was reading the newspaper. It was a very warm evening, and Jane leant back in her chair and seemed oppressed by the heat. Presently she stood up and opened the window. The Colonel looked up from his paper: “It is very cold, my dear; are you obliged to have that window open?” —“Oh, no, not at all,” and the window was closed, and Jane sat down again and went on with her work. “Is there anything interesting in the papers, Philip?” —“Nothing that will interest you, my dear.” He read it for another ten minutes in silence, then tossed it aside, and throwing his head back in his chair, closed his eyes. Jane took up the paper. Public matters always attracted her now for her husband's sake. She liked to read the leading article in ‘The Times;’ and she turned over the huge sheets to find it. The Colonel opened his eyes: “Are you obliged

to make that rustling, Jane?"—"Oh! no, not if it disturbs you." The paper was put down softly, and Jane returned diligently to her work. The time-piece struck half-past ten. Jane looked very worn; she had not been at all strong lately. She began putting up her work, and accidentally moved so as to awake her husband. He started up: "Bed-time, Jane! it can't be."—"Yes, indeed it is," said Jane, smiling, and pointing to the time-piece. "It is only a quarter-past by my watch," said the Colonel, "and I wanted to talk to you." Jane sat down instantly. "I must be off to London to-morrow."—"Again!" and Jane tried very hard not to let the silly tears come into her eyes.—"I shall not be gone long," he continued; "not more than a week or ten days. You must really try, Jane, not to fret about it in this way. You know I cannot help it."—"Oh! no," exclaimed Jane; "of course I know you can't help it; but, dear Philip, you must not be vexed with me for wishing not to lose you."—"Of course not, my love; no one dreams of being vexed with you, only you know I don't like sorrowful faces. What I wanted to say to you was, that I have been talking to young Ashton to-day about his farm, and that if his sister comes to you at all about it, you must not give her any hope of my changing my determination."—"Very well," replied Jane, in a quiet voice, and keeping her eyes fixed upon the ground. "I don't want to be hard," continued the Colonel, in an apologetic tone, "but I can't be ruining myself for a man who goes against me in everything. If old Ashton will join himself to the Maddens and their set, he must not expect me to put myself out of my way to keep his son at Moorlands."—"I don't think he has any object in what he is doing," observed Jane; "he has been talked over into being a Protectionist, but I really don't believe he has any decided opinions upon the

subject.”—“That may or may not be, my dear; it will not alter my determination, and therefore I wish to hear no excuses.” Jane shrank into herself; she dared not thwart him by arguing the point. “The Duke and myself have agreed that we must make a stand upon the question,” continued Colonel Forbes; “I shall see the Duke in London, and when he comes home we are to have some meetings at the Castle.”—“At which you won’t want me, I suppose,” said Jane, with an attempt at a smile.—“That will be as it happens, my love; if there are ladies there, of course you will go; if not,”—“I shall stay at home and take care of the children,” said Jane, good-humouredly. He did not say, “Yes,” or “no,” but went on upon his own subject. “That is a most clever article in ‘The Times,’ Jane; have you read it?”—“No, I have not had time, but I will to-morrow.”—“Just sit down and read it now, and tell me what you think of it; it won’t take you long.” Jane’s eyes were heavy with sleep, her limbs were aching; she looked at her watch again. “I don’t think I really can understand it to-night, Philip, I am so very tired.” He looked annoyed, but said nothing. Jane understood the look well. It was his common complaint that she took no interest in his parliamentary business. “Perhaps it is not so very long,” she said; and with a great effort she roused her energies and sat down to study the long political article. Colonel Forbes read till she had ended; and when she laid down the paper, exclaimed, “Well, what do you think of it?” Jane gave her opinion—it seemed to her very conclusive. He looked extremely pleased, and said, that of course it was; it was based upon sound principles, principles he had always advocated, and he would explain to her what they were. He was eloquent upon the subject, and Jane managed to keep awake so well and to ask such

very apt questions that he was put into thorough good humour, both with himself and her. He talked till he was tired, till it was half-past eleven, instead of half-past ten, quite unconscious all the time of the fatigue expressed in Jane's face; and then rang for a bottle of soda-water. "I think I must go now," said Jane.—"Oh! why? It is not at all late."—"Half-past eleven," said Jane, "and you know I ought to be in bed by eleven."—"Oh! that is only Dr. Lowe's folly; I don't believe one hour or another makes the slightest difference."—"Not to you perhaps," said Jane, "but it does to me." She took up her candle, but sat down again. "I think, Philip, if you would get me a glass of water I should be better." Her face expressed so much suffering that he was frightened, and rang the bell violently. "Is it pain, my love?—is it the old pain?" he inquired, anxiously. "Not pain exactly, only an odd faint kind of feeling," said Jane; "but I am better now, I dare say I shall do without the water." She stood up, and he made her take his arm. "We must send you to bed quickly," he said, as he led her along the passage, and delivered her into the care of her maid. "Dawson, don't let your mistress exert herself." Jane smiled, and said she was feeling pretty well now: and he left her, quite satisfied.

Breakfast was earlier than usual the next morning; it always was when the Colonel was going to London. He had to drive into Rilworth to meet the ten-o'clock train. Jane came down stairs at eight o'clock, not looking well; but Colonel Forbes did not see that. She made his breakfast, and then went to his study to receive his orders. They were always given to her, for he would not trust any one else, though many were of that kind which would have been better given to his steward or bailiff. John Ashton and the farm were again mentioned,

and a still greater determination was expressed by Colonel Forbes not to agree to any offer which would keep him at Moorlands, except that of taking a lease for five years more, and paying increased rent. Jane was bolder this morning, and said she should be grieved to have anything done hastily, if it were only for Katharine's sake; but she was silenced by her husband's manner. There was a peculiar moodiness, a clouded brow, which always warned her when she was going too far. He could not endure opposition. He said now, that he never acted hastily; that he had considered the subject well, and had consulted persons whose opinion was worth having; his mind was made up. As regarded Miss Ashton, he regretted that Jane should suffer herself to be warped in judgment by a fancied sentimental affection for a person in every way her inferior. Jane could bear much for herself, but contempt expressed for Katharine tried her severely. If she did not reply it was not because she did not feel, but because she felt too much; but Colonel Forbes never saw anything he did not like to see, and he turned now to a different subject—election parties. He must have some, he said, as soon as he returned, and he begged that Jane would send out cards of invitation.—“Certainly, if you wish it,” was Jane's reply; “but is it necessary for me to appear at these parties? They try me very much, and they seem only intended for gentlemen.”—“I cannot urge the point, my love, but you know what will be the result of showing disrespect to the Rillworth people.” Jane was silent again.—“I shall probably bring down one or two parliamentary men with me,” continued the Colonel. “You will be prepared for them, Jane.”—“Certainly, dear Philip; I am always ready, as you know, for your friends; only spare me the wives and daughters,” she added,

laughing.—“I will spare you what I can, my dear,” he answered, in a tone of impatience; “but you must remember that we have something else to consult besides inclination.” What was to be said to that argument? Nothing. Jane summoned up her courage to endure the importation of a set of fine London ladies whom she scarcely knew, and did not at all like, and who would certainly upset for the time her little plans of occupation and charity.—“I suppose”, she said, timidly, when the last orders were given, “you will not have any leisure in London.”—“I can’t say, my love; probably not; but what do you want?”—“Only that poor boy, young Dawes, who was sent to the hospital;—I should like to know that some one had seen him; or if you could only inquire how he is going on.”—“Better wait till you go to London yourself, my dear,” replied the Colonel. “Ladies always manage these things better than gentlemen. Is there anything else?”—“Nothing except——but never mind, I had better not trouble you. You will not be able, I suppose, to come into the garden and give your opinion about the turn of the new walk. I should like to have it all finished before your return.”—“Finish it your own way, my dear, I don’t care about it. Where are the children?”—“In the nursery, just going out.” He hurried upstairs much quicker than she could follow, kissed his little girl once, his boy many times, and was standing in the hall again before the carriage was ready. Jane followed him there: “How often shall I hear from you, dear Philip?”—“I can’t exactly say, my love; you know I am only going for a week, and I shall be tremendously busy.”—“Yes, I forgot that,” said Jane. “I suppose you could not write and tell me for certain if I have to go to the Castle.”—“If I remember it I will; but you need not fret

yourself about it, you have nothing to do but to make up your mind that you will go.—What are those fellows doing with the carriage?”—“I hear the wheels,” said Jane, going to the hall-door.—“Then, good-bye, my love.” He kissed her hastily. Jane’s eyes were full of tears; but her manner had something of the old impassiveness. Besides, the servants were near; she could not let them see that she was wanting in self-control.—“Remember you write every day, my love,” said the Colonel, “and tell me everything you hear of public matters.”—“Certainly.” Jane’s lips quivered, and she could not say more. The time was gone by when every tone and look was noticed. Colonel Forbes said another cheerful good-bye, waved his hand from the window, and drove off. Jane watched the carriage down the avenue, and when it entered the Rilworth road, turned back to her solitary room to think over and treasure up the one request which savoured of the affection of by-gone days: “Remember you write every day, my love.” She did not add the reason of the anxiety, “tell me everything you hear of public matters.”

CHAPTER XXX.

JANE spent a great part of the morning in the shrubbery, partly to superintend the turning of the walk, partly for the pleasure of being with her children; but she felt sadly lonely, and there was to be a week of loneliness, possibly more, and after that the intrusion of visitors, and then the visit to the Castle. She sighed for quietness, not by herself, but with her husband—quietness which would bring

him back to her and give him sympathy with her pursuits. The whirl in which he lived separated him from her sadly in appearance—she could not, would not, think it was in heart. Even now she did not see his faults, or if she did see them she attributed them only to circumstances. Yet from whatever cause they arose they had the same unfortunate effect upon her,—they chilled her, and doubled her natural fence of reserve. How could she speak to him upon subjects near her heart when she was met by answers which showed that his thoughts were wandering, or that he was irritated by the interruption to his own ideas? But Jane blamed herself almost wholly. When he was cold and absent, she said it was her own unfortunate manner which was the cause; and if he complained of her, as he sometimes did, she at once acknowledged the justice of the accusation. She was, she knew, very chilly at times. But how could she expand to the sun when there was no sun to cheer her? Often and often, when feeling was most aroused, when one word of love would have assisted her over the barrier of her natural disposition, and enabled her to pour forth the full tide of her affection, some act of thoughtlessness, some expression which showed ignorance of her wishes, checked the torrent ready to escape, and forced it back with the rush of disappointed feeling to the depths of her own heart. The world looked at Mrs. Forbes, and called her happy; perhaps she was so according to their notions of happiness. She had no great griefs, no wearing anxieties; her husband could not be called unkind or tyrannical; he was very properly attentive to her, very respectably affectionate; he gave her everything that wealth could procure, and was anxious about her when she was ill, and insisted upon having the very best

medical advice. If he did not share her pursuits, at least he did not generally interfere with them; and as long as she did not come in the way of his political interests, he did not wish to put a check upon her parochial ones. Her children were lovely, healthy, and intelligent; her little girl becoming something of a companion, her boy showing, even in his infancy, signs of a precocious intellect. One grief—the loss of her mother, who had died about two years after her marriage—had indeed darkened her happiness for a time; but (so the world said) a married woman would naturally feel the severing of that early tie much less than one to whom it was the entire break up of home. People were very sorry for her when her mother died, but no one considered that it would be a life-long grief. How could it be, when she had a kind husband and two sweet little children left?

Mrs. Forbes was envied by many, by all perhaps in Rilworth, except one.

“Half-past eleven, nurse,—time for the children to go in, is it not?” said Jane, sitting down on a bench, and beckoning little Lucy to her. “Lucy is sleepy, I am sure,” she added; and she took up the child in her lap, and laid her head upon her shoulder. “Lucy stay with mamma,” was the child’s answer; and Philip, who could only just run alone, put up his little face for a kiss, and cried for her to take him. Jane always felt so free, so happy with her children! There could be no reserve, no chilling absence and inattention with them, and nothing she could say or do would be misconstrued. Tired though she was, she took them both in her lap, and played with them, and fondled them with all the yearning tenderness of a young mother’s love. “You will wear yourself out with them, ma’am,” said the nurse, looking at the tired expression of her face,

“and it is their sleeping time ; they had much better go in.”—“ Yes, I know they had,” replied Jane, yet she kept them only the more closely in her arms, and smoothed the little girl’s glossy curls, and pressed her lips to her boy’s soft cheek. “ Lucy stay with mamma, because mamma is alone ;” and the child turned away from the nurse when she would fain have lifted her to the ground. “ Then Lucy must stay a whole week,” said Jane, “ for mamma will be alone all that time.”—“ Is master gone for so long, ma’am ?” asked the nurse respectfully. — “ A week or ten days,” said Jane, trying to speak as if she did not care. — “ It seems very soon to be away again,” was the nurse’s comment. “ I hoped he was going to stay with us a little, as he only came back so lately. Are you sure you hadn’t better go in, ma’am, and rest a little before luncheon ?” But Jane refused. “ The fresh air,” she said, “ was the best thing she could have, and she would sit on the bench, and read, and then at the same time she could watch the men at their work.” The children were carried away, not without a little resistance from Lucy ; and Jane sat still to enjoy rest and silence. It was unfortunate that she should extract gall from the simplest words ; yet the observation, “ It seems very soon to be away again,” in spite of herself, fretted her. True there were parliamentary duties and engagements ;—no doubt there were reasons why her husband should be so constantly absent from her ; yet there must be something more than common in these frequent absences, or they would not be noticed, and noticed by the servants. Jane could not bear the thought of that ; most especially she dreaded pity from any but those whom she dearly loved. She felt angry with the nurse, and then angry with herself for being so ; and she reasoned, and argued, and thought upon her

husband's pressing business, which must necessarily interfere with his attentions to her; and brought forth from the treasure-house of her memory every little act of affectionate thoughtfulness, every word of anxious interest, and repeated again his last wish, — "Remember you write every day, my love;" till she believed, or thought at least that she believed, him unchanged. If there was a hollow at her heart, a space unfilled, a feeling unsatisfied, Jane would not then acknowledge it.

It was past twelve, and still she was sitting in the garden, working, when one of the men-servants came to find her, and tell her that Miss Ashton was waiting to speak with her. He seemed to expect the answer: "Ask her to come to me in the garden;" and Katharine must have expected it also, for she was already standing on the flight of steps which led from the house to the shrubbery. She was a welcome and frequent visitor; the servant's manner showed that, for he did not think it necessary to point out the bench where she would find his mistress, but left her to make her way by herself through the walks, which perhaps she knew even better than himself. Jane's radiant smile was very dear to Katharine's heart; it was unmistakable, such entire confidence there was in it! And though she had come burdened with care, there was still space left for the quick throb of pleasure caused by the return of a most true and long-enduring affection.

Five years of trial and mutual experience and sympathy! How closely they may knit human hearts together, let the world strive to raise what barriers it may of outward position! "I have been thinking of you, Katharine," said Jane, "fancying you might be here this morning, because I saw your father's chaise go up the lane last evening, and so I

concluded you were all at Moorlands.”—“We came yesterday,” said Katharine; “my mother and I walked in the middle of the day, and my father drove over in the evening.”—“And does your father like his new pony?” inquired Jane. “He was just going to buy it when I saw you last.”—“Yes, he likes it very much,” answered Katharine; “but I am afraid it won’t be a pleasure to him much longer.” “Why not?” asked Jane, though she felt conscience stricken for knowing the answer beforehand. “Can’t you guess, dear Mrs. Forbes?” said Katharine, looking at her with a little surprise. Jane rather hesitated. “Perhaps I may guess something about it, Katharine; but one must—” she was going to say, “hope that a mutual agreement may be possible;” but she could not venture upon this, for she was certain that on her husband’s side at least there would be no change. “I don’t think there is anything to hope for,” continued Katharine; “Colonel Forbes has a fair right to an increase of rent; both my father and John acknowledge that; the misfortune is, that John cannot afford to pay it.”—“I should be very, very sorry to lose you as a kind of neighbour,” said Jane; “I should not see half as much of you then, Katharine.”—“And I am sure we shall be very sorry to go,” said Katharine; “we have had many happy days at Moorlands, my father especially. He will never like any other place as well, and indeed I doubt if he will have the opportunity. There is some notion of John’s coming back to the shop.”—“But that would never do, would it?” exclaimed Jane. “When he has not been brought up to the business; he would never work in it well.”—“I don’t think he would,” replied Katharine; “and that is the reason why I never urge the point myself, though it seems the most natural thing to do. But then if he does not enter

the shop, I don't know what he is to do; it is very perplexing." She looked thoroughly harassed, and Jane pressed her hand, and said, "Poor Katharine! I am so sorry for you," just as she would have done in the old days. Katharine struggled against the weak feelings which rose up in her throat, and gave her a sensation of being suffocated, and then she said, "I am much more sorry for my father than for any one else. I hoped the latter years of his life would have been peaceful, but troubles seem to be thickening upon us."—"They do that with us all, I am afraid," said Jane; "but, dear Katharine, we must try and see some way out of this business. —I wish Colonel Forbes was here."—"Is he not?" exclaimed Katharine, with a tone of excessive disappointment; "I thought I saw him yesterday."—"He was here yesterday, but he is gone to London to-day," replied Jane; "and he will be away probably a week or ten days; and when he comes down there will be friends with him, and after that I think we shall be going to stay at the Duke of Lowther's."—"That will not be much quietness for you, dear Mrs. Forbes, and you want quietness," said Katharine, putting aside the thought of her own troubles, as she noticed Jane's worn expression of face.—"I shall have a week's quietness at any rate," said Jane; but the words had in them an accent of bitterness; "and I must make the best use I can of it," she added, "by growing strong. But, Katharine, what is to be done for you in this business?"

Katharine considered a minute. "I should have liked best to talk to Colonel Forbes," she said; "I think I might have made him see things my way then. It is better to ask favours oneself, and what I have to ask is a favour."—"For yourself or your brother?" inquired Jane.—"For my father, principally," replied Katharine; "but does that

make any difference?"—"Only that those horrible politics come into the question," said Jane; "Mr. Ashton and Colonel Forbes are not quite one as they used to be." Katharine's start showed a sudden enlightenment. She drew herself up with a momentary feeling of pride, and said, "If that is the cause why Colonel Forbes wishes my brother to go from Moorlands, there is nothing more to be said."—"Just as hasty as in the days of Miss Richardson," exclaimed Jane, with a smile. "Gentlemen are gentlemen, and will have fancies about politics, which you and I perhaps may think carried to a wrong extent; but it does not follow, dear Katharine, that private friends are to quarrel in consequence."—"Quarrel! Oh, no, dear Mrs. Forbes. I was so wrong; please forgive me;" and Katharine looked, and was, ashamed of her burst of petulance. "My father suggested something of the kind," she continued; "and that was the reason why he would not come and talk over the matter himself; but it lies so near his heart that I could not bear to give it all up without an effort, and so I said I would be bold and come instead."—"And what is the favour which Mr. Ashton is too proud to ask?" inquired Jane.—"Why, that instead of making John take a lease of the farm for five years more at once," replied Katharine, "which I believe is what Colonel Forbes wishes, he may be allowed to try it for one year longer with only a moderate increase of rent, and by that time my father thinks John will be cleared of some of the difficulties which press him now, and will be able to see his way clearly, and judge how far it will be wise to continue at Moorlands. I was very averse to this plan at first," continued Katharine; "I am afraid that it is too much of a place for him. But my father urges it so much, that I suppose he is right;

and in fact, as he says, if John were to give up the farm at once, he would be thrown upon the wide world without a home or occupation, and it might be months and months before he would find anything to suit him; whereas, the delay of a year will give him time to look about."—"I wish I could settle the matter directly for you," replied Jane; "but I am afraid there must be some delay, unless, ——" and she paused.—"It frets my father very much," continued Katharine; "I have scarcely ever seen him in such a state of worry as he was last night; and now, this morning, instead of going into Rilworth, he is staying with John, talking over affairs, and going over the farm."—"It is a pity he has not some wise farming friend to advise him," said Jane; "he cannot have had much experience himself."—"Mr. Ronaldson talked of coming down," said Katharine.—"Oh! Mr. Ronaldson," exclaimed Jane, laughing; "your old friend Charlie, Katharine. I remember how the word used to slip out, and how you always corrected yourself and said Mr. Ronaldson immediately afterwards quite properly."—"I must never call him Charlie again to any one," said Katharine; "he is a grand man, and going to be married?"—"And to give up the Duke's northern agency, and take the Rilworth one, is he not?" inquired Jane.—"Not that I ever heard of," replied Katharine; "he is coming down; but, as I said before, to see my father and John; and I have a notion too that he may be wishing to bring his wife with him, and introduce her to his old friends."—"Oh! is that all? but I did hear something about the Rilworth agency, I am sure. Never mind about that though, now; tell me what will be done if Mr. Ronaldson does not come?"—"My father and John will have to decide matters for themselves," said Katharine;

“and I don’t think,—I hope it is not very undutiful,—but I don’t think they are very likely to decide wisely.”—“And delay is all you want?” said Jane.—“Yes, delay, with a moderate increase of rent; only I thought,—dear Mrs. Forbes, would it be troubling you very much to ask you to write?” Jane looked extremely uncomfortable, and Katharine’s quick eye instantly caught the change in her countenance. “But not if you have any objection; if you at all think it would be better not,” she added; “you must know much better than I can.”—“It might be better for you to write yourself, Katharine,” observed Jane; and a flush of painful feelings crimsoned her face. Katharine made no answer for some moments, and then she said, “If it is because of politics that Colonel Forbes wishes John to go, it will be better to let things stay as they are; I could not write myself.”—“Why not?” inquired Jane.—“Because it is not my place, and he would think so, and be angry; writing is such a very business thing—it is quite different from talking. I think I could have explained myself if I had been able to see him.”—“And you may see him very soon,” replied Jane; “I will let you know directly he comes home.” Katharine thanked her, but her manner was that of a person who was very disappointed. Jane could not bear this, she felt as if she had been cowardly. “I am afraid I have vexed you by not agreeing to write myself,” she said.—“I dare say I am wrong in being vexed,” replied Katharine, candidly; “I am sure you must have very good reasons.”—“I would do it in an instant,” said Jane; “if I thought it would further your cause.” Her colour went and came fast, and Katharine saw directly that she must not press the subject. Jane felt as if she had betrayed herself by giving cause

for suspicion that her influence with her husband was not what it once had been. She could not bear that, even with Katharine; and she tried to explain, to lay the blame upon politics, but it would not do. She was so thoroughly true in feeling and in word, that the shadow of dissimulation perplexed her painfully. Katharine's perceptions were too keen not to read something of the truth. "Dear Mrs. Forbes," she said, as Jane held her hand affectionately; "please do not try to explain. I was in fault, not you; it would really vex me now if you were to write. My father must wait, it will only be the delay of a week."—"No, only a week," said Jane, abstractedly.—"And I will go home and preach patience to him," continued Katharine. Jane assented, but in the same absent way, and Katharine rose to take leave. "I had a great deal to say to you," observed Jane; "but it is gone now; my head aches terribly." She put her hand to her head, and the same look of suffering which had frightened her husband the evening before came over her face. Katharine did not like to leave her, and begged her to go into the house; but Jane shook her head. "Just tell them to send my maid to me, that is all I want—good-bye, dear Katharine; it is going off again, I shall be quite well in a minute," she added, as Katharine watched her anxiously; "I sat up too late last night, that is all."—"You want some one to take care of you," said Katharine. She spoke without any particular meaning, merely from kindness; but the words shot like a dagger through Jane's heart, and tired and ill as she already was, she leant her head upon Katharine's shoulder and burst into tears.

CHAPTER XXXI.

KATHARINE went back to Moorlands, thinking very little of her own affairs—very much of Jane's. Some incidents, trifling in themselves, solve mysteries which have perplexed us for years. Five years had Katharine been pondering the question which she had asked herself when first she met Jane as the mistress of Maplestead—Was she going to be happy? For five years had she watched the course of Jane's life, noticed her looks and words, and varied in her opinion almost with every fresh opportunity for observation. In her first married days Jane appeared blind to that which to Katharine was clear as the sunlight. She was so unselfish and self-sacrificing that she seemed not to have the power of perceiving selfishness in others—especially in those she loved. It was so easy to her to give up her own wishes, that she was not conscious when she had done so. During this period Katharine imagined that Jane was happy; or if occasionally clouds appeared to be gathering, they formed only a thin mist, which scarcely could be said to obscure the brightness of her life. But then came a change. Colonel Forbes entered upon political life, and everything was considered subordinate to his parliamentary interests. His wife's domestic quiet was disturbed, and her most cherished pursuits were put aside, if in the slightest degree they crossed the path of his ambition; and Katharine could not but perceive that Jane was oftentimes in consequence sorely fretted. As an instance, she had kept up the care of her district, not very regularly, but still with a thoughtful judgment and kindness which

had been a great help to Katharine, and many were the little favours which the poor had obtained from her influence with her husband. But this was now stopped. When Katharine mentioned cases in which Colonel Forbes could be of use, Jane hesitated to mention them. He was busy; or she was afraid he would not like to do what he was asked because of offending Mr. So-and-so; or she knew he would not take any steps in the matter until he had consulted some one else. There was always some obstacle in the way, very distressing to Jane—Katharine could see that—but quite insurmountable; and at last Jane gave up her district; partly, she said, because of health, partly because of want of leisure; but a very great deal, as Katharine suspected, because she felt that kindnesses were expected from her which she had not the power to show.

Still these vexations might not disturb the real happiness of life, and everything was outwardly smooth with Jane and her husband. Katharine had not much opportunity of seeing further. The instinct of her own good taste made her feel that she must not go to Maplestead even as often as Jane would have been willing to see her there. Jane had a regard for her from the associations of old times, but Colonel Forbes could not care in the least about her; and Katharine very soon perceived that, although he expected his own friends to be welcomed at once by Jane as hers, he did not at all think it necessary to reciprocate the sympathy. He was very civil to Katharine when they met; but that seldom happened. When Katharine knew that Jane was alone, she went to Maplestead to see her; when she knew that Colonel Forbes was there, she never intruded except when business required it.

But even in those few meetings, a quick eye like

Katharine's could, after a time, discover some causes for doubting Jane's perfect happiness. It was quite evident that she humoured her husband, not from affection only, but from fear. Whenever he began a subject, she pursued it, even at the risk of tiring others; whenever she had a subject to begin herself, she touched upon it with delicate caution. If he showed an interest in it, it was followed out; but if he was abstracted or indifferent, it was instantly dropped. If she differed from him it was always with the utmost humility; her suggestions were those of a gentle child doubtful of her own power. Now and then he would listen to them, but more frequently he just smiled and turned to another subject. He was kept in good humour by these means, and so Jane was satisfied; but it was a life of constant effort—there was no freedom in it. Jane could not read or write, or work, or talk—she could not even say that she liked or disliked a thing, without consulting that handsome, polished, clever brow, which was open or clouded with every change of the working mind within.

And the provoking point to Katharine in all this was that there was so little directly to complain of. If Colonel Forbes had been passionate, or absurdly particular upon any special subject, or exacting in any one peculiar fancy, there would have been a direct cause of offence, and it might have been reasoned against, or borne patiently; but it was an indescribable, intangible source of trial, and one to which his own eyes were necessarily blinded. He had always loved himself best; he did so now. It was not possible for him to perceive that he was changed in any way, because, though his outward manner might be different, his heart was unaltered. His indifference to Jane's wishes and feelings now was only another form of the same

selfishness which, before they were married, had induced him to consult them. He loved her first because she pleased his taste, and approved herself to his judgment of what the wife of a man in his position ought to be. To indulge the feeling, to obtain her thankful affection in return, he lavished upon her all his wealth, and devoted to her all his time. But his constant thought for the future was not how he could please her when she was his wife, but how she could please him—what a pleasant, intelligent companion she would be—how gracefully she would do the honours of his house—how proud he should be of introducing her to his friends! He wished to see her happy, but then she must learn to be so in his way. There was no change in all this after they married, only the first excitement of feeling had passed off. He was accustomed to her. His selfishness took the form of love before; now it was changed into ambition. He did not really mean to be as unkind as he often was—he would have been shocked to know the effect which his impatience and neglect had upon his gentle wife, and he would have deemed it disgraceful to behave in an unmanly way towards one so trusting and loving; but he was a cold man—cold, though with impetuous feelings, sudden impulses, even overflowings of kindness and apparent benevolence; he was cold because self was his centre, and the touch of self changes the rushing stream of love into an iceberg. To Katharine Ashton, Jane's life was a mystery. Inexperienced in love herself, she could not imagine the extent of its blinding power. Before Jane's marriage she had given Colonel Forbes credit for virtues which he did not possess, upon the strength of Jane's affection for him; now that she was convinced her own first impressions were true, it seemed as if, neces-

sarily, Jane's eyes must also be opened, and that her love in consequence must diminish. But this did not appear to be the case. Jane still mourned over her husband's absence, watched eagerly for his return, planned for his happiness, sacrificed every favourite wish of her own, if she had the most distant suspicion that by so doing she could give him pleasure. Katharine marvelled at her, and the more because she became convinced at last that Jane was not blind as she imagined. She felt her husband's faults if she did not see them—they made her unhappy;—but she loved him still devotedly. Katharine thought she could not have done the same; but then she was not married.

But Katharine had not yet reached the inmost secret of Jane's disappointment. All outward things could be borne, and even the gradual subsiding of her husband's first excessive fondness might have seemed only the natural change from over-excited feelings to calmer, yet not less enduring affection. She was no sentimentalist, fed upon romances, and believing that the honeymoon of life was to last for ever—she was quite prepared for little trials of temper and peculiarities of taste; but she had never supposed it possible that from any cause her respect for him might be lessened. It was long, very long, before the idea had been more than a passing misgiving; it was so intensely painful, that Jane shrank from it, as from a thought of sin. But it came by slow degrees; first as a momentary pang, then a settled doubt, not understood but felt; then a wearing, aching pain, into the origin of which she never inquired, but which was aggravated day by day, as passing events showed the motives which influenced his conduct.

Walking side by side through life, professing the

same belief, repeating the same prayers, kneeling in the same church, sometimes before the same altar, they were far as the poles asunder. Colonel Forbes lived for this world, Jane for the world to come. Colonel Forbes thought only of the praise of man, Jane of the praise of God. They could agree and act together on all great points ; — there is no lasting credit in these days to be obtained except by a certain amount of religion, — and thus Jane had been deceived. But in daily life, when it became a question of strictness with the servants, attention to religious duties at inconvenient hours, exertion to attend church services, braving the annoyance of some person of influence for the sake of an act of charity to the poor, there was always a falling off — very plausibly excused, perhaps even upheld by specious arguments, but still — Jane was far too earnest and single-minded not to see it — a decided, unmistakeable turning aside from the right path. That was the pang, that was the exceeding grief, which none but God might see.

Katharine could wonder, and pity, and love, and long to comfort, as she did this day, when the disappointment of Mrs. Forbes' life was first fully made clear to her ; but she could never know the hours of bitter anguish which Jane spent in her own chamber, kneeling in silent, speechless anguish, and dreading even in prayer to own the sorrow of her heart, since it accused her husband of sin.

It might not have been so with others. There are thousands in the world who marry, and are disappointed — disappointed even in esteem, and yet live patiently and comfortably, and probably would, on the whole, prefer even such a married life to the loneliness of a single one ; but Jane's mind was like her outward form, not constituted to bear the

roughnesses of life. "Trifles light as air," which by many would have been put aside without a thought, were felt by her with a quickness which was actual pain. When once she had the clue to the source of her husband's inconsistency, she could read the worldly motive even in his best actions, and so they ceased to give her pleasure; and then she became grave and silent, almost sad; and he was vexed and angry, and she, in her turn, frightened, and shut herself up still more in her own thoughts. And so the unacknowledged, unrealised estrangement between them increased every day.

If Jane would scarcely allow all this to herself, still less would she speak of it to any one else. A great deal of the depression which she felt was attributed by her to bad health; and she was very much out of health. She was not naturally strong, and the life which she was leading tried her very much. Constant dinner parties, late hours, and perpetual calls for the entertainment of persons staying in the house, were as much as she could have borne if she had been perfectly well and happy, and had attended to nothing else. But Jane could not live a life of idle luxury. Though she had given up her district in Rilworth, she felt herself bound to attend to the poor around Maplestead; and she had a school close to the lodge, and a clothing club, and, was watchful over her children, and thoughtful for the comfort and instruction of her servants; and this in addition to copying her husband's letters, listening to his political pamphlets, and reading, if possible, everything, however dry and abstruse, which she thought might be a good subject of conversation with him.

It was no wonder that she was ill. The strange thing was that Colonel Forbes did not see it. But he had always considered her a delicate person, and

yet equal to considerable exertion when excited ; and he did not see much change in her now, except that she was thinner. How should he? He had a prospect, not perhaps very near, but still sufficient to give him a constant stimulus, of being one day a member of the government. He thought of very little else, and Jane unconsciously encouraged him, for she was quite willing to talk of nothing else.

It seems hard to blame a man for not seeing what another carefully tries to hide from him. Katharine often thought she was severe in her judgment of Colonel Forbes ; and when he was kind to his wife, and civil to herself, she always tried to like him, and make excuses for him ; but there was nothing but her own right feeling to soften her towards him. Political feeling ran very high in Rilworth about this time. Her father and Colonel Forbes held opposite views upon one or two of the leading questions of the day. Of course, therefore, she was not likely to hear anything in his favour from any of her own family ; and now that this question of Moorlands and the rent had arisen, there seemed likely to be a complete feud. What Katharine would have desired, setting aside her personal likings and dislikings, would have been to break the connexion at once, and for John to remove to another place ; but there was a good deal of reason in what her father said upon the subject. Rents had risen everywhere, and John might not find a farm cheaper than Moorlands, even if he left it ; and if he could once be set free from the burdens he had incurred, or rather which his father had incurred for him when first undertaking the farm, he might, with care, find his income sufficient. The next year Mr. Ashton hoped would be a very successful one with himself. If it were so he could help John ; and it seemed a pity, therefore, not to wait and see in what state affairs

were likely to be before taking a step which could not be recalled. All this had brought Katharine's judgment round to the Moorlands side of the question; and she had hoped to go at once to Colonel Forbes and settle it. He was a prejudiced man, but never unfair; and, in spite of political enmity, Katharine thought that the remembrance of old times, and the long acquaintance with her father, would induce him to view the case favourably. It was a great disappointment to her to be obliged to go back to Moorlands and say that she had not seen Colonel Forbes, and that nothing could be decided for another week. Many important arrangements depended upon what John was going to do; and Mr. Ashton had worked himself up to such anxiety, that Katharine quite dreaded the consequence of the trial of patience he was to endure. She found him standing in the porch with John, looking out for her. The children were there too, but, contrary to Mr. Ashton's usual custom, he was not playing with them, or indeed noticing them at all; and in fact they were in the way, and John had just called to the nurse to take them to the nursery.—“Well, Kitty, child!” was Mr. Ashton's greeting. He was too proud to ask in plain words for the answer.—“Patience, father,” replied Katharine, lightly; “Colonel Forbes is gone to London for a week.”—John uttered a very impatient exclamation. Mr. Ashton checked his irritation, and only said, “Umph!” but he folded his arms, and walked away by himself. John was just then summoned to the farm. Katharine followed her father. She put her arm within his, and they went into the garden, to the broad walk which separated the kitchen-garden from the lawn. “Only a week's patience, father, dear,” said Katharine, gently; “we must be contented to wait for

that."—"Yes, Kitty, yes." He seemed very thoughtful. — "Is it of so much consequence?" continued Katharine.—"Only another week's anxiety, Kate; and there has been enough of that lately."—"And I am afraid there will be enough of that to come," observed Katharine; "whether John goes or stays, it will be very uphill work with him." "And with us all," continued Mr. Ashton; "Moorlands has cost me a pretty good penny, taking one thing and another."—"I don't think we any of us care much about being rich," said Katharine; "at least my mother and I don't, I am sure."—"No; and there would always be the business," observed Mr. Ashton. "Mr. Madden was with me yesterday afternoon, when you were gone, talking about Henry. He wants to see him a partner very much."—"And you are inclined to have him, aren't you?" replied Katharine. "He would bring in some ready money, and help you a good deal; and really, father, you want help."—"Yes," replied Mr. Ashton, gravely, "and I can't have it where I ought to have it. If I were to go over life again I would not do as I have done."—"Not with regard to John," said Katharine; "but, father, dear, there is no good in looking back and regretting." He did not seem inclined to take advantage of the consolation, but went on with his own thoughts. — "It was a foolish kind of teaching the boy had when he was a child,—all that petting, and humouring, and bringing him up to think he might choose what he would be. If we had only told him at once that there was the shop and he must look to it, he wouldn't have said what he did to me just now."—"What was that?" asked Katharine, anxiously; dreading above all things a misunderstanding between her father and her brother.—"I can't blame him for it," said Mr. Ashton; "it is but my own doing.

But I asked him what he would do if it came to the point of leaving Moorlands, and I told him that he might come into the shop and take the partnership instead of young Madden; and I made him a very fair offer about the house. I said he and Selly could have the upstairs parlour to themselves, and that I would give them the spare bedroom, and fit up the attic for the children; but it wouldn't do, it wouldn't do, Kitty—he can't take to business; and he said he would rather go off to Australia and try his fortune there.”—“Australia!” exclaimed Katharine, in a tone of horror.—“Aye, child, Australia,” said Mr. Ashton, with a quietness which was more painful to Katharine than any outbreak; “and that would break your mother's heart, and mine too.”

Katharine was silent for a few moments. Presently she said, “It is all very well to talk of, but he would never do it.”—“He would, if it came to a question between that and the shop,” said Mr. Ashton. “Kitty, for your mother's sake we must keep him at Moorlands.”—“Well, we will hope we may, dear father,” replied Katharine with a tone of cheerfulness which she was very far from feeling.—“If he stays here, he will come right in the end,” continued Mr. Ashton; “if he tries new-fangled plans he will be ruined.”—Katharine thought in her own mind, that the chances of ruin were about equal in both cases; but she would not fret her father by saying so, and only replied, “Well, we must wait and see.”—“And in the meantime I must give Mr. Madden an answer about the partnership,” said Mr. Ashton. “I did not think he would have hurried matters on so fast; but he says he has an offer of help if the affair can be arranged, and if not he must be looking out for something else for Henry. I should be sorry to lose him; he has a good head

for business, and he is honest and straightforward."—"Yes," replied Katharine; "I wish he was not so much of a politician, he makes himself enemies by it; but, however, one can't have everything."—"And if one has not one side one must have the other," continued Mr. Ashton. "I never knew a place so cut up as Rilworth is by politics. Why George Andrews and Madden don't speak now."—"Their quarrel dates further back than anything political," said Katharine. "They quarrelled years ago at the Union Ball, and even before it."—"The Dis-union Ball you mean, Kitty," observed Mr. Ashton, smiling at his own wit.—"The Dis-union certainly," replied Katharine, "if one may judge from the two parties which date their split from it."—"Very foolish it all is," observed Mr. Ashton, thoughtfully; "things seem so trifling when one looks back upon them."—"Trifling except in their consequences," replied Katharine.—Mr. Ashton walked twice up and down the walk without making another observation; then he said suddenly, "It would have been a better thing for me, Kitty, if you and Mr. Reeves had taken to be friends earlier."—"We must be thankful that we are friends at all," replied Katharine; "I am sure I never could have expected it."—"I shouldn't like him ever to think I was forgetful of what he has advised," continued Mr. Ashton. "I hope, Kitty, when I am not here to look after things, you will see that the subscriptions are kept up as far as can be." Katharine did not quite understand what he meant by not being here to look after things, but she said she should always be delighted to do anything he wished. "And there will be enough for you to do it with," continued Mr. Ashton. "There's the shop, and outstanding debts, and fifteen hundred pounds in the funds; there ought to have been a pretty good deal more, only—" "Never

mind, dear father," replied Katharine, speaking cheerfully, yet with an effort, for she understood now what was in his thoughts; "when the time comes that it shall please God to part us, my mother and I shall not think much about being rich or poor, you may be quite sure of that."—"You have been a good daughter to me, Kitty," said Mr. Ashton. "God will reward you for it."—"He has rewarded me," said Katharine, stopping to kiss him. "It is a thousand times more reward than I could ever deserve to hear you say so." Mr. Ashton put his hands upon her cheeks, according to an old habit, and looked at her fixedly. His eyes were glistening; and when he returned her kiss, first on one side, then on the other, Katharine felt a tear upon her face.

"There is the chaise," she said, looking down the lane to avoid noticing her father. He seemed relieved at the interruption, and said he would go into the house and say good-bye to his wife, and Selly, and the children. Katharine thought the children were asleep, and begged him, as he was coming out again in the evening, not to disturb them; but he could not be persuaded, and stole upstairs, according to his own notions, so quietly, that it was quite impossible for them to be awakened. Clara and Johnnie were lying in their little cribs, quite worn out with the morning's play; their cheeks were flushed with bright crimson, and their hair, with its disorderly truant curls, was clustering round their little calm faces. There were no traces of angry passions then—they might have been sleeping angels.—Perhaps Mr. Ashton thought them so, for his eye dwelt on them with a tender lingering regret, and when he had turned away to kiss the baby who was lying in its nurse's arms, he came back again once more to the crib, and stood looking at them as if he

would fain bear their image with him, to give him quietness in the turmoil of his business. "They can't come to any harm, Kitty, it's impossible," he said, in an under tone; "if they have a silly mother, they have a wise aunt."—"I am afraid aunts can't do much against mothers," replied Katharine, smiling.—"Where there's a will there's a way," said Mr. Ashton. "I look to you, Kitty, to be the poor little things' best friend. There—it won't do to waste any more time with them." Once more he bent over them; Johnnie just opened his eyes and said, "Grandpapa," and put his arms up to him, and then turned aside and was fast asleep again. Clara pouted and moaned, and hid her face in her pillow;—and so he left them. "You will be out again, my dear, at six," said Mrs. Ashton, as her husband stepped into the chaise; "and bring out some biscuits for the children, and ask at Sawyer's for a packet of his best arrow-root. Selina can't take what she has, it is so bad."—"And, father, make Susan tell you if any of the poor people from the district have been up," said Katharine.—"Oh! yes, and the work, Kitty," said Mrs. Ashton. "The work, my dear," she repeated, speaking to her husband. "You will find a roll of calico in the first long drawer of the bureau. That will do for you, Kitty, when you have made the children's frocks."—"Nothing more," exclaimed Mr. Ashton, with good-humoured impatience; "I vow if there is, you shall come in and fetch it yourselves. Good-bye, Selly; good-bye, John, my boy; keep a good heart; good-bye, God bless you all."

They were the last words they heard. At six o'clock that evening Katharine was again walking down the lane, again expecting her father, listening again for the sound of carriage-wheels. The chaise came up the Rilworth road, and she saw it turn the

sharp corner into the lane which, though improved, was still rough, and always associated in her mind with the accident which had befallen her on her first visit to Moorlands. A heavy waggon was in the way. Katharine saw there was very little room to pass, yet fancied that her father would be sure to get by; but the new pony became frightened and restive, and reared; and Katharine rushed forward, not knowing what she was going to do; and the wheel of the chaise became entangled with the heavy wheel of the waggon, and one of the great waggon horses became frightened too, and—Katharine never quite knew in detail what happened next; but there was a terrible confusion with the waggoner and his boy, crying for help, and her father calling to her to come and hold the pony. And then, just as she was about to seize its head, the pony gave a desperate plunge, the chaise was upset, her father thrown out violently, with his head against a stone,—and when Katharine knelt beside him—he was dead.

CHAPTER XXXII.

GLOOM was in the streets of Rilworth; the principal shops were shut, and many faces were grave,—many sorrowful and compassionate,—whilst the heavy clang of the tolling bell gave warning that one, a companion and friend, was about to be carried to his grave.

Mr. Ashton had been much respected; he had been associated with all the chief events in the little town for the last five-and-twenty years.

Persons had learnt to think that his advice was necessary; that without his judgment difficulties could not be satisfactorily arranged; and, of late years, more than respect had been attached to his name; he had shown himself a kind and unselfish friend, and a liberal benefactor to the poor. He was followed to his last home with blessings; and those who knew most intimately the workings of his secret heart prayed that, when their summons should come, they also, like him, might have made their peace with God.

These were soothing thoughts, even to Katharine, as she sat that day by her mother's bedside, thankful that the torpor of opiates had given a short respite from the restless feverish anguish which had been Mrs. Ashton's trial for the last week.

Katharine was strangely altered in that short time; she could even see it herself. She had grown so old,—the lines of her features were so deeply indented, her eyes were so dim and dark;—but she was quite quiet and self-possessed—she had been so from the beginning. She had known exactly what to do, and to order; she had never troubled her mother with a single question, yet had arranged, even to the minutest particular, according to what she knew would be her wish; whilst it seemed to Mrs. Ashton as if she was never left. Katharine was at hand, by night as well as by day, to whisper soothing words of hope, — to suggest the duty of faith and submission, — to lead the troubled, broken heart to the rest which, stunned by sorrow, it scarcely knew how to seek. How all this was done Katharine could not tell. She had indeed kind friends; Mr. Reeves was with her often; and Jane made herself so much at home at Moorlands, that she was allowed to enter the house at all hours, and make her way unnoticed to Katharine's room,

and remain there as she chose, without its being thought necessary on either side to make an apology for intrusion or neglect. But the real support was nothing earthly; it was a strength beyond her own, beyond any human power, which upheld her. For Katharine was like one in a dream. Comfort was taken mechanically, — even offered by herself mechanically. She did not feel that she had any feeling, — she knew what was to be done, and she did it, without tears or any outward expression of grief. Only at last, when the calm summer breeze brought to her from afar the first sound which told that it was the day of her father's funeral, she burst into tears, and the weight of a heavy cloud seemed to pass away from her mind.

Selina came in to see her; and this was something of comfort, for Selina, though not sensible or useful, — that she never could be, — was softened, and in a degree sympathising; and she could help Katharine a little, by sitting with Mrs. Ashton whilst Katharine refreshed herself in the garden. She was come to offer this now. Katharine thanked her with a smile, and a whisper of gratitude, and then she took her prayer-book, and went out. The broad walk was the best place for exercise; but she could not go there, it had been her last happy walk; besides, her thoughts were away in the churchyard at Rilworth. She was, in fancy, standing beneath the old yew tree, where her grandfather and her grandmother had been laid, and where her father was now to rest; she was listening to a voice repeating, "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord;" and she longed to kneel alone, and rest her weary heart with the same blessed words. And so she went to a small summer-house which was used as the children's playroom, where she could lock the door, and

be quite to herself, and sit or kneel unperceived, and see from the narrow window the tower of Rilworth Church, and listen for the last toll which would give notice that the service was begun.

It was all gone through. Katharine had prayed, that when she herself should depart this life, she might rest in Christ, and be found acceptable in His sight on the morning of the Resurrection; and still she knelt, in tranquil thought of that bright reunion which was to restore to her the affection for which her soul was yearning. Tears came very fast now, but they were not bitter. She could read great mercy in the present, terrible though it was. She could trust in it for the future; and, though she could not think of anything very distinctly, there was a sure loving confidence and submission granted her, which was like the peace of sleep to her worn spirits. After a time she rose up from her prayers; but still she lingered at the little window, unwilling to lose the sight of the old church tower, which was more a home to her now than anything else could be. She heard voices about the farm, and knew that one was John's. He was especially dear to her just then, for their grief was in common; and she forgot all his follies when she was trying to comfort him, though it was often painfully forced upon her that she was the person to whom all looked for advice and support; and that he, who ought to have been everything as the head of the family, was comparatively nothing.

Thinking that he would come into the garden to look for her, she went out to meet him; but the voices she had heard must have been in the farm-yard, for no one was in the garden except the nurse with the children. Katharine had not seen the little ones before that morning. They ran up to her directly:—"See, aunt Kate, new frocks!" and

they pointed to their black dresses. Katharine turned from them, unable even to kiss them. A choking, hysterical feeling rose up in her throat, and she walked very quickly up and down the gravel path, trying to overcome it; now and then she stooped and gathered a flower, but she would not let herself think or look about—it was only by a strong physical effort that she could hope to master herself. She had reached the laurel hedge between the lawn and the kitchen-garden, and turned again. Some one—a man—came along the cross path towards her. She fancied it was John, and did not look at him particularly till he came nearer; then there was a second glance, and Katharine saw that it was not John, it was Charles Ronaldson. She was startled, yet scarcely surprised, after the first moment, for she had known he might come at any time. Her impulse was to go into the house, she was feeling so ill and weak; that, however, would have been unkind; and she could not be so to him who for years had been so kind to them. Besides,—it was a very vague memory which came over Katharine at that moment—something that brought back to her a time of sadness, which yet was scarcely sadness, so little there had been of real grief in it,—but it made her feel gently and kindly towards him; and she was grateful, that after so long a separation, he had come to visit them now in their trouble. He had lost all his shy, odd manner, and came up and shook hands very warmly; and she kept back the struggling tears, and spoke calmly, and told him that she was very thankful to see him; she had often been thinking of him lately, and her mother and John would find it the greatest possible comfort to have him with them now. “He had hoped that might be,” he said, “and, therefore, he had made his arrangements to

come away as soon——” He stopped.—“It was very like you,” said Katharine, gratefully; “you always knew how to put aside your own wishes.”—“They were not put aside at all in this case,” he said; “my wish was to come!”—“To give us comfort,” replied Katharine; “we want it very much! But won’t you go in and see my mother, or at least let me tell her that you are come, and prepare her for seeing you? And John, too, must be told.”—“John knows that I am here,” he replied; “I was at Rilworth with him.”—“Were you!” and Katharine’s glistening eyes sparkled with a little of the expression of former days. “Then you were present.”—“Yes, present at the service; I came on purpose; that is, I only arrived about six this morning. There was no time to come on here then.” They walked on some paces silently, and then Katharine said, “Certainly there are times when we learn to value true friends.” His countenance changed, but she did not see it; and, after a moment’s consideration, he said, “I am glad you will look upon me as a friend; it has been my wish for years to prove myself such.”—“Thank you,” said Katharine, offering him her hand; “my father always considered you one.” He was relieved to find that she could mention her father, and continued the conversation more easily. Katharine told him a great deal of what had taken place which he did not know before, and his sympathy led her on to the expression of her own feelings, and all that had softened the blow to her—those sacred hopes, which perhaps are never more carefully hidden from the general view than when some great shock would at first sight seem necessarily to call them forth to light. Charles was gentle, and kind, and put her quite at her ease. There was nothing in his manner to recall the past, at least

nothing that she would have noticed; indeed, the remembrance was scarcely present to her after the first moment. The conversation, and the walk, and the fresh air were so quieting to her mind, that she would willingly have remained with him much longer; but her mother would be wanting her, and she knew that she must go. Besides, it would be necessary to prepare Mrs. Ashton for seeing Charles. He was wishing himself to find John; his stay, he said, must be very short, and even on that day it would be necessary to talk of business. 'To-morrow,' he added, "I am engaged with the Duke of Lowther's business, and the day after I must return."—"So very, very soon," said Katharine; "and when we have been looking for you so long? But I forgot!"—"Forgot what?" She blushed a little from the dread that she was alluding to a subject he might dislike, and answered, ambiguously, "I forgot how much you must have to occupy your thoughts. It has been a great satisfaction to us to hear of the success you have had."—"Thank you," he replied; but he did not pursue the subject, and only added, "May I ask if you are returning to Rilworth?"—"I think so," replied Katharine; "at least for a time. I have not talked about anything with John yet, he has not been able to bear it; indeed, we have none of us been able. I have not any notion myself what is to be done, but my mother has said once or twice lately that she should like to be at home."—"We must see where her home can be most comfortable," replied Charles. "You will not mind my saying we, I hope, as if I was one of yourselves?"—"Oh, no, no!" exclaimed Katharine. "I am only too glad that it should be we."—Again he seemed checked, but it was only for a moment, and he went on, "John said a little to me just now about the future.

He has a notion—I don't know, of course, whether it would be a practicable one, that Mrs. Ashton would like to remain at Moorlands."—"Live with John and Selina! Oh, no! impossible!" exclaimed Katharine, her natural impetuosity overcoming the sobering influence of her grief.—"He seems very anxious about it," continued Charles, quietly.—"It would not do," was Katharine's reply. "My mother could not live with Selina."—"Not without you, perhaps," he observed.—"Nor with me," replied Katharine; "I should be more likely to mar than to make, in that case."—"Perhaps other persons may judge better than yourself," replied Charles. "Your brother seems to have no fear; he is, in fact, much bent upon the idea."—"He has never suggested it to me," observed Katharine, with a little impatience of manner; then, vexed with herself, she added, "But I would do whatever is right."—"Yes, I was quite sure, thoroughly convinced, you would. I told your brother that if, upon consideration, it seemed the most feasible step, there could not be a doubt of your acquiescence." Katharine felt again as if she ought to have been consulted before her brother and Charles Ronaldson formed plans for her; and a little pride rose up in her heart, which helped her, for a few minutes, to continue the conversation in a cold, business-like way. But it could not last. Charles Ronaldson was so entirely considerate, and even deferential to her wishes, she could not be proud with him. Conscience reproached her, and made her more bitterly sorrowful than she would have been from any other sorrow; and in order to bring herself round to a right frame of mind, she tried to throw herself more heartily into the plan.

A change must be made; that she saw, when Charles had talked to her a little. At first she had

entertained a hope that she and her mother might make arrangements with Henry Madden, or with any one who might take the business, so as to remain in the old house. This would satisfy her mother, Katherine felt ; and it was certainly what she most wished for herself ; she was so fond of Rillworth and her district, and so thankful to be near Mr. and Mrs. Reeves. But the expense she now saw would be more than they could afford, and the house was too large for them ; and, besides, the shop could not well be separated from it ; and if it were, the plan would materially lessen the value of the business if it were sold. The plan which had suggested itself to John was, that Henry Madden should take the shop, just as it was, and carry on the business, giving Mrs. Ashton and Katharine a fixed sum for a certain number of years out of it. Charles was a little fearful of the plan, thinking that if the business were to decrease, it would be an injury to them ; but John was perfectly certain of Henry Madden's fitness for the position, and felt it would save a great deal of present inconvenience. Besides, it had been a plan once suggested by his father, when talking over the chances of the future. This consideration weighed with Katharine more than any other. She had a great opinion of her father's wisdom in worldly matters, and any word of his now assumed a sacred importance in her eyes. Nothing, however, could be settled without talking to Mrs. Ashton ; nor until Charles had gone over the farm, and decided whether the plan of remaining there all together was feasible.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE evening of that day was misty and rather cold. It was late in the summer, and there was an autumnal feeling in the air. Jane wrapped her shawl closely round her, and walked up and down the avenue at Maplestead waiting for her husband. He was to come alone, but in two days' time a large importation of visitors was to arrive. Jane was thankful to have him to herself if only for two evenings; yet she was a little nervous at the prospect of his arrival, for she had made up her mind to speak to him upon business. When Katharine Ashton talked to her of Moorlands, and asked her to write to Colonel Forbes about the lease and the rent, she had a good excuse to herself for declining; but she was not thoroughly satisfied, she fancied that she had been a coward. The feeling was deepened now, for all Jane's sympathies were excited. Katharine's interests had become hers, doubly, trebly, in that week of sorrow. Whatever she could do for her she felt must be done, at any sacrifice of her own feelings. And what had she to fear? Why did her heart sink at the thought of introducing an unwelcome subject and receiving an ungracious answer? Words were but words; and if her husband were annoyed it would not be on account of any real fault on her part. So Jane reasoned with herself; and so perhaps almost all reason at some time or other. There is no real cause for dreading to say disagreeable things, and yet perhaps there is nothing from which people so often shrink; and thus those who are apt to show annoyance and impatience, become in a way tyrants,

not because they mean to be so, but because the persons with whom they live are cowards. Jane went through the conversation in her own mind many times; saw exactly how her husband would look, heard exactly how he would speak. There would be a knitting of the brows first, then an impatient tapping upon the table or the mantelpiece with his fingers, then the beginning of a sentence to interrupt her, then an ominous stillness, and at the end a mental pushing away of the subject, evidenced by a hasty, "My love, it can't be;" and after that would come an impenetrable mood, which was worse than any passion; a mood in which he spoke quite civilly to her, but said only just as much as was necessary, and vented his open irritation upon things in general. The only thing to arouse him from these moods was excitement. Perhaps the arrival of his visitors might be of use in this instance; but even then Jane was not sure that he would soon make friends with her again,—he did not always do so.

She feared all this, yet she longed to see him, and grew nervously anxious when he did not come in time. Mr. Ashton's accident frightened her, and every now and then fearful thoughts came over her of the sorrow there might be in store for herself. Her love for her husband was very great then; what might it not have been if he had proved himself all that she had once fondly expected? Jane had been saved from a great danger, though she was not aware of it. The tendency of her mind was to idolatry; it was a most Merciful Hand which was loosening the tie that might have bound her for ever to earth. She heard the lodge-gates open and the carriage drive up the avenue, and when it came near the coachman stopped. Colonel Forbes looked out and nodded to her; but he did not offer

to alight and walk with her, and she did not ask him. They met upon the hall-steps, with the usual rather hurried kiss. Colonel Forbes was full of indignation about the railway people. "They had been so provokingly negligent," he said; "he had actually lost a carpet-bag; and he had been detained in Rilworth to write and make inquiries about it." And two or three times he went over the history of where he had last seen the bag, and speculated upon whose fault it was. Jane listened, and was extremely sorry, and hoped he would not vex himself; and when his anger had a little subsided he stood warming himself with his back to the fire, which she had ordered to be lighted for him in his study, and asked her how she had been getting on.—"Tolerably," was Jane's reply. "There has been a good deal to try me."—"Try you, my dear?" He looked very much surprised. "What do you mean?"—"Only the accident," said Jane; "Mr. Ashton's accident, you know; I wrote you word."—"O! yes, I remember—very shocking indeed. Poor Ashton! Well!"—he did not quite like to say at once what was in his thoughts; but it came out a very few moments afterwards: "the Protectionists will find his loss at the next election."—"Every one will find it, I think," said Jane; "he was such a very useful person, and so honourable and sensible."—"Yes, he was a good fellow in his way," said the Colonel. "Is not dinner ready, Jane?"—"It was not ordered till seven," replied Jane, "and it is only a quarter-past six."—"A very foolish arrangement," he observed testily; "I wrote you word to expect me at six."—"Yes, but there are so often delays," said Jane, gently; "and I thought you would not have time to dress comfortably. Besides, I was not sure that you might not after all bring a friend with you, and then we should have been

very much hurried.”—“ I wish, my dear, you would learn to believe that I mean what I say. I told you I should come alone at six o'clock. Dinner ought to have been ready at half-past six.”—“ I am very sorry,” said Jane, meekly ; “ perhaps it can be hastened.”—“ And spoilt !” exclaimed the Colonel. “ No ; if we are to wait, let us at least have a dinner we can eat.” He threw himself into an arm-chair, and Jane sat down opposite to him.—“ Shall we have the children down ?” she asked ; “ there will be just time if they are not in bed.”—He made no answer, but rang the bell. When it was answered the servant brought word that Mr. Ronaldson would be very glad to speak with Colonel Forbes if he was at leisure. The Colonel looked up impatiently : “ Mr. who ?” — “ Mr. Ronaldson, sir.” — “ The Duke of Lowther's agent for the north,” said Jane quietly.—“ Oh ! let him come up.” The servant retired.—“ What can possess people to trouble one at this hour ?” continued the Colonel. “ He is a friend of the Ashtons, isn't he, Jane ?” — “ Yes, a great friend,” replied Jane ; “ he is here, I suspect, on purpose to advise them ——” “ Then he had better advise John Ashton to pay more rent, or leave the farm ; there is nothing else will serve him.”—“ Must it be quite such an increase ?” asked Jane, timidly. “ It will come hard upon them now.”—“ My dear, I must beg you to leave those matters to me ;” and of course Jane was silenced.—“ I suppose I had better leave you to talk over your business by yourselves,” she said ; “ so I will go and get ready for dinner.” He did not take any notice of her. If he had she would have followed her natural impulse, and kissed him in remembrance that they had only just met ; but she wanted encouragement, and that he never gave. She went to her room and dressed for dinner, and then sat down to read, but without being able to

attend, her thoughts were wandering so much to Katharine, and all she must have been feeling that day. It was by Katharine's own wish that she had not gone to Moorlands to see her. There were likely to be strangers in the house, friends and connexions who had been present at the funeral, and Katharine felt for Jane what Jane would not have felt for herself, and did not wish to put her in the way of meeting persons she did not know.

The conversation with Charles Ronaldson lasted very long. The second dinner-bell had rung before Jane heard her husband enter his dressing-room. She had learnt to interpret even the way in which he shut his door, and she augured no good from its quick closing and the sliding of the bolt. She joined him when he came out of his room, and they walked down stairs together; and just before they went into the dining-room she ventured to ask whether Mr. Ronaldson's business was of much importance. "We will talk about it by-and-by," was the reply; and Jane blamed herself for indiscretion. They had a silent dinner, partly because the men-servants were in the room; partly, also, because Colonel Forbes gave such very short answers, that Jane did not know how to continue any subject. When, at last, the dessert was placed upon the table, and they were left alone, Jane thought she might once more allude to the subject so much in her thoughts. "You told me," she said, "that I might hear something of Mr. Ronaldson's business."—"Did I, my dear? it was nothing that concerns you."—"Oh!" Jane looked blank; and, after an instant's pause, added, by way of apology, "I did not think it concerned me, but I fancied it might have had something to do with the Ashtons."—"People are most strange in these days," exclaimed Colonel Forbes; "what possible reason

can there be for my granting any special favour to John Ashton?"—"Only the remembrance of 'auld lang syne,' I suppose," suggested Jane.—"I don't know anything about 'auld lang syne,' as you call it, Jane. I believe you have some sentimental remembrance of it, which makes you patronise Miss Ashton; but I must beg to say that I have none myself, and if I had I should not sacrifice the interests of the country to a foolish weakness." Jane did not at all know what to say next; but, finding her husband silent, she remarked that Mr. Ronaldson was such a very sensible, judicious person, she should not have imagined he would have made any unreasonable request. She said this merely because she did not wish to change the conversation suddenly, as though she were annoyed. Colonel Forbes, however, took it up sharply: "I wish, Jane, you would not misunderstand in the way you so constantly do. I never said that Mr. Ronaldson made an unreasonable request, or John Ashton, or any one. It may be all perfectly reasonable, but I may not be inclined to grant it."—"Certainly not," replied Jane; but even then she did not dare ask what the request was. It was mentioned, however, at last. "Ronaldson urges me to give John Ashton a trial at Moorlands for a year, before he takes a lease at the increased rent," said Colonel Forbes.—"Oh! that was what Katharine wanted," exclaimed Jane. Her husband turned round upon her instantly: "Then, my dear, why did you not tell me so? If you and Miss Ashton have been putting your heads together to plan the arrangement of my property, why not do me the favour to let me know what you have decided upon?"—"Oh! Philip," exclaimed Jane reproachfully, "you know that is wrong; you know, quite well, that I never

plan or decide upon anything unknown to you.”—
“I beg your pardon,” he replied, coldly; “I thought I understood you to say that the idea had been mentioned to you.”—“Yes, just mentioned in the course of conversation,” said Jane; “that is,”—and she blushed, for conscience reproached her with equivocation—“Katharine told me what they wished, and asked me to write to you, but ——”
“But what?” asked Colonel Forbes, sarcastically.—
“I did not like to trouble you; I was afraid!” said Jane, still following the impulse of her most truthful mind, to say exactly what had been her motive. Yet she trembled, and not without cause. That word “afraid” touched a dangerous chord—one which from the very first beginning of their affection had produced a jarring note. “Afraid!” he repeated. “I am a tyrant then; my wife is afraid of me; she cannot give me the most trivial confidence! She can talk over my private affairs with her female friends, with Miss Ashton, the bookseller’s daughter, but she cannot come openly to me and tell me what it is of importance I should know.” He pushed aside his plate, rose from his chair, and paced the room. Jane thought she could speak, but she tried, and her voice failed her; and receiving no answer, he went on in the tone of a man who has been deeply injured. “You may think it of no consequence yourself, Jane, to keep up this stiff reserve between us; no doubt it does signify but little to you. My interests, I know, are of very slight consequence to you, except so far as they affect your own personal comfort; but I must take the opportunity of warning you, that you will do yourself and me material injury by persisting in this habit of keeping back everything from me, and making me a stranger in my own house.” Jane’s humble self-upbraiding spirit made her seize upon

the shadow of truth contained in this accusation, and she said, she knew she was cowardly, but she could not have thought, in the present instance, that it could possibly be of consequence to him to know what had passed between Katharine Ashton and herself.—“Everything is of consequence to me,” he repeated, his voice a very little softened; “I wish to know everything; I have told you so repeatedly. You can be no judge what is of importance to me and what is not.” Jane could not in the least understand what she had done; but accustomed to be misconstrued, she had learnt how to behave so as not to irritate him further. So, without requiring an explanation, she only remarked that she should be wiser for the future. “You don’t see the working of things,” he continued, mollified by her gentleness; “it is one thing to say quietly to Katharine Ashton, through you, that the thing can’t be, and therefore it had better not be formally asked; and another to have to refuse point blank a man like Ronaldson—an old inhabitant of Rilworth—a man of influence. It gives me the character of a hard landlord; it sets people talking; it does me harm in a thousand ways. I wish, with all my heart I wish,” he added, “that old Ashton had been at the Antipodes before he made such a fool of me as to persuade me to let a good farm upon those absurd conditions.”—“I did not know there were any conditions,” replied Jane.—“Not that if John Ashton chooses to stay, and to pay the rent, I am bound to renew the lease?” said Colonel Forbes.—“No, I did not know it,” replied Jane; “I never thought about inquiring into such things.”—“Perhaps it might have been better if you had,” he replied sharply. “If Ashton chooses to remain upon my terms, I can’t say ‘No’ to him. It was a promise given when he took Moorlands.”

Jane still could not see why this should vex him; and as his first irritation seemed to be subsiding, she ventured to ask him why he was so desirous that John Ashton should not stay. "When I stand as member for the county, which I certainly shall do at the next dissolution of Parliament, John Ashton's vote will be against me," was the reply. Member for the county! that was a totally new light to Jane. She might well have retaliated now upon him for want of confidence, but she was too humble and charitable for that, and she merely replied, that she had never understood before that he had any idea of the kind.—"Then you know it now, my dear; and it will teach you, I hope, how necessary it is to keep back nothing from me. Either I refuse John Ashton, and have Mr. Ronaldson talking about it to every one, and the world crying out upon me; or I keep him at Moorlands, and nourish an enemy at my own door. If I had only known the matter through you, I might have stopped it before it came to this."—"I am very sorry, very sorry, indeed," said Jane, though she could not see how any confidence on her part could have prevented such a state of things. She rose to go upstairs to the drawing-room—her husband opened the door for her—she waited for an instant, and there was a movement as if she half-expected a kiss of reconciliation—but it was not to be. Colonel Forbes was in a mood. Every one who has experience of moody people will know what that implies. No one who has not can imagine it, even from description.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

JANE did not see Katharine again at Moorlands for some time. The day after the funeral Mrs. Ashton expressed a strong wish to go back to Rilworth, and she was not in a condition to be thwarted. Charles Ronaldson, much to his own inconvenience, agreed to remain another day, in order to be with them, and help them; and he hoped also, by this delay, to bring their plans for the future into some definite form before his departure. If this were not done, he saw only interminable worry for all, especially for Katharine. Every one could wish, but no one could decide. Mrs. Ashton was bent upon living in the old house; Katharine inclined to the notion of going into a smaller one in Rilworth. Selina harped upon the necessity of remaining at Moorlands, under all circumstances; John declared it was impossible at the increased rent which Colonel Forbes demanded. When Charles was with them, his good sense and judgment, and kind sympathy, brought gentleness and harmony; and, notwithstanding the necessity of discussing business, the day of the funeral itself passed off peacefully. But the next morning Charles went off early to Rilworth Castle, and almost immediately afterwards Mrs. Ashton became restless and fretful, — fancied that there was a plan for keeping her at Moorlands against her will, and preventing her return to the old house, and insisted, as has been said, upon an instant removal. Katharine was not sorry for the change—Moorlands was very trying to her. Selina was most provokingly selfish in argument; and the painful disturbance of the household during last

week had made the children more unruly than ever. Her chief regret was for John, who looked very anxious and unhappy, and was bewildered by the new circumstances in which he found himself placed. Katharine was much touched by his manner just before they parted; his chief comfort would be taken away, he said, when she was gone, and he had no heart to set to work at anything, it was all so uncertain. He wished Selly could make up her mind to leave Moorlands at once, only he did not know what they should do then;—go to Australia perhaps, he could see nothing else for them. Katharine was for a moment startled at this reappearance of an idea which she had hoped at first was merely a discontented fancy; but she knew her brother well enough not to oppose him directly, and warded off the subject by remarking that they should all see their way clearly, she had no doubt, in a few days; and in the meantime they must be thankful they had such a friend as Charles Ronaldson to advise them. “Yes,” said John emphatically; “there isn’t another like him to be found in these parts, or anywhere that I ever heard. Oh! Kate, how could you ever ——?” But Kate stopped him: “We won’t talk about that, John, dear; it is best not.” She hurried upstairs to tell her mother that the fly was at the door; perhaps she felt that it was better not to think as well as not to talk.

Very sad was that return to the old house. If it had not been for the constant attention which her mother required, Katharine would have given way entirely under the trial. So like, yet so different everything was from what it had been; and it was not a fortnight since that the world had seemed to be going on as quietly, as if it could never change; or as if, when it did change, it would be by smooth, imperceptible degrees. Katharine had never realised

to herself the possibility of any great shock in her life, it had been so even in its tenor hitherto; but now it seemed as if something strange and frightening might come upon her at any moment. Her confidence in the stability of things had been shaken; and, to add to the sudden rush of grief which came upon her continually, when she was quite unprepared for it, she felt herself nervously incapable of looking steadily upon the future, or of forming any plans which depended upon things remaining as they were. She had a feeling now that nothing could continue. Mr. Reeves came to visit them in the course of the afternoon, and soothed her a good deal. Her mother also liked to see him; he read to her, and talked to her, and that not in a general way, but individually. He told her little things about her husband, which no one but himself knew;—instances of Mr. Ashton's kindness to persons in trouble; remarks he had made, and questions he had asked, which showed a heart thoroughly repentant for its many sins and negligences, and resting its hope of acceptance upon the only sure Foundation. Mr. Ashton had been very reserved to his own family in all that personally concerned himself, but he had talked to Mr. Reeves much more freely; and though Katharine's tears fell bitterly, when she thought that opportunities for mutual sympathy upon these subjects were lost to her for ever in this world, the result of the conversation was to quiet and strengthen her mind, and render her more able to face the trials which might be before her.

Tea-time when it came was very overpowering, both for herself and her mother. It was impossible not to look at the shop-door, and think that it was going to open; and there was the great chair placed where Mr. Ashton used to sit, and Katharine could

not bear to put it aside ; and yet it looked so indescribably mournful, almost awful, she was quite glad when the servant came in, and accidentally put it out of its place ; she could not have moved it herself. After tea, things were a little better ; her mother began to work for the children at Moorlands, making up some common frocks out of an old black gown which she had by her, and this rather occupied her attention ; and she did not, as Katharine had feared she might, talk about the house, and insist upon remaining in it. About eight o'clock she was quite worn out, and went to bed ; and then Katharine sat down to try and collect her own thoughts, and form a judgment as to what was to be done ; a task quite impossible when, as had happened that day, every minute some person or duty claimed her attention.

If it had been necessary to think only for her mother and herself, a decision would have been easy enough — they must take a small house in Rilworth, and either sell the business entirely, or give it up to Henry Madden, with the agreement of receiving a certain sum from the profits. The latter plan would not have approved itself to Katharine's judgment, though, as having been proposed by her father, it would to her feelings, except for one reason ;—all the property of every kind was left to Mrs. Ashton during her lifetime ; and Katharine, conscious of her mother's weak affection for John, was afraid of the consequences of putting everything she possessed within her reach at any moment. If John should be in difficulties, Mrs. Ashton would be certain to help him at whatever sacrifice to herself, or even to Katharine ; and unselfish though Katharine was, both by nature and habit, she could not but see that this might in the end bring ruin upon all. As long as

they had a yearly income from the shop, however small, there would be something for them to depend upon, even in the event (which was very probable) of John's coming upon them for more help than he had already had. His own share in his father's property was very nearly gone. It had been sunk in setting him up in the farm, and assisting him since he had been carrying it on; but he was now in a great degree free from debt; and if he would only be wise and careful, and attend to Charles Ronaldson's instructions; and if Selina would cease to be a fine lady, and give up her greenhouse, and her gay parties, and look after her servants, and work for her children, and superintend the domestic affairs of the farm, everything might be well. But all this was doubtful, perhaps in Katharine's eyes rather more than doubtful; and the large increase of rent which John was called upon to pay would in that case completely crush him. Katharine could not help feeling vexed with Colonel Forbes for driving them to a decision so quickly. If he could have been content to leave things as they were for one more year, they would have had time to judge correctly; but now, with the necessity of coming to a conclusion at once, they were almost certain to make a mistake. Katharine thought over the business vaguely at first, and could not see her way out of the difficulties at all; but then she became more methodical, and set herself to consider, first, what they must not do. Certainly they must not remain in the old house—that was put aside; certainly John must not stay at Moorlands unless he could see his way to the payment of the increased rent; certainly it would be a great expense to go from Moorlands; certainly John was just as likely to fail in another farm as he was in that one; and certainly, also, he was not fitted for any other kind of business, espe-

cially not for trade. All these points were quite clear to her mind, therefore it was clear also, that Moorlands would be likely to prove the best place, if the rent could be paid. There was but one way of managing that point. Katharine was very unwilling to believe it; but the more she thought the more she was convinced that Charles Ronaldson's proposition was the only feasible one for all. She and her mother must go to Moorlands; they must pay John a certain sum, as they would have done if they had taken another house, or gone into lodgings. Mrs. Ashton would superintend a great deal of the in-door work of the farm, to which she had been accustomed in her youth; Katharine would take care of the children, and save expense by working for them, and would endeavour to check her brother when he was inclined to be extravagant, and urge him to exertion when tempted to be indolent; and so, by all joining together, they might hope to go on with tolerable comfort. Katharine could not promise herself anything more, she so very much disliked the plan, and saw so many difficulties and disagreeables in the way of its execution; but it really did seem that to leave John to himself just at this moment would be leaving him to ruin, and that would be far worse for them all than any annoyances which might be caused by the union of the two families. When once Katharine's judgment was convinced she was in a degree at rest. She could face any trouble when it was definite; and her good sense and strong religious feeling soon made her acquiesce in the plan, not as agreeable, but as necessary, and therefore, no doubt, intended to act in some way for their highest benefit. Her mother, she thought, would demur to it at first; but there was a good deal to tempt her in the plan, especially the idea of helping John

and having country occupations. It certainly was strange to herself to see how her opinions had changed since first the idea was suggested; but that fact gave her a most useful lesson in self-distrust. She had naturally very good judgment, and lately she been accustomed to be so consulted, that she was in danger of depending upon her own opinions and her first impressions too much. To see that others had brought forward a plan contrary to her own, but which was likely to be the best in the end, was a very useful discipline. Besides, there was a great deal to be thankful for in the arrangement; family union first, then usefulness, to say nothing of the comfort of a country home and the satisfaction of being near Maplestead. Katharine could not feel happy, or look forward to any pleasure, but she could be grateful; and her last thought, when she laid her head upon her pillow, was of the "Mercy which had followed her all the days of her life."

CHAPTER XXXV.

CHARLES RONALDSON came early the next morning. He was to leave Rilworth at eleven o'clock. Katharine and he had a long conversation together before Mrs. Ashton was down stairs. Katharine put before him the result of her reflections of the previous evening, and received the sanction of his judgment. He was only afraid of two things; one, that Mrs. Ashton might be induced to spend more money upon John than was just and reasonable; the other, that Katharine herself would be worn out by the constant claims upon her time and exertions. They both foresaw that when Selina had

a person with her able and willing to take from her the care of her children and her household, she would become more indolent and absent than ever. The only consolation, as regarded the new plan, being, that she was not likely to be much better under any other circumstances. The same argument held good as to the probability of Mrs. Ashton's ruining herself by assisting her son. She would be as likely to do it if they lived separately as if they were together; and Katharine hoped, by constant care and watchfulness, to put a stop to the petty daily expenditure which Charles Ronaldson feared.

And so they talked for a long time upon matters of mere business; both as calmly, and apparently as unconcernedly as if no storm of suffering had ever passed over their heads. No one would have supposed that Charles Ronaldson had ever entertained a feeling for Katharine beyond that of hearty regard; and her manner was so entirely unconstrained, her thoughts so engaged by her home interests, that it was evident the very memory of the past days had for the time been blotted out. But the parting hour drew near. Mrs. Ashton was not quite ready to come down and say good-bye to him, as she wished; and Katharine went to help her, for she was afraid that Charles might be late for the London train. When she returned she found him standing by the mantelpiece, his head buried in his hands, and lost in thought. "My mother will be ready in less than ten minutes," she said; "can you wait? I think there is time if you have nothing else to do." He took out his watch: "I think there will be a quarter of an hour. I left my visit to you till the last."—"That was very good of you," said Katharine. "My mother will be very sorry not to

have seen more of you; she would not have stayed in bed this morning if I had not forced her to it, fearing to miss you.”—“I am very thankful to have been able to come,” he said, “and I shall be very anxious to hear how you are getting on.”—“I must write and tell you if we are in difficulty,” said Katharine. The words were followed by a slight blush; she had spoken without consideration, and the thought crossed her mind that perhaps she had been forward; but then he was an old and tried friend, and engaged to be married, and she could not bear to think—she would not allow herself to think—that there was any reason why they should not be perfectly free with each other. “Would you really write?” he began eagerly; but the sentence was ended coldly, as he added, “You could not do me a greater favour.” Katharine was a little pained; perhaps she had really been too forward, and he did not like it; and, as an indirect excuse, she said, “You are such a very old friend, and I don’t know whom else I could apply to.”—“I should have supposed Mr. Reeves might have been of use to you,” he replied in the same chilling tone.—“In some things; yes, in some,” replied Katharine; “but not in these business matters. Of course, though, I will not trouble you unnecessarily.” She did not know whether he heard the latter part of her speech, for just then her mother came in, and Charles went up to her to shake hands, and ask how she was. Katharine was so uncomfortable at the change in his manner, that for an instant she forgot her usual attention to her mother, and thought only of herself. So silly and wrong it seemed in her to speak hastily, as she often did! Naturally enough he would think it strange that she should be the one to propose a correspondence, and yet she really meant nothing by it, nothing at all. If she had meant anything,

she could not have spoken so freely. Time was passing quickly, and Charles had but a few minutes to spare, and these were engrossed by Mrs. Ashton. He did not think it wise just then to enter into any detailed plans for the future ; but he told her, that he had been over the farm at Moorlands with John, and had looked into his accounts, and the result was that, with care, he thought John might do well there, if between them they could provide the increased rent. At any rate he was not worse off there than he would be elsewhere, supposing he still persisted in farming. Mrs. Ashton was much relieved at this opinion. Of all things she disliked changes, and just now they would have been peculiarly painful to her. She could not help feeling as if Charles had in some active way been instrumental in bringing about such a satisfactory idea, and her gratitude was most cordial. It had been a very great comfort, she said, to see him ; and not to her only, but to John and Selina, and Katharine, to all of them indeed ; he had done for them what no other person could have done just then. “ And now you are going,” she added, as he took up his hat, “ and we shan’t see you again till one can’t say the time when.”—“ It will not be so very long,” he replied ; “ at least, I hope not. There is likely to be business for me in this part of the world before long.”—“ Indeed ! and then we may hope that you will bring some one else to see us,” said Mrs. Ashton, with a mournful attempt to speak cheerfully, which Katharine was afraid might end in a burst of tears. “ My mother is always talking of coming,” said Charles, “ but the distance is very great for a person of her age.”—“ If you will bring her to us——” began Mrs. Ashton ; but the sentence was stopped by a remembrance that she might not have a house of her own in which to receive a guest, and she sobbed hysterically. Katha-

rine was very much distressed for her, and almost as much so for Charles, who was impatient to go, and yet could not bear to leave her in such a state. Katharine brought her a glass of water, and after drinking a little she grew more composed, and tried again to resume the subject: "Kate and I shall be most glad to see your mother, wherever we may be, Charlie; tell her that from us. But I was not thinking so much of her,—there will be another Mrs. Ronaldson, won't there, before long?" Charles turned deadly pale, and he really could not speak. Katharine came to his assistance: "You must forgive us, Mr. Ronaldson; we cannot help being interested in all which interests you; but you shall tell us about it at your own time; only," she added, shaking hands with him warmly, "we wish you so much happiness." Katharine's voice was singularly firm, almost unnaturally so; there was not any feeling at all in it, unless it might have been the effort to repress feeling. Charles appeared in a manner stunned; he just said, "Thank you, thank you, good-bye;" and then it seemed to strike him that he had been remiss, and he came back again to Mrs. Ashton, and begged her to let him hear of anything he could do for her. "There is his pencil-case; he has left his pencil-case, Kate," said Mrs. Ashton, as the door closed. Katharine hurried after him: "Mr. Ronaldson, your pencil-case; you have forgotten it." He turned at the sound of her voice, and his face was almost ghastly in its expression. "Good-bye, once more," said Katharine.—He kept her hand: "Miss Ashton—only one word—did you really think I was going to be married?"—"Yes, indeed." Katharine's heart beat very quickly, and, angry with herself—she did not know why—she added, "we were very glad to hear it." That was a sharp pang of conscience

which followed. The words were not strictly true; but Charles could see nothing of the inmost heart, and, dropping her hand abruptly, he said stiffly, "I will ask you to contradict the report;" and they parted.

Katharine went back to her mother. Mrs. Ashton had eaten no breakfast, and Katharine tried to persuade her to take a cup of coffee, and said she would make it herself in the parlour. "Thank you, my dear; you don't look at all well yourself this morning," was Mrs. Ashton's reply; "won't you have some too?"—"No, thank you, mother, dear," replied Katharine; "I made a very good breakfast at eight o'clock;" and, turning away from Mrs. Ashton's scrutinising gaze, she busied herself in going in and out of the room to fetch what was wanted, and in stirring the fire, and putting on coals, for it was a chilly morning and almost autumnal, though the season would have been called summer. Mrs. Ashton did not talk very much; she did not seem to have much heart for business, and probably did not like to disturb herself with the idea of the change which no doubt she felt in her secret heart might soon be necessary. Katharine did not sit down at all; and at last Mrs. Ashton grew fidgety, and said she could not bear such incessant movement—if Katharine had things to do upstairs she had better go and see about them, and leave her to herself; she would try and work a little at the children's frocks. Katharine gave her her workbox, and threaded several needles for her; and then, kissing her, and begging her to be sure and ring the moment she wanted anything, went away. And most thankful she was to go—to be alone. She did not think it would have been possible to remain under that restraint of feeling much longer, for she was so lonely, so unhappy; all the old grief had come upon

her, and with a new bitterness. There was no one now to soothe her and thoroughly sympathise with her. The one person who could have done so was gone—quite gone, for ever it might be. The great distance between them was like for ever; and she could not write to him now, a barrier was between them—he was free. At that thought a feeling of gladness, which shocked and pained her, rose up in her heart. She would not own it to herself at first; but she was very true with herself—she never wilfully trifled with even the slightest suggestion of conscience, and presently she returned to the feeling and examined it. What made her feel glad? Selfishness, vanity—so at least she said to herself. She liked still to be first in his eyes—she would wish to be so even at the expense of his happiness. It was a very humiliating confession. Katharine felt as if for the first time she was learning the deceitfulness of her own heart. But how much she had to be thankful for; how much the mistake under which she had been labouring had helped her during the last few days! With her present wrong, silly, vain feelings it would have been impossible to have been quite at her ease with Charles as she had been. And she could understand now why he seemed to dislike the idea of her writing to him. Certainly it would have been an odd thing to offer if they had stood to each other in the same position as formerly; but he would perceive now how it happened that she ventured to propose such a thing; that was one comfort; she would be re-established in his good opinion if she had in any degree lost it. The very satisfaction however which this idea gave was a fresh cause for Katharine's self-condemnation. She said to herself that she cared too much for his good opinion; it was vanity still, and she was sure he would be shocked at it; for in this last conversation

he had given her the impression of being even more strict and severe in his judgment of right and wrong than he was in the old times. As to his retaining any feeling for her it could not be, he was quite altered. He had evidently no thought of anything but business all the time he was with them; and yet at the very minute Katharine said this, there was a lurking feeling of the contrary, which she instantly tried to stifle. All these conflicting notions were very unsafe for Katharine, they made her think of Charles Ronaldson more than was at all desirable for her peace of mind, or even her moral well-being. Nothing which makes us concentrate our thoughts upon ourselves can be good for any length of time, and self-examination is of all things the most likely to degenerate into morbid self-consciousness, if it is not carried on in a strictly religious spirit. It was happy for her that active duties were at hand to force into active thought; yet even then there was the aching at the heart, the perpetual recurrence of some thought connected with him, the involuntary listening for his voice when the door-bell rang, with the absurd hope that something might have detained him, and he might be returned to wish them another good-bye. All this was worse than grief; it lowered her in her own eyes, for she was constantly resolving to think of something else, and constantly breaking the resolution. Fortunately for Katharine she was not likely to be noticed whatever she might be thinking or feeling; there was too much to make her unhappy for it to be a matter of surprise if she seemed so; and though Mrs. Ashton several times during the day remarked how ill she looked, she always accounted for it, and added: "And indeed, my dear, no wonder!"

The next day was Sunday, and they went to church in the afternoon. Mrs. Ashton bore it bet-

ter than Katharine expected, and the effort enabled her to rally her spirits a little. She was more herself afterwards; and when John walked in from Moorlands, as he did about five o'clock, intending to go to church at Rilworth in the evening, Mrs. Ashton was almost cheerful, and liked to hear about Selina and the children, and said she hoped to be able to see them again soon. This seemed rather an opening for introducing the proposed change; but it happened to be nearly the time for evening service, and Katharine did not like to disturb the Sunday quietness by bringing forward an agitating subject; and it was agreed therefore between John and herself that it should be mentioned to her the following day. John was indescribably relieved himself at the possibility of remaining at Moorlands, and Katharine thought it was as much for the sake of domestic peace as for his own comfort. Selina's wishes were so very strong upon the point that she was not likely to leave him any peace until it was settled her way. So far Katharine was glad that Selina would look upon their living at Moorlands as a help and not a trial, which she very probably would have done under other circumstances.

The world was to begin in its old way on Monday morning. Katharine felt this bitterly. There was no excuse to be made any longer for not seeing persons if they chose to call, and business could not be put aside as it had been; but if duties were necessary, the only satisfactory way of performing them was to begin vigorously, and Katharine stifled her sorrow and steeled her heart, and immediately after breakfast entered with her mother upon the question of a removal to Moorlands.

How strange it is—what cowards we are, in spite of the lessons of faith which are so continually given us! Katharine introduced the subject ti-

midly, dreading a long argument. She had not said more than a few sentences, when she found her mother not only willing, but even anxious to second the proposal. It had suggested itself to her own mind. Perhaps when away from Moorlands she missed more having the opinion and judgment of a man to lean upon; or it might be that she was cheered by the presence of the children; or, more likely still, the actual return to the old house had convinced her that she never could be happy in it again. Be this as it may, Katharine's difficulties melted into thin air when once she grasped them, and all that remained was to determine the lesser questions as to the disposal of the shop, the furniture, &c. These, at least, were the public questions. There were many peculiar only to Katharine, which harassed her a good deal. The district was one. She could not bear to give it up, and yet she felt that it must be done. Five years before, in her eagerness to embrace every opportunity of usefulness, she would have determined upon keeping it, trusting to be able so to arrange her occupations as to visit it every week; but experience had taught her many lessons, and, amongst others, that in attempting too much we seize upon work not intended for us, and in consequence accomplish nothing well. If she was to be useful at Moorlands, she could not also be useful in Rilworth. Mrs. Forbes, with the advantage of more leisure, and the command of carriages and horses, had tried it and failed, and Katharine, therefore, could not hope to succeed. It did not follow that she might not see her poor people, and interest herself about them; but this would be different from undertaking an actual responsibility. Besides, it was evident that the Providence of God was preparing for her a new sphere of duty. Her business, therefore, was

to do her best with that, and not to look with lingering regret upon one which it was His Will to take from her. And there were other sacrifices involved in the removal from Rilworth which none but Katharine herself could understand. She had gathered around her, within the last few years, several young persons in her own position in life, to whom she felt that her advice and assistance were very useful, and these must now be left in a great degree to themselves ; and there were others, more of her own standing in age, but rather superior to herself in worldly rank, whose society had often given her both pleasure and profit. Some she was accustomed to meet at district meetings, or when some opportunity occurred for her being asked to drink tea at Mr. Reeves' ; others she had been introduced to by Mrs. Reeves herself. They had greatly influenced and enlarged Katharine's mind, partly by conversation, and partly by lending her books, which every one seemed anxious to do, when once it was known that she was fond of reading. It was sad to think that all this must now be given up—that she must content herself with Selina's frivolous observations upon dress and the weather. If it had not been for her acquired habit of study she would have felt it even more ; but reading was a much less effort now than it used to be, and the society of books she might always hope to have. Mr. Reeves would lend her any which he had, and the Miss Lockes were great readers, and were always anxious to send her anything interesting which came in their way. Betsy Carter, too, though absurd in some respects, was sensible enough in others, and had often given Katharine very good advice as to books ; and Katharine indulged an idea now, which before had not seemed necessary, that of joining a book society, so that

she might always have the opportunity of reading without being dependent on the charity of her friends. How much she felt the value of Mr. Reeves' advice, when he made her take home the volumes of travels to finish! That had been the beginning of a habit which was now to be an incalculable comfort to her. If she had waited till the present time to begin, her mind would have been so ill-trained to attention, and the cares of life would have pressed so heavily upon her, that in all probability she would have found it no relief, but only a painful effort to read steadily.

Katharine could see all this in the midst of her great grief and her many anxieties. Hers was a bright, hopeful mind, always looking out for the "silver lining" to the cloud; and even when the aching pain, the sense of loneliness, and the self-reproach which had been present with her since Charles Ronaldson's departure, were the most wearing to her spirits, she had still thoughts and words of cheering comfort for her mother, and for herself the privilege of kneeling in her own chamber, and telling her troubles to Him who was always near to listen to them.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"I AM going into Rilworth this afternoon, Jane," said Colonel Forbes, on the Wednesday after Mr. Ashton's funeral; "Have you any business there?" Jane felt as if she must have, if it were only for the prospect of a drive with her husband alone. For the last two days the house had been full of gentlemen visitors, and she had seen nothing of

him. Colonel Forbes happened to be in particularly good humour that morning. He had been listening to some judiciously administered flatteries: very judicious they were, he could not endure open praise; but he liked to be consulted and deferred to, in manner however, more than in words, for he was extremely fastidious, and, as is the case with most persons who are so, he piqued himself upon it. He thought it proved his good taste, and never for a moment supposed that it could be a mask for ill-temper. It had been suggested to him formally that morning that a seat for the county was more befitting a man of his fortune than to be member for the borough. The idea exactly chimed in with his own, and he did not make any foolish attempt to conceal it. He said he should wish it; and he and his parliamentary friends had spent the morning in making calculations as to the probabilities of success, which were very satisfactory. Colonel Forbes was anxious to tell all this to his wife—she was his safety-valve; he had no fear of appearing vain in her eyes and being misunderstood, and so he was very glad to seize upon the opportunity of a drive into Rilworth, short though it was, for a *tête-à-tête*; and Jane, only too happy whenever he expressed the least inclination for her society, went to dress for her drive with a lighter heart than she had had for many days. “Where do you wish to go, my dear?” was Colonel Forbes’ first question, as he seated himself by her side.—“To a good many places,” replied Jane, “if there is time; but if not, perhaps we had better drive at once to Mrs. Ashton’s, if you don’t care. I must see Katharine if I can; she and her mother went off from Moorlands so suddenly.” Colonel Forbes’ brow was a little overcast at the mention of the name of Ashton; but he only told the servant rather impatiently to stop at

Ashton the bookseller's, and reminded Jane that he should be in Rilworth but a very short time, so she had better not stay too long with Miss Ashton if she had any shopping to do. Jane very much wished to continue the subject, in the hope of obtaining from her husband something satisfactory as regarded Moorlands, but they were at peace at the moment, and she could not bare to disturb such rare and happy repose. She led the conversation, therefore, back again to the former topic—the prospect of Colonel Forbes' becoming member for the county. He had with him a list of the votes which he felt certain he could command in his immediate neighbourhood, and he gave it to Jane to read. "There are a good many more doubtful ones," he added; "but I wish to reckon only certainties."—"What name is this?" asked Jane, pointing to one which was written opposite to that of Moorlands Farm. Colonel Forbes bent down to look. "That?" He hesitated a little. "Oh! Andrews; he is a cousin of George Andrews. He wants the farm, and I think I shall let him have it; he is quite a sound man." Jane was perplexed, and, after a short pause, asked, though very timidly, "Is it really certain, then, that John Ashton is going to leave Moorlands?"—"Certain, if I am to believe what people say," he replied testily; "Ronaldson told me Ashton could not afford the rent, and I can tell him he won't stay there if he can't."—"Oh!" was all Jane's answer; she could not again touch upon the dangerous ground of the year's delay.

They were then very near Rilworth. Jane was sorry that the drive was so short, and said so; and her husband was touched by her warm expression of feeling, and especially by the hearty way in which she had entered into his schemes, and once

or twice called her his darling, apparently with the fondness of his first affection. This was indescribably sweet to poor Jane, for it was rarely that she heard such words;—all the past was forgotten in a moment, as if it had never been, and even his faults were not thought of. When she felt that he really loved her, how could she remember any thing painful! He had business at the Post-office, and at one or two other places where she could go with him. She could not help him in any way, and the business was not in the least likely to interest her, and he knew that she wished to have as much time as possible for Katharine Ashton; but now that he was in good humour he did not choose to part from her. So, instead of allowing her to go in and see Katharine at once, he merely went himself into the shop, gave some orders he wanted, and insisted, good-humouredly, but still in a way which admitted of no refusal, that Jane should drive with him to the Post-office, and the other places to which he wished to go at the further end of the town. Then, if she liked, she might manage, he said, a little shopping, whilst he went to see Mr. Andrews, and make her way to Mrs. Ashton's as the last thing; and there the carriage might call for her. It was just the most disagreeable, inconvenient arrangement for Jane that could have been proposed. It wasted her time, shortened her visit to Katharine, and gave her a long walk, which was likely to be too much for her strength, and would probably tire her, and render her unfit for entertaining her visitors in the evening. She did say to him that it was rather far from Mill-place, where he proposed she should stop, to the top of High-street; but there was some difficulty about her having the carriage, as it interfered with a plan of his for taking Mr. Andrews with him

to see Mr. Somebody-else, who was likely to be a staunch ally; and Jane, always disliking to make difficulties, put her own comfort aside instantly, and said, that no doubt she should manage very well. "You won't find it as far as you think, my dear," was Colonel Forbes' comforting reply; and the order was given to drive to the other end of the town. They went to the Post-office, to the Bank, to the Town-hall, to the solicitor's office; the precious moments were diminishing fast, they were obliged to be at home again at half-past four; yet Jane did not even look impatient. At last they stopped at Mill-place, where a dressmaker lived whom Jane sometimes employed. Here at length she was set free; but before they parted Colonel Forbes took out his watch and made Jane compare hers with it:—"You are five minutes too slow, my dear;" but that won't signify. I give you three-quarters of an hour from this time, then the carriage shall call for you at Ashton's."—"Might it not be an hour?" asked Jane; "I shall never finish all I have to do else."—He pointed to his watch: "Three-quarters of an hour will bring it just to four o'clock. We must be at home certainly by half-past; it ought to be earlier. I have an appointment, as you know." Jane looked disappointed; she really could not help it. "You had better put off seeing Miss Ashton till another day," said Colonel Forbes, as he remarked her manner; "you will only tire yourself by walking so far, and you are quite fagged as it is." Jane was frightened; in another moment she knew he would insist upon her doing as he suggested. She did not say that she must see Katharine, or that she intended to do so, for that would have made him contradictory; but she laughed and promised to take care of herself, and observed that

she could cut short her shopping if it was necessary ; and, as he was in a hurry to go to Mr. Andrews, he was not inclined to stay and argue the point with her.

The dressmaker was gone out, but was expected to return immediately — that delayed Jane at least ten minutes ; and then she found there had been some stupid mistakes about the children's frocks, and the consequence was a long discussion ; and when she left the dressmaker she was obliged to go to a shop which was near to purchase a toy she had promised little Lucy ; so that at last, even by giving up everything else that she wished to do, and walking as fast as possible, she found that only ten minutes, or at the utmost a quarter of an hour, would remain for Katharine.

She did walk very fast, choosing back-streets, that she might not be noticed, or meet any one she knew. Her breath was very short, and her heart beat with a most oppressive quickness ; but Jane was accustomed to that, especially of late. Even going up the broad shallow stairs at Maplestead was sometimes more than she could quite bear. She went on, only thinking of Katharine, and knowing that she could rest when she was with her ; but on reaching Mrs. Ashton's door she felt indescribably ill ; she did not know what was the matter, but she had only just strength to ring the bell, and lean against the wall for support. The servant opened the door, saw her ghastly face, and, very much frightened, ran back to call Katharine. Jane was a little recovered by this momentary rest ; but the fearfully rapid beating of her heart took from her the power of utterance. Katharine asked no questions, but led her into the parlour and made her lie down on the sofa, and Mrs. Ashton brought her sal-volatile. Jane several times tried to make an apology for intruding upon them, but her head

was quite dizzy. She did, however, contrive to say at last that she had been walking too fast,—it was nothing but that; and then she sat up a little, and tried to look as if nothing was the matter; but the hollow indentations under her eyes, and the sallow lines around her mouth showed that there was something very much the matter,—more, a great deal, Katharine was sure, than merely a momentary illness from walking too fast. That was not the time, however, for inquiry. Katharine's ready tact made her feel that Jane would be better just then by having her thoughts drawn off from herself, and, Mrs. Ashton having left them to themselves, she began, though it was a great effort to her, to talk of their own affairs. Jane was all interest in a moment, anxious to know how Mrs. Ashton had been since their return home; how she had borne the going to church on Sunday; and especially — a question which Jane put indirectly, but which was of more consequence than any other—what they intended to do for the future. Katharine was very open upon this subject, as she was upon almost all others, with Jane. There was such a peaceful feeling of trust when conversing with her, that it was quite rest to tell her all their plans. To remain at Moorlands, she said, was considered the best thing for her brother, and as this could only be managed by his having some assistance from his mother, it was settled that they should all live there together. Another lease therefore would be taken for five years. Her mother, she added, talked of removing to Moorlands finally in about a fortnight's time; the business was to be taken by Henry Madden, who would bind himself to give them a certain yearly income out of the profits of the shop. Katharine was eager in explaining all this, and giving the reasons for their deter-

mination; and especially she wished to make Jane feel that they had no unkind feeling against Colonel Forbes for his refusal to accede to the year's delay. She was in consequence so engrossed in what she was saying, that she did not at once perceive the change in Jane's countenance when she heard it mentioned as a settled thing that John Ashton would remain at Moorlands. She noticed however, after a little while, that Jane looked ill again, and begged her to have some more salvolatile, or a glass of wine. Jane declined everything; there was nothing the matter she said; and, turning Katharine's attention from herself, she asked, in what she meant to be a very unconcerned tone, whether the plan of their all living together at Moorlands was perfectly fixed. "Yes," was Katharine's reply; "as far as anything can be. But, dear Mrs. Forbes, why do you ask? don't you think it a wise arrangement?" Jane was infinitely perplexed, and hesitated to answer. "If you see any objections," continued Katharine, "it would be very kind in you to mention them now, whilst there is yet time to draw back. Would you advise us to alter the arrangement?" No, Jane could not in conscience do that; it was so clear, so indisputably clear, from what Katharine had told her, that no other plan was likely to be safe; but she tried to avoid an answer. She could not be a judge, she said; Katharine must have friends much better calculated to give an opinion. — "Perhaps so," said Katharine, a little disappointed; "but there is not one I should care for as much; that is, except," — and she coloured a little, — "except Mr. Ronaldson's, and he is quite satisfied that it is the best thing to be done." — "Oh! then, be contented," exclaimed Jane, rejoiced to escape the necessity of giving her own judgment; "whatever Mr. Ronaldson says

will be best, is so, you may be quite certain of that.” —“He is a very prudent person, and knows a great deal about farming,” observed Katharine, speaking with consideration. “He says that if John were to remove to another farm the cost of moving would probably swallow up the difference of rent for a year or two, even if he could find a cheaper farm than Moorlands, which we do not any of us think he could do. Our old objection,” she added, “used to be, that the house was too large; but if my mother and I live with him that will in a great measure be done away.” —“It does seem very feasible,” observed Jane, not liking to show anything like deficient interest in that which just then was so important to Katharine. “And you will be near me,” she added, with one of her sweetest smiles, “and we can go shares with the poor people; it will be very nice.” There was the very least effort of manner still, but Katharine was always trusting; she never weighed the words and looks of those whom she truly loved. Mrs. Forbes was the last person whose affection she could in the least doubt; and though she noticed her restraint, she still attributed it entirely to illness. “You must not tire Mrs. Forbes, Kate, my dear,” said Mrs. Ashton, coming again into the room, just as they were about to begin a different subject. —“The carriage will be here in a minute; I think I hear it,” said Jane, accustomed to the sound of the wheels. Katharine went into the passage to look. “Yes, here it is! and Colonel Forbes, and Mr. Andrews in it.” Jane’s heart sank. She was still feeling extremely unwell, and these political acquaintances were at all times extremely fatiguing to her, because she was afraid of not showing them sufficient attention to satisfy her husband or themselves. She drew her shawl round her and put on her bonnet with a lingering wish to

delay what was just then so disagreeable, the necessity of being civil to the obtrusive Mr. Andrews. "I can't say I look very beautiful," she said, smiling, as she glanced at her own wan face, and arranged her hair by the little, long, old-fashioned glass over the mantelpiece.—"I don't know what Colonel Forbes will think," said Mrs. Ashton; "I am afraid he will say that Kitty has been tiring you out. But I hope, my dear ma'am, that you will take care of yourself when you get home. You really ought to rest well this evening."—"My mother will have no peace till she hears how you are," said Katharine affectionately; "and indeed I think she is right. Will you please not talk much to Mr. Andrews, if he is going back to Maplestead with you?"—"If you will please prevent him from thinking me very rude, if I am silent," replied Jane, with a playful smile; "but now I really must go; good-bye;" and she shook hands cordially with Mrs. Ashton. "Good-bye, dear Katharine; I must see or hear something of you again before long." Her step, usually so light, and yet so full of energy, was now weak and slow; and Katharine looked anxiously after her as she seated herself in the carriage.—"There are some people who seem too good for this world," said Mrs. Ashton, sighing, as she took up her work. Katharine did not immediately reply, and no one would have perceived the connection that really existed between the silence which then followed, and the question put, as if accidentally, more than an hour afterwards.—"Mother, did you say that that thin, sallow-faced woman, who came begging this morning, looked as if she had a heart complaint?"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

JANE did talk all the way home, for Mr. Andrews talked to her, and she could not but answer him. He thought it his duty to be polite, and flattered himself that he could not fail to be agreeable; moreover he was as much gratified to be taken into Colonel Forbes' confidence, and carried to Maplestead, to give electioneering information, as the Colonel himself was to be admitted to the secrets of persons connected with the ministry, and asked to give his opinion on the great questions of the day. Most men are talkative when they are pleased and excited, and Jane therefore had the full benefit of Mr. Andrews' self-congratulations, for her husband was so full of thought that he did not notice how ill and tired she looked, and only joined in the conversation every now and then; or rather interrupted it with some question proper to his own musings.

Happily it was a very short drive; yet short as it was it seemed almost interminable to Jane, the effort of talking and keeping up her attention was so great; and once or twice she found herself answering quite wide of the mark, and then she was frightened, and roused herself more. Of all things Colonel Forbes was annoyed with anything like neglect of his political adherents; and though he seemed abstracted, Jane could not be at all sure that he was not seeing and hearing everything that passed, and treasuring it all in his memory to be brought forward against her on some future occasion. She talked a great deal more than she would have done if he had not been there, more than was

at all necessary ; but in his presence every power of her mind was at all times strained.

He did at last see that she was weary and looking ill, but that was not till they had reached the lodge at the entrance of the beech avenue, and then he told her that she had better keep quiet till dinner-time. Jane's very earnest wish would have been to ask him to excuse her going in to dinner ; but she could not propose it herself with Mr. Andrews sitting by, and her husband was not likely to suggest it and make an excuse for her.

It was an infinite relief to find herself at last alone in her own room, with her maid ready to bring her everything she wanted. The feeling of comfort seemed even a reproach to her for having for a moment inwardly repined ; but it was not to last very long. She was lying on the sofa in her dressing-room, and trying to sleep, when Colonel Forbes' step was heard along the passage. Jane started up, for he was coming towards her door. What was the matter ? That was always the question which came first to her mind. There did not seem much the matter, however ; not anything, indeed. He was quite good-humoured, only a little impatient at her not being well, and anxious to know if she was going down stairs. The conference was over, and Mr. Andrews, who had been asked to stay and dine, was sitting by himself in the drawing-room, and Colonel Forbes was too busy to attend to him. He did not say that of all fatigues he thought talking to Mr. Andrews upon any but political subjects the greatest. Jane asked if Mr. Andrews could not be shown to his room to dress for dinner.—“It wants an hour to dinner yet, my dear. I can't send him there so soon.” Jane sat up ; her manner was languid, and her voice weak, and Colonel Forbes was irritated. It was very

provoking in her, he said, to walk such a distance when she knew it would do her harm. It was that absurd fancy for the Ashtons which was at the bottom of it all; and he really must put a stop to it, if it went on. It would not do to have her killing herself for nothing. — “I don’t think it was merely the distance,” replied Jane gently; “but walking so fast, which always tries me.” — “Then, my dear, why did you walk fast?” — “Because there was so little time,” she replied. — “Better have given it up altogether,” said Colonel Forbes. “I must keep you quiet, Jane. Dr. Lowe said to me, only the other day, that quiet was essential to you; but whenever you have an idea in your head, it must be carried out; wise or foolish, it must be done. I never saw any one so determined.” — “It was very foolish,” replied Jane; “I will be more careful in future; and I will go down stairs now, and entertain Mr. Andrews.” — “I would not say anything about it if he were a personal friend,” said Colonel Forbes, betraying, unknown to himself, that his conscience was not easy; “but these Rilworth people are so very tenacious, and it might appear uncivil if you kept away entirely; and really I have exhausted all I have to say to him, for I have been talking for the last hour, till in fact I am nearly worn out.” — “And is the result satisfactory?” asked Jane, willing by any means to avoid subjects which might lead to a storm. — “Why, yes, upon the whole, I think it is. When his cousin takes Moorlands——” Jane’s maid knocked at the door; she was come to see how her mistress was. Colonel Forbes was stopped in the middle of his sentence; “then, my dear, you will go down to Mr. Andrews.” — “Yes, directly.” — He kissed her. “Take care of yourself, my love. Dawson, I think your mistress would be the better for some drops of camphor

julep." And he went away, thinking himself the very pattern of an affectionate husband.

When Jane went to the drawing-room she found Mr. Andrews seated in a comfortable arm-chair, reading the newspaper. She might just as well, therefore, have remained in her own room; but having once made her appearance it was necessary to stay, especially as Mr. Andrews put aside the newspaper as soon as she entered the room. What they would have found to talk about for the next hour, having previously exhausted all subjects in common during the drive from Rilworth, it would have been impossible to say, but that Mr. Andrews happened to touch upon the subject of Moorlands, and from thence naturally enlarged upon the Ashtons, of whom he gave his opinion freely. Old Ashton, he said, was a good sort of fellow enough; crotchety, and difficult to manage, but honest and shrewd. As for John Ashton, he was neither the one nor the other; he had not wit enough to get money, or if he did get it, he had not enough to know what to do with it. "As I have been telling the Colonel," he continued, in his loud, pompous voice, "it was a bad day when he let one of the best farms on his estate to a man like John Ashton; and a very good one it will be when he gets my cousin to take his place. You see, my dear ma'am, in farms, as in everything else, the secret of success depends upon capital—capital, that's the thing wanted. Now, John Ashton never had any of his own—it was all a speculation of his father's; and old Ashton did not lay out half the money a man would have done who had the farm in his own hands, and so, between the two stools, our friend the Colonel's interest fell to the ground."—Jane inwardly winced at "our friend the Colonel," but outwardly she was most laudably civil and for-

bearing ; and being really anxious to know how far her husband considered Moorlands to be in his own power, she inquired whether it was really certain that Mr. John Ashton was to leave it. "Unquestionably, ma'am," replied Mr. Andrews, opening his quick grey eyes to their fullest extent, in surprise at her apparent ignorance ; "it must be : politically (between ourselves), it must be ; the Colonel can't afford to lose a vote. As he and I were reckoning just now, it will be a close run, under any circumstances." Jane was going to say that it was at John Ashton's option to leave the farm, but she did not know how far her husband might have explained the conditions on which it was originally taken, and she could only look thoughtful and be silent. "You need not be frightened, my dear ma'am," continued Mr. Andrews, patronisingly, thinking that her gravity proceeded from anxiety as to the election ; "we won't let the Colonel run any risk. If he plays his game well, he's sure of it, only we must keep a sharp look out—we must'nt have traitors at our door." — "I should have thought," said Jane, "that Mr. John Ashton was not a person to have any decided opinion of his own upon these political questions. Old Mr. Ashton thought a great deal about them, I know ; but his son has not half his cleverness." — "A man must be a fool indeed who can't have an eye to his own interests," replied Mr. Andrews. "John Ashton has wit enough to see that he is a richer man himself with Protection than without it, and he won't look a step beyond that ; he has no large views like the Colonel, and if he were to profess to change, who would trust him ? Not I, as I said to the Colonel just now.—'Colonel,' said I, 'let us have a safe man at Moorlands.' Now my cousin is a safe man—an Anti-Protectionist

to the backbone. He'd go through fire and water for the point."—Jane felt as if going through fire and water would have been an easy penance compared with that which she was enduring, as Mr. Andrews drew his chair nearer to hers, and became more and more dogmatic and familiar. He was not a man to be kept back by ordinary stiff civility, and anything more decided would have been against her husband's political interests; so she endured it as well as she could, and Mr. Andrews went on enlarging upon his own sayings and doings to his heart's content. "We were talking over John Ashton's case just now," he said; "all of us; and some of the Colonel's London friends were inclined to mercy, in consideration of the good effect it might have upon public opinion; but, said I, 'Colonel, don't listen to that; "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush," and has been so always. Secure your vote,—that's the first thing to be done—and leave public opinion to itself. And, after all, there's nothing to be said about the matter. You give the man a fair option—pay your rent and stay, don't pay and go. He can't pay and he goes; who's to blame for that? As for any half-measures, trying for a year, and so forth, where's the good? and in the meantime comes a dissolution, as it may come any day, and there's your vote clear gone."—"Then it is understood that if the increased rent is paid he may stay," said Jane, rather anxiously.—"But he can't pay, he won't pay, he mustn't pay, my dear ma'am," exclaimed Mr. Andrews, with a curiously evident effort to keep down excessive irritation at the idea which Jane had propounded.—"Only if he can, he may," persisted Jane.—"But he can't, my dear ma'am, he can't; he says so." Jane was silent and very uncomfortable. Fortunately for her the dressing-bell just

then rang, and she was able to retire; but it was not before her manner had been remarked by the shrewd eye of Mr. Andrews, who was always keenly alive to the possibility of having a traitor in the political camp, and perfectly well aware of Jane's predilection for Katharine Ashton, and consequent interest in her family.

Jane dressed quickly, that she might have another rest before dinner; but she could not rest in mind. Perhaps it was physical fatigue which made her peculiarly nervous, but certainly she had seldom been so inclined to forebode annoyance, and even worse, to herself and to others. She felt guilty, as it were, of planning against her husband, for all her wishes were for Katharine. In her own mind she went over and over again all that had passed in her late interview, trying to recollect whether she had in any way encouraged her in the idea of removing to Moorlands; but she could only remember one thing clearly, that she had said that whatever Charles Ronaldson advised must be right, or something to that effect. She could not in conscience have given a different opinion, that was quite certain; for the more she thought over the plan the more she was convinced that it was the best which, under the circumstances, Mrs. Ashton could adopt. But this would not satisfy Colonel Forbes; and to be thwarted in his favourite plan—to find an obstacle, however slight, in the way of his ambition!—Jane trembled at the consequences. She had, as yet, as she well knew, seen only the shadow of his anger, heard only its distant mutterings; but she had seen and heard enough to know, that once thoroughly awakened it would be very terrible.

She listened, hoping that he might come to her room before he went down stairs; for she thought it

might be well to break the matter gently to him, and if possible to soften his annoyance. At any rate, it would be better than leaving him to hear the fact first from John Ashton, with whom he would not be likely to exercise much restraint; but time slipped away and he did not come, and when she went to the drawing-room he still did not make his appearance for a long time, not indeed till dinner was announced. He came into the room then with Mr. Andrews, looking!—Jane felt the look; she did not think any one else did. Colonel Forbes was always polished, courteous, attentive; he had never been more studiously careful in his behaviour to every one, to his wife especially, than on this day; but the dark thunder-cloud gathering in the far horizon could not more certainly foretel to the traveller an approaching storm than did the peculiar undertone of his voice and a deep line in his forehead portend to Jane a torrent of anger. He talked a good deal upon all subjects, except politics; these he seemed to avoid, although several political friends were with him, and Mr. Andrews found no other subject in any way interesting, and therefore tried to introduce it at every opportunity. Jane, as the only lady present, was obliged to exert herself generally, and perhaps this was fortunate for her; she could not, as she might otherwise have been tempted to do, watch her husband's face, and ponder upon the meaning of every intonation of his voice. Even as it was, she heard every word spoken by him, whatever might be the conversation she was carrying on with others, and often found it difficult to reply properly to the observations addressed to her, in her anxiety to lose nothing which might throw a light upon the secret cause of his displeasure.

But she could obtain no clue, and might

almost have thought herself fanciful in supposing there was anything amiss, but for his peculiarly formal tone when speaking to herself. That she could not mistake; it was so evident that she was afraid others might notice it, and she could not indeed feel certain that Mr. Andrews did not. He certainly watched them both narrowly, for Jane remarked that he often cut short his own conversation to listen to what either of them said.

The common-place subjects of the day were soon exhausted. Jane felt the necessity of keeping up the conversation, and tried to think of some new topic, but her mind seemed a blank; and with that unfortunate fatality which so often seems to force us to say the very things we had better not, she inquired of Mr. Andrews whether it was true that the Duke of Lowther had given the management of his Rilworth estates to his northern agent, Mr. Ronaldson. Mr. Andrews, flattered at anything like a confidential question, professed not to know, but thought it extremely unlikely, as the Duke's bailiff had been with him that very day and had not mentioned the subject. He could find out however, he said, if Mrs. Forbes had the least curiosity upon the subject,—he could find out without fail; indeed, he should have an opportunity of asking the very next day, and he would send Mrs. Forbes word. — Jane was half-amused and half-provoked at his officiousness, but professed not to care about it, except that she believed Mr. Ronaldson to be a very estimable person, and she thought it might be a desirable thing to have him in the neighbourhood.—“Desirable for many people, no doubt,” replied Mr. Andrews, with an unpleasant confidential wink of the eye. “Of course, Mrs. Forbes, so kindly interested as you have always been in the Ashtons, you know the report?”—Jane was aware that her husband's eye

was upon her, and she blushed without meaning it. —“It’s more than a report,” continued Mr. Andrews, finding by her silence that he was not to be encouraged to repeat it. “Ronaldson and Katharine Ashton are to be married, so it is said, for certain.” — Jane started, and her eyes sparkled with satisfaction. “Oh! Mr. Andrews!” she exclaimed, “when did you hear such good news?” — “Jane, Mr. Trevor has been waiting to speak to you for the last half-hour,” exclaimed Colonel Forbes in a tone like the faint growlings of thunder. Jane apologised most politely; but Mr. Trevor only wished to offer her some grapes, and Mr. Andrews returned again to his subject. — “It is the common talk in Rilworth,” he said. “Of course it’s rather early to speak of such things so soon after old Ashton’s death; but there is no doubt, I believe, as to the truth of the report; in fact, from what I understand, it is quite an old affair.” There was much food for thought to Jane in this announcement. It might ultimately interfere with the proposed removal to Moorlands; and, independent of her satisfaction at such a prospect for Katharine, she could not help feeling relieved at anything which might prevent the storm she anticipated from her husband. She quite longed to hear the news more fully confirmed, but Mr. Andrews had nothing more than general rumour to give her, though he was entirely confident of its truth. Jane’s spirits rose at the idea, and she talked with greater animation and more generally, till she happened to glance at her husband. He was sitting silent, his eyes were fixed upon her, and his thoughts were seemingly so absorbed as to render him unconscious of the presence of his guests. Jane thought for a moment, as she noticed his look of distressed gravity, that he was ill; but after a few seconds he seemed to rally again,

though still, to her perception, all he said was an effort. The change in him was quite sufficient to make a change in her. She stopped almost suddenly in the midst of a remark she was making, and a painful, frightened feeling of nervousness came over her, which took all the colour from her cheeks, and attracted the notice of her neighbour Mr. Trevor. Jane might have managed pretty well if left to herself, but notice aggravated the evil, and made her realise that she was feeling most uncomfortable. She rose and said she would go to the drawing-room, and the general attention was directed towards her. Colonel Forbes could not help perceiving that something was the matter; for Jane's step was so trembling that Mr. Trevor was upon the point of offering her his arm. He went up to her, and forcing her to lean upon him, said in a low tone, "Pray exert yourself for a few moments;" and Jane did exert herself, quite sharing in his dislike to scenes. She sat down in the hall, her heart still beating with painful, choking rapidity. She did not dare say that it was over-fatigue, lest she should again be reproached with her long walk, and she did not think it was anything physical which caused her to feel as she did. One kind word from her husband, one assurance that he was not displeased with her, would have quieted her more than the skill of the wisest physician. But she had no word; only the most formal, polite attention, such as an utter stranger in her case might have expected. They went into the drawing-room; it was nearer than the dressing-room, and Jane thought that to go there would seem less troublesome, less as if she wanted to make herself appear very ill. For the same reason she sat down in an armchair instead of lying down on a sofa. Colonel Forbes was just going to ring for Dawson and

leave her, but she prevented him ; she wished, she said, to be alone. "My dear, you are ill, and you must have some one with you." He touched the bell again.—"Please, dear Philip—please not. Could not——" She hesitated, and the sentence was finished hurriedly ; "must you go back to the drawing-room?"—"Of course, my dear ; I can't leave my friends, it would be too absurd."—"But only just for a few minutes. I wanted to say—Philip, are you angry with me?" She put her hand upon his, and fixed her soft, clear eyes upon his face with an expression of the most eager affection, mingled with suspense.—"We will talk of that by-and-by, my dear ; I wish for no more scenes."—Jane's eyes were dimmed then ; yet her spirit was a little aroused, and she said, "There would be less chance of a scene if I were less worried by your manner, Philip. You are angry, and I must know why."—"You will not understand if I tell you," he answered. "You have chosen to make to yourself interests apart from mine, and of course nothing that I am feeling can affect you."—Jane was silent. The accusation was very old, and most unsatisfactorily vague.—"It can be no fancy of mine," continued Colonel Forbes, speaking as if greatly aggrieved, "when even strangers remark it."—"Strangers!" exclaimed Jane, hastily. "Oh ! Philip, who has ventured——" He interrupted her : "I can see no venturing, as you call it, in drawing deductions from observations which are made voluntarily. It is what every one is at liberty to do ; but I really must leave you, Jane ; I can't be rude to my guests."—"Only one minute more, Philip," exclaimed Jane ; "they will not expect you ; they know that I am not well."—"One minute will do no good," he answered hastily, "nor ten, nor twenty minutes ; I do not want words, but

actions.”—“I would act if I knew how,” replied Jane; “but indeed, Philip, you make me very wretched by these vague complaints. If you would only tell me what I have done!”—“I do not accuse you of doing,” he answered very coldly.—“Then of saying. What have I said? Was it anything that passed with Mr. Andrews?”—“Conscience, I perceive,” remarked Colonel Forbes, with a scornful smile. “You best know what passed between yourself and Mr. Andrews.” Jane tried to collect her thoughts, to remember every word she had spoken, but her memory was sadly confused. “It is useless to try and recollect any particular expression,” continued Colonel Forbes, seeing her perplexed look, and it is not of anything particular that I complain, but simply of that general want of interest in my interests, and of devotion to those of others, which is obvious even to strangers.”—“You mean about the Ashtons,” said Jane, a light breaking in upon her mind. “I don’t quite know what I said to him.”—“Of course not; of course you cannot remember what came so naturally from your lips. You cannot know what your manner was, but I can, and I do know, Jane. Mr. Andrews looks upon you as entirely in the Ashton interest.”—Jane’s temper, though very sweet, was sorely tried by this constant reference to a man like Mr. Andrews; and she replied with a little bitterness of tone, “It is a new thing for you, Philip, to listen to Mr. Andrews in preference to your wife.”—“I must beg you to command yourself, Jane,” replied Colonel Forbes: “we shall do no good by irritating each other. You would not have me distrust Mr. Andrews’ word, I suppose.”—“I must first hear what he said,” answered Jane, doing her very utmost to appear what she was not, either physically or mentally—quite calm.—“He informed

me," continued Colonel Forbes, "that you had expressed yourself as being deeply interested in the Ashtons, and that you had even gone so far as to suggest the probability of entirely counteracting my wishes; that, in fact—but it is useless to pursue the subject," he added, drawing himself up haughtily; "you know better than I can tell you how far this infatuated predilection for persons quite out of your sphere leads you astray from the path of duty."—"You are not just to me, Philip," replied Jane, every limb trembling with agitation, which she vainly strove to subdue; "God knows that I would not willingly swerve a hair's breadth from the path of duty, even for you, dear, though you are to me dearer than my own life. I said to Mr. Andrews—I forget what I said—I think I only asked questions. I wished to know whether it was quite certain that Moorlands must be given up."—"And you suggested the probability of John Ashton's remaining there," observed Colonel Forbes; "and, more than that, you were glad of it; you would have furthered their wishes against mine."—"I would have that done which is honourable and right," replied Jane; "and I was anxious for them because——" She hesitated. — "Because what? It is better that I should know the plots that are forming against me." Jane turned excessively pale and leant back in her chair. "Then you do know there is a plot," exclaimed Colonel Forbes, his voice raised to a pitch of sudden and violent anger. "You have been joining in it yourself probably; yes, you were so anxious to go there to-day; you must needs go, though it made you, as you acknowledged, very ill. I see it all; I want no words—my wife is against me. I might have known it from the beginning." He walked up and down the room rapidly; then in a moment checked himself, and,

coming up to Jane, who was too frightened at his vehemence to attempt any exculpation, he said very gravely, but with a sternness which made her shudder, "Tell me everything, I have a right to know, and I will know."—Jane made a great effort to speak, her voice was very low, and he bent down to listen: "I always meant to tell you, Philip—I knew you ought to know it. They will not leave Moorlands—Katharine said so to-day—they will join together and live there."—Colonel Forbes clenched the arm of her chair. "And you approved, Jane?"—"I did not know what to say—it seemed the best plan."—"But you said—tell me, I must and will know."—"I said—I don't know—I don't remember exactly, only I think it seemed to me that whatever Mr. Ronaldson advised was likely to be best."—"And Mr. Ronaldson's advice was that they should remain?"—"Yes, I believe so."—"And you advised the same?"—"Yes; that is, I did not advise."—"Let me have no equivocation—you advised the same?"—"I can't quite recollect, I was feeling very ill. Oh! Philip, why will you torture me?" and Jane burst into tears. Colonel Forbes left the room and brought back a glass of water, which he offered her without speaking. Jane pushed it aside. "Let me go to my room," she said, in a faint voice; and she stood up, holding by the mantelpiece.—"Your room will be the best place for you," he replied coldly, and he rang the bell. Jane rested her hand upon his shoulder and looked pleadingly in his face. "I meant no wrong, dear Philip; will you not forgive me?" He withdrew from her light touch, and Jane's hand at the same moment fell powerless by her side, and with a sharp cry of intense bodily anguish she sank senseless upon the ground.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

“MOTHER,” said Katharine, the next morning, “don’t you think I had better go and see Miss Ronaldson to-day, if there is time? Betsy Carter says she is very poorly.”—“As you like, Kitty,” was Mrs. Ashton’s reply; “but there’s a great deal to be done, one way and another. When did you say John wanted us to be at Moorlands?”—“Thursday-week,” replied Katharine. “That will leave us just ten days.”—Mrs. Ashton heaved a deep sigh. “It’s very soon,” she said; “I don’t see at all how everything is to be managed in such a hurry. We must have Henry Madden in to look at the furniture, and see what he has a fancy for.”—“And what we like we can take over to Moorlands,” continued Katharine; “that is one very great comfort. I should have been dreadfully sorry to part with some things,” and her eye glanced at the arm-chair.—“Yes, we must keep that,” said Mrs. Ashton, following the direction of Katharine’s glance; “and the table too.” It was a small table, standing between the fireplace and the window, with a desk upon it, at which Mr. Ashton had been in the habit of writing his business letters. His picture hung above it; rather a coarse painting, but a very good likeness. Katharine looked at the picture for a few moments, and then said, “We had better manage to take that over ourselves, mother; it won’t do to trust it in the cart. Mr. Fowler told me the other day he knew some one who packed pictures particularly well; Hobbs I think the name was, in Dean-street. Perhaps, if I go out, I had better call and speak about it.”—“Yes, if you must go,” said Mrs. Ashton,

who was beginning to feel so nervously fond of Katharine, and so dependent upon her, that she could scarcely bear her to be out of her sight. — “I would not go if I could help it, dear mother,” said Katharine; “but there are some things I must see about, and you would not like me to be unkind to Miss Ronaldson, would you?” — “No, child, surely not, when Charlie has been so kind to us, but don’t stay long; and, now I think of it, has any one heard from Charlie since he went away?” Katharine was conscious that she blushed a little, and the feeling made her blush still more. “John has heard from him,” she replied; “he got quite safe home, and his mother was quite well, he says.” — “And he must be glad enough to be there,” continued Mrs. Ashton; “though he has not such good prospects as we thought. I could have wished, Kate—but never mind, that’s all amongst by-gones, and I couldn’t have borne to have you living away.” Katharine hurried out of the room with the words “it’s all amongst by-gones” echoing in her ears, and haunting her mind like the tone of a mournful chant.

She went on her errand—first to the upholsterer’s to speak about taking some useless chairs off their hands; then to the china-shop to match some jugs and basins which were to be carried with them to Moorlands; then to the charwoman in Pebble-street, to tell her that she must come and help them all the next week; and at last to Hobbs, the carpenter, to speak about packing the picture. But the man was not at home, and his wife did not know when he would be; she thought he was at Mr. Fowler’s; so to Mr. Fowler’s Katharine went, and there she could hear nothing, except that Hobbs had been there, and was gone again, because Mr. Fowler was out. He had been out all night, the

servant said, but they expected him in every minute. Katharine did not ask where he had been; it was not in her nature to be curious; besides, she was just then occupied with the thought of the picture.

There was nothing to be done then but to go to the Miss Ronaldson's. This was not quite such a pleasant visit as it used to be. The spirits of the old ladies were not as good as formerly; they were always lamenting that Charlie and his mother were not settled near them, and there might have been something, too, of reproach in their feeling towards Katharine. They had so settled it in their own minds that she was to be their niece, that her refusal had come upon them as a bitter disappointment. Still they were very good and very charitable, and helped Katharine in all her district matters to the utmost of their power, and liked her to come and gossip with them about the news of the town. It was only when marriage was in question, or when anything was said about their nephew and his prosperous career, or his health or happiness, that a sigh from Miss Ronaldson, and a little wink and shake of the head from Miss Priscilla, showed that if they had forgiven they had not quite forgotten.

Katharine found them this morning particularly complaining; Miss Priscilla's rheumatism had kept her awake all night, and her sister was vainly endeavouring to make her wrap herself up in flannel, and was as angry as it was possible for her to be, when she found that Prissy liked better to sit by the fire, moaning in solemn suffering, than to take immediate measures to be cured. "Let Deborah rub your shoulder with opodeldoc, Prissy, my dear, and put this piece of new Welsh flannel across your back," she was saying, just as Katharine came into the room.—"I've told you, sister, it's no good; it's in

the family, and there's nothing to be done. Oh dear!" and a loud moan escaped from Miss Priscilla, as she turned round in her chair to see who had entered. "Oh Katharine, it's you; how do you do?—sit down, do. You find us very bad indeed to-day."—"Very bad indeed," echoed Miss Ronaldson. "We have had a rough night, hav'n't we, Prissy?"—Miss Priscilla dolorously shook her head. "A terrible pain is rheumatism, Katharine, a terrible pain. I hope you'll never be troubled with it."—"And Prissy won't try Steers' opodeldoc," said Miss Ronaldson, though there's nothing like it; it is not like a quack medicine—it's quite known and recommended; but she won't try it. I've done all I can to persuade her, I do assure you I have; but Prissy thinks she knows best."—"What's the good of setting oneself against a family complaint?" observed Miss Priscilla, sitting upright in her chair, with the most determined martyr-like air. "Sister Rebecca, you had better not trouble Katharine about it; you'd best leave me to myself. How's your mother to-day, Katharine? Oh dear!"—"Sha'n't we send for Mr. Fowler, my dear?" asked Miss Ronaldson, anxiously.—Miss Priscilla declined with a hasty shake of the head.—"I should have sent for Mr. Fowler in the night, I assure you, Kate," continued Miss Ronaldson, anxious to assure Katharine that she had not been deficient in any sisterly duty; "but Prissy wouldn't let me; she hates doctors, Prissy does."—"Where's the good of sending for a doctor to cure a family complaint?" asked Miss Priscilla.—"You wouldn't have had Mr. Fowler if you had sent for him," said Katharine, wishing to divert the attention of both sisters; "I called there just now, and they told me he had been out all night, but I did not learn where."—"Didn't you, now? there's a pity," exclaimed Miss Priscilla, in an energetic tone, and quite forgetting

her rheumatism.—“A great pity,” repeated Miss Ronaldson; “out all night! then what Deborah said is true.”—“And what did Deborah say?” asked Miss Priscilla, quickly; “you never told me.”—“Why, Deborah said, when she came back from market, that she had seen the new assistant standing at the surgery-door, looking out; and she heard him say to some one, — she did not know who,—a bluff man dressed in a brown coat and straw hat; she thinks it might have been Taylor’s brother, at the Black Eagle, for he does wear a brown coat sometimes, and once she saw him in a straw hat—but, dear me! what was I saying? Prissy, my dear, do help me.”—“You were going to tell us what Mr. Fowler’s assistant said, as he stood at the surgery-door,” observed Katharine, stepping in before Miss Priscilla’s rather impatient answer could be ready.—“Oh! yes, so it was; at least—but, you know, my dear Katharine, I like to be exact—I think Deborah told me it was the surgery-door, but I can’t be quite certain; it might have been the house-door, but I think it must have been the surgery-door, don’t you, Prissy, my dear? because, you see, assistants do always stand at surgery-doors.”—“Well!” was all Miss Priscilla’s reply. Miss Ronaldson hurried forward more quickly, but not more intelligibly: “It might have been the surgery-door—and I think—yes, I am quite sure it was now, for Deborah told me she had to get some medicine made up, and she thought of going in there, and asking him to do it for her, and then it was she saw him; yes, it must have been the surgery-door.”—“I dare say it was,” said Katharine good-humouredly, “for I remember remarking him there myself to-day, when I came up the street.”—“Did you, indeed! that was curious, and makes it quite certain. But, anyhow, Deborah brought home the

news that Mr. Fowler had been at Maplestead all night; and very sorry I was to hear it."

"Maplestead!" replied Katharine, in a tone of alarm.—"Maplestead?" echoed Miss Priscilla, with eager curiosity.—"Ah! yes, Maplestead, surely," replied Miss Ronaldson, her face assuming an expression in which might have been traced grave sympathy and a little mixture of self-importance at being the bearer of such tidings. "Deborah was telling me about it just as some one called her away to the back-door; and then, when I came back, I found you so bad, Prissy, my dear, that it put it out of my head."—"Might we hear a little more from Deborah now?" asked Katharine, trying to control a feeling of overpowering anxiety.—"Surely," said Miss Priscilla, quickly.—"Surely," was echoed by Miss Ronaldson, and the bell was immediately rung. But Deborah could give no satisfactory account. The new assistant had told her that Mr. Fowler had been summoned to Maplestead about half-past eight or nine o'clock the preceding evening, and had not returned. Mrs. Forbes was very ill, but what was the matter was not fully known.—"Well, it's very provoking; but we must be patient," said Miss Priscilla, resignedly; "we shall know all in good time."—"Yes, all in good time," repeated Miss Ronaldson; and Katharine felt more strongly than either, that it must be all in good time, but it was a sore trial to be patient.—She moved to go; but the blank looks of the two old ladies showed her that it would be unkind; they had only seen her once since her father's death, and there was much to be told which was interesting to them, and something to hear which might be interesting to Katharine. A letter had been received from Mrs. Ronaldson that morning; part of which was read aloud with marked emphasis. Mrs. Ronaldson was

vexed, she wrote, at the effect of Charlie's visit to Rilworth, he had returned home in such bad spirits. Not that this was exactly to be wondered at, considering all he had had to try him whilst he was there; but he did not seem to rally at all!—"And that's not like a young man of Charlie's age," observed Miss Ronaldson oracularly, as she carefully refolded the letter, replaced it in the envelope, and conveyed it to the depths of a capacious pocket. "He has a very feeling heart; but to go on fretting can't be right."—"Surely not," observed Miss Priscilla, fixing her keen eyes on Katharine's face till she brought the crimson colour to her temples. "There's little good in fretting in this world, is there, Katharine?—oh dear!"—"Let me rub, Prissy," said Miss Ronaldson anxiously, and drawing her chair near to Miss Priscilla.—"No, thank you, sister, no, please not;" and Miss Priscilla extended her hand forbiddingly. "I was going to say about fretting, I don't think it's right in any one, let alone our nephew Charlie, who has so many blessings about him, to be always looking to the sad side of things. But it's what he's very much given to Katharine, and, as I tell him, he makes himself ill by it. Sometimes it's other people's trouble, sometimes it's his own; but it all comes to the same; and I shall write, and tell him so. Yesterday carried yesterday's troubles, and to-day will carry to-day's; but there's no day strong enough to bear both."—The little knowing face looked more knowing and mysterious than ever after the delivery of this speech; and the tone was decidedly fierce, as if Katharine were bent upon contradicting the assertion. But Katharine was in no humour for contradiction, she was far too sad at heart. She was sorry for Charles. At another time she might have been unhappy because he was so; but that was not the

prominent idea in her mind, although she did blush when Miss Priscilla looked at her. People may be judged very hardly from their blushes; sometimes they are merely the result of an uncomfortable self-consciousness; they were not much more now to Katharine. Miss Priscilla stared at her, and spoke meaningly, and her colour came, as a necessary consequence; but all that she really thought of at the moment was, how she could make an excuse to go. By calling again at Mr. Fowler's she might hope now to learn something more definite as to Jane's illness. She was upon the point of rising when an exclamation from Miss Ronaldson stopped her: "Why, I declare — yes, I do think it is;—Katharine, my dear, isn't that the Maplestead servant? and riding so fast too! do look!" It was Crewe the butler, Colonel Forbes' confidential servant; he was riding rapidly down the street. "Going to the railway I've no doubt," said Miss Ronaldson, as she watched him turn into a narrow street. Miss Priscilla moved her chair, trying to look; but he was out of sight before she could approach near enough to the window. "He must be going up to London by the two-o'clock train," was her comment. She always knew the exact time of the arrival and departure of every train.— "Yes, to be sure; and what for, I wonder?" Katharine felt that she knew—he must be going for further medical advice. She could bear the suspense no longer; and, breaking in upon the suggestion on the subject which Miss Ronaldson was inclined to offer, and Miss Priscilla perversely to contradict, owing, we may charitably believe, to the rheumatism, she wished them a hasty good-bye, and almost ran up the street till she reached Mr. Fowler's door.

Still "Not at home," was the answer; "but expected in every instant." Katharine felt quite sick at heart. Her first impulse was to hurry on to

Maplestead at once; but she thought of her mother and the dinner-hour. No; she must be contented to wait; it might be a hard trial of patience, but she must bear it; and she did bear it, as she had learnt to bear every trial, small or great, in the last few years, with a calm, smiling face, and a kind thought for every one about her.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

EIGHT o'clock came before Katharine had the opportunity of hearing anything more; and all that time she said little or nothing of her anxiety. She only mentioned the fact of Jane's illness, and then let the subject drop. Mrs. Ashton was very sorry; she wished extremely they could hear more, but she was too much absorbed in her own troubles to enter much into those of another. So they sat the whole afternoon and evening looking over books, and burning papers, and working, and talking upon all subjects, except that which in Katharine's mind was uppermost, or rather, we should say, undermost. Uppermost thoughts are not the nearest, and dearest, and most anxious. They come and go with every change of this changing world. Undermost thoughts, buried deep where no human eye can see them — the substrata — the foundations of our actions — the sources of our feelings — these are the important thoughts, and Katharine's thought of Jane Forbes was amongst them. That early tie, that fond clinging of the affections around the companion whom she had loved in childhood, was stronger than till that hour she knew. It was Henry Madden who at last brought more definite intelligence, when he came in to see them, and dis-

cuss business, as was his wont almost every evening when the shop was closed; and he talked so carelessly, so indifferently, Katharine could scarcely bear to stay in the room and listen to him. Had they heard, he asked, how ill Mrs. Forbes was? A sudden attack—something at the heart it was supposed. She was better; but Mr. Fowler considered her still in danger, and a special messenger had been despatched that afternoon to bring back a London physician. Mrs. Ashton was full of inquiries, and very much wished that Mr. Fowler would call in and tell them more; and then she and Henry Madden began talking about Jane's health in general, and her pale face; and they thought her mother had died of something of the same kind; and Mrs. Ashton said she had always had a misgiving that she would not live long. Henry Madden even went on to calculate the chances of Colonel Forbes' marrying again; till Katharine, who had been sitting quite silent, could endure it no longer, and hastily exclaimed, "Mother, I must run down to Mr. Fowler's; you won't mind."—"Run down to Mr. Fowler's, child! It's too late a good deal." Henry Madden offered to go, but Katharine was determined. She was very much obliged, she said, but nothing would satisfy her except hearing herself. "I won't be gone five minutes, mother, dear," she added; "and supper is not quite ready. You know you would like to hear how Mrs. Forbes is yourself. And please stay and talk a little," she added in a low voice to Henry Madden, as he was going into the shop. He was very good-natured, and had the feeling of old acquaintance and regard for Mrs. Ashton; so he sat down again, and the conversation became interesting to both, and they did not observe how long Katharine had been absent, till Henry Madden recollected an

engagement he had made for that evening, and looking at his watch found it was nearly nine o'clock. "I am afraid I must go now," he said; "I had not the least notion it was so late. I suppose your daughter will be back in a minute or two."—"Yes, I suppose so. Certainly, she must be," replied Mrs. Ashton, in the uncomfortable tone of a person who did not thoroughly believe her own word. "But Kitty isn't used to be out so late. I wonder what has kept her; bad news from Maplestead, I am afraid."—"I could just call at Mr. Fowler's, and inquire, as I go down street, if you like," said Mr. Madden, feeling his own curiosity not a little excited. "Fowler was to have gone over to Maplestead again this afternoon."—"Thank you; it would be very kind," began Mrs. Ashton. "Kate is sure to take on sadly if anything is amiss with Mrs. Forbes. It's strange how the feeling has kept up since the time when they were together at Miss Richardson's."—"And Mrs. Forbes is not a very come-at-able person with all," observed Mr. Madden. "I have heard my sisters talk about her, and say she is proud."—"My Kitty knows how to make friends, and to keep them, I will say that for her," observed Mrs. Ashton, complacently. "She has got them of all kinds. There's the Miss Lockes as fond of her as can be, and Betsy Carter and her little sister quite like relations. I don't know any one who has more friends than Kitty."—"All of one style, though," said Mr. Madden, laughing. "She won't let any one be friends with her except the wonderfully good ones,—at least that is what I hear my sisters say. If you are one of Mr. Reeves' followers, you may be one of Katharine Ashton's, so they declare, but never else."—"I don't know what you mean by Mr. Reeves' followers," observed Mrs. Ashton a little quickly;

“it seems to me we ought all to be followers of the clergyman of the parish ; but if you mean one of those who help Mr. Reeves, why it’s natural enough. If people work together, they must in a way get to know each other, and be friendly ; and that, I think, is what has been at the bottom of Kitty’s keeping friends with Mrs. Forbes. They always had some business together, and so they have in a measure now. And I don’t think you would find any of those who have districts, and go to the schools, and all that sort of thing, call Mrs. Forbes proud ; indeed, I have heard many of them say just the contrary.”—“Perhaps so,” said Mr. Madden, to whom the question was one of profound indifference, except that it was part of his political creed that every person connected with Colonel Forbes must on all occasions be in fault. “But really I mustn’t stay any longer. Good evening to you, Mrs. Ashton.”—“Good-bye,” said Mrs. Ashton, in a sorrowful tone ; for her spirits, which had been a little excited by the conversation, began to sink as soon as she thought she was to be left alone. “If you go to Mr. Fowler’s, do send Kitty back ; she ought not to be out so late.”

The injunction was unnecessary, for just at that moment Katharine’s knock was heard at the street-door. In spite of his haste, Henry Madden could not help delaying a little longer to hear the latest news. He held open the door for Katharine, who did not see him, but, rushing up to her mother, threw herself on her neck, exclaiming, “Oh, mother !” — and, in spite of every effort, her voice was choked with sobs ; — “she is so ill.”—“Never mind, Kitty, my child, sit down ; don’t fret, sit down. Just get her a glass of water,” added Mrs. Ashton, addressing Mr. Madden, who stood by in quiet astonishment at this sudden burst of feeling.

—“No, mother; no, thank you; I don't want any water; I don't want anything,” exclaimed Katharine, commanding herself directly she became conscious of the presence of a third person; “I am not going to fret, but I wanted to say ——” She stopped, and the pause made Mr. Madden feel himself in the way; but even then he could not go without satisfying his curiosity. “Mrs. Forbes is worse, I am afraid,” he said.—“Yes, that is—no, she is not worse; at least, they think not; but they want——Oh! mother, if I might only go over and nurse her.”—“Kitty, my child! why you are quite silly,” exclaimed Mrs. Ashton, with an accent of gentle and anxious expostulation.—“They have fine servants enough at Maplestead, I should imagine,” observed Mr. Madden, sarcastically, “without requiring any aid from Rilworth.” Katharine looked up quickly, and a little angrily: “Mr. Madden, you won't mind, I hope, but I want to speak to my mother very much, and time presses.”—“Oh! of course, I beg your pardon. I did not mean to be any interruption,” he replied in an offended tone; “I did not in the least know you were such a devoted Forbesite.” Katharine would not answer him, but stood up with an air which plainly showed she expected him instantly to go. “Good evening,” he said once more, and this time very coldly. Katharine saw she had annoyed him; but she did not think or care about it then, and as soon as the door was closed, she turned again to her mother: “I could not tell you all about it while he was here, mother; but, indeed, it is not a fancy. They do want a nurse dreadfully, and Mr. Fowler does not know where to get one, and——” “But you to go, Kitty, and leave me here all alone, and the packing, and all the business!” Mrs. Ashton was really a kind-hearted person; but it

naturally struck her just then that "charity should begin at home." Katharine, however, was not to be daunted. "I thought of all that, mother, dear; and I would not for the world leave you for more than this one night; but it would only be just for to-night, and Betsy Carter would come and sleep here. I went and asked her as I came up street, that was one thing which made me so late. But I will tell you how it is: The London doctor came about seven, and he and Mr. Fowler went over to Maplestead together, and Mr. Fowler wasn't come back when I went there just now; but he did come after a time, and then he told me that he was so pressed for a nurse; for Mrs. Forbes' maid is quite new, and they don't like to trust her, and the housekeeper is ill, and the Colonel seems bent upon having a regular nurse, and Mr. Fowler promised to get one."—"Well, child! well; but you are not a regular nurse," exclaimed Mrs. Ashton.—"No, mother, of course not; but Mr. Fowler can't get the person he thought he could, she is engaged; and there's only Nurse Lawson to be had, and she is deaf, and he was quite in a fuss about it; and then it struck me that perhaps if I could go I might be of use, because you know I am accustomed to illness. I have always been with Selina when she was ill; and I should be so very glad, and Mr. Fowler seemed to think it might do; and then I said I would come back and ask you; and perhaps you would let me go over with him; he is to have a fly ready in half-an-hour." Mrs. Ashton looked doubtful and disconcerted, and Katharine, reading her thoughts, continued, "I thought of you, mother, directly, and what you would do without me; but I fancied perhaps just for this one night you would not mind so much if Betsy Carter would come over and be here, and I shall be back again quite

early to-morrow morning; for, of course, I could not think of staying there. Indeed Dr. Lowe says that he should like to send for a person from one of the London Institutions, so I shall not be wanted. Please, dear mother, let me go." — "But I don't understand; what is the matter with Mrs. Forbes? what has made her so ill of a sudden?" inquired Mrs. Ashton, not able to bring herself as yet to give a direct assent to the request. — "I don't quite know what they call it," replied Katharine; "but it is some internal inflammation, which they say has been coming on some time, and has been made worse by worry and over-exertion. You know, mother, how tired we thought Mrs. Forbes looked yesterday when she called." — "I should have said she had a heart complaint," observed Mrs. Ashton, a little peevishly; "and it's my belief that that is what is the matter with her now." — "There is a tendency to it, they are afraid, though they think there is nothing actually wrong now," said Katharine in a low voice; and turning from the subject as if she did not like even to allow it to herself, she added, "but, mother, what do you say to my going? I told Mr. Fowler I would be back directly and let him know." — "I can't have you running about the streets at this time of night, Kitty," said Mrs. Ashton; "it's not fitting; and why can't you let Colonel Forbes manage his own affairs, he has money enough." — "But money won't buy nurses when there are none to be had," said Katharine, good-humouredly. "However, I won't go, of course, if you don't like it, dear mother; only please may I let Mr. Fowler know, because he's waiting to hear." — "Send Susan," said Mrs. Ashton. — "Susan is younger than I am, and not half so steady," said Katharine, trying very hard not to show how disappointed she felt. "I think, mother,

if you don't mind much, I had better take the message myself; it is but a very little way to go." Mrs. Ashton would neither say "yes," nor "no." She sat gazing upon the fire, trying to make up her mind that it was her duty to be hard-hearted. There was a loud ringing at the street-door bell. Mrs. Ashton started: "My patience! what a pull! why the world is bewitched."—"It's Mr. Fowler," said Katharine, looking into the passage; "I thought he was likely to come." He was giving a message to Susan that he was in a great hurry, and hoped Miss Ashton was ready. Mrs. Ashton heard the words. "Ask him to come in, beg him to come in; tell him I must see him, Susan," she exclaimed, her tone becoming louder and louder. Mr. Fowler appeared, muffled up in a great-coat. He was come, he said, to carry off Miss Katharine, and he hoped she would not keep him waiting.—"My mother does not like me to go," said Katharine.—"I don't see the need of it," observed Mrs. Ashton; "when people have got plenty of money they can afford to hire nurses; and I don't know what's the matter with Mrs. Forbes; it may be an infectious fever."—Mr. Fowler smiled with good-humoured contempt: "Pooh! pooh! my dear ma'am; nothing of the kind. It's all perfectly safe, trust me. Come, Kate, I am ready." Katharine looked at her mother beseechingly. "If you had not promised to go, I should have been looking out for some one else, all this time," continued Mr. Fowler, reproachfully; "but you seemed to take it all for granted, and I don't understand being put off in this way at the last moment."—"Only just for this one night, dear mother," said Katharine, as she knelt down by Mrs. Ashton's chair; "and Betsy Carter promised she would be over directly; I expect her every minute."—"You seem to have settled it all won-

derfully quick," observed Mrs. Ashton. "It puts me quite in a maze. What time do you say you will be home to-morrow, Kate?"—"I can't say exactly the hour, but the very first minute I can," replied Katharine.—"And you will be so tired all day, you won't be fit for anything," continued Mrs. Ashton; "and there's the inventory to be made, and the charwoman coming, and John is to send in the cart from Moorlands."—"And I shall be quite ready for it all," said Katharine, trying to laugh away her mother's difficulties. "You will see me back again to-morrow before you and Betsy Carter have had your breakfast; Betsy does not get up very early."—"And then you'll take to your bed all day," persisted Mrs. Ashton. "What do you say, Mr. Fowler?"—"Why, my dear ma'am, I say that it is getting late, and I must be off; and if you can't spare Miss Katharine, I must needs go and look for some one else. One night's sitting-up won't kill her. She may go to bed early to-morrow and make up for it."—"Well, then, I suppose it must be," said Mrs. Ashton. It was a very unsatisfactory consent, and Katharine at first scarcely felt herself justified in acting upon it; but when Mrs. Ashton had once yielded, Mr. Fowler urged so strongly the use Katharine might be, and the satisfaction Mrs. Forbes would certainly feel in having a person with her whom she knew and cared for, that Mrs. Ashton's heart was quite softened, and her good-bye was very hearty, and accompanied by the permission not to hurry home too soon the next morning if Katharine felt she could be any real good at Maplestead.

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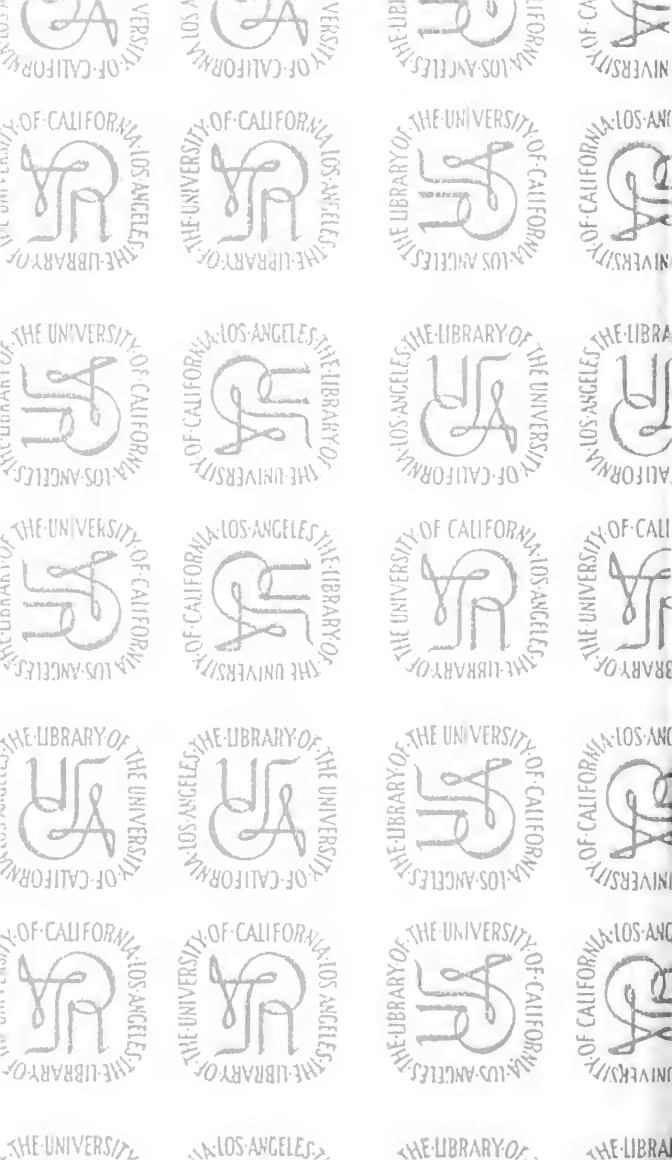
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