





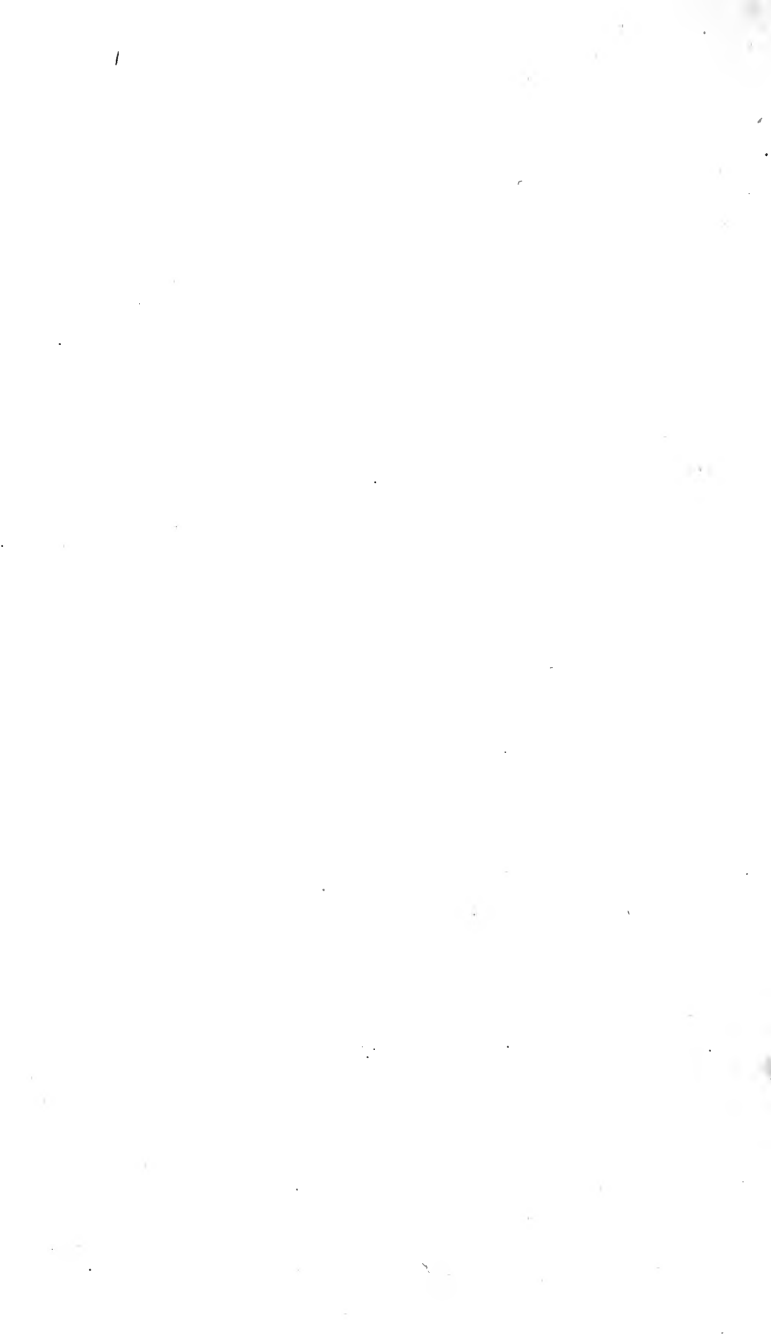
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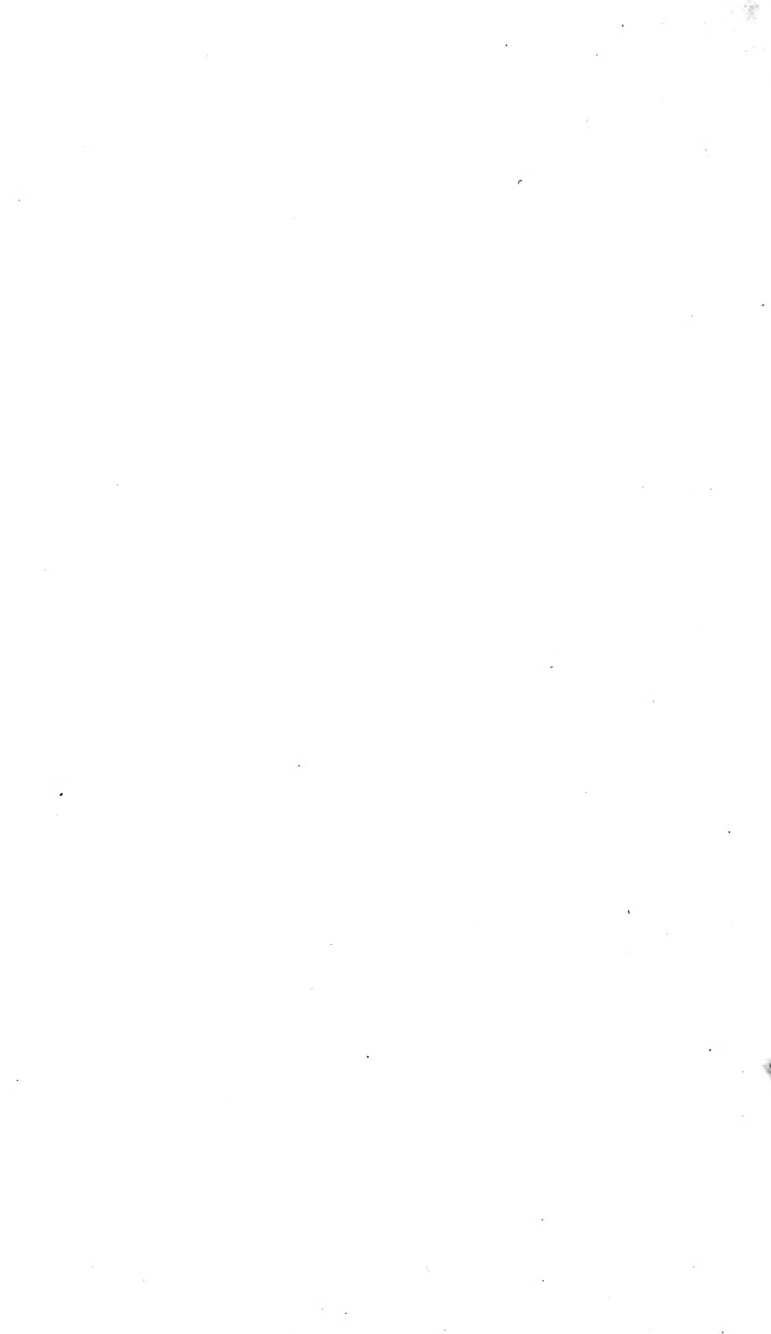






MADGE.

VOL. III.



# MADGE.

BY

LADY DUFFUS-HARDY.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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## MADGE.

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### CHAPTER I.

#### A NEW LOVE.

CECIL had not been gone many minutes when George Siward made his appearance. It was a most unusual thing for him to pay a visit to Kensington at any time, and at the present early hour it was unheard of; but having received the news from Cecil, he thought it was the correct thing to pay a congratulatory visit to his sister, and, as he elegantly phrased it, "polish off the old lady" at the same time,

the "old lady" thus irreverently referred to being Lady Erlescliffe herself.

Margaret and George were very fond of each other, but they had different ways of showing it, she being of the demonstrative order, and he the reverse; indeed, often affecting a curt indifference to hide real feeling. He had got himself up with unusual care on this occasion, and appeared in faultless broadcloth, the lightest of grey gloves, and patent boots polished to the highest pitch.

How he had grumbled as he put himself into them! Margaret was not used to receiving polite attentions from her brother, and therefore it was with smiling surprise she received a bunch of lovely June roses, which he had brought her. He had been to Covent Garden to "buy them himself," and, as he told her so, seemed to have a very high sense of his own devotion. She took his

flowers, and thanked him for his kind thought of her, adding,

“Dear Georgy, I know why you have come; Cecil has told you——”

“Of course he has. There, now, you needn't strangle a fellow,” he added, as she slipped her arms in a gentle, sisterly fashion round his neck, and he struggled to free himself, in that unappreciative way with which brothers do sometimes receive their sisters' caresses. “He told me everything, and *I* told him what a jolly fool I thought him.”

“Oh! you did. And pray what did he say? Though I do not suppose he set much value on your opinion.”

“I cannot say he appreciated it as he ought. Poor fellow, I'm sure he was a little mad last night, and I don't think he has recovered his senses yet.”

“Dear Cecil!” said Margaret, softly,

dwelling with a caressing accent on his name. "we are both so happy, George. He is your dearest friend, too, now he will be your brother. Are not you glad?"

"Well—no," he answered; "to tell you the truth, though it may sound unsympathetic and all that, I'm awfully sorry, though I'm obliged to humbug him and seem delighted. Why couldn't you have gone in for some other fellow's friend, Madge, instead of running off with mine?"

Margaret smiled, she understood her brother's feelings so well; he loved his friend, and could not bear to part with him even for his sister's sake.

"Because no other fellow's friend would have suited me so well," she answered; "there is but one Cecil Slade in all the world."

"By Jove! you're right there," rejoined George, his louring brow clearing in an



instant; "you've no idea what a capital fellow he is. When I was ill, he nursed me like a woman—he never left me day or night, and when I tried to thank him, he only laughed—you know his way—pretending it was all nothing; he was always in such good spirits too. I believe he did me more good than all the doctors."

Margaret listened with brightening eyes and dimpling cheek to the praises of the man she loved; her whole face lighted up from the joy within.

As her brother let his eyes rest upon her face, he could not help thinking how pretty she was looking, and he said, in a more satisfied tone,

"Well, I suppose a fellow's sure to make himself a fool about a woman some time or other, and it might as well be about you as anybody else."

Margaret looked as though she thought it

was a great deal better it should be about *her*.

“Of course you can’t expect me to be rejoiced at losing the best and dearest old chum a fellow ever had. I don’t know what will become of me when Cecil cuts me adrift.”

“There is no need for you to be ‘cut adrift,’ as you call it,” said Margaret; “accept me as a third party, and we can all ‘chum’ together.”

“Not if I know it,” answered George. “Cecil single and Cecil married are quite different things. I don’t think a married bachelor is a success anyway; when he has once gone over to the ranks of the enemy, he had better stay there.”

“The ‘enemy,’ as you maliciously term your sister,” she answered, “will be very happy to keep him, only don’t say I wasn’t generous enough to offer you a share.”

A happy light shone in her face, and lighted up her eyes as she was speaking.

“Upon my word, Madge,” he rejoined somewhat irrelevantly, “you *do* look blooming—I never saw a girl so jolly glad to get married!”

“How coarse and vulgar you are, George!” Margaret said, the lights and shadows changing on her face as the sun-clouds sweep over a field of corn. “It will be a long time before we think of such a thing. I should like our engagement to last a long time.”

“Most girls like to cut it as short as they can,” said he.

“What do you know about girls? You will always talk about things you don’t understand.”

“Well, I understand this, that there’s many a ‘slip between the cup and the lip;’ though you have hooked your fish so far, you haven’t landed him yet.”

“I hate slang,” said Margaret.

“Except such as you appropriate to your own special use. But what I mean is this—love, and all that kind of bosh, is very well in its way, but you can’t live on it. Now I know Cecil hasn’t a penny but what he earns, and art is not lively just now; I know you’re counting on the governor, but suppose he refuses to cash up—how then? you can’t live upon love, you know—it is an awkward fact; but somehow those common things, ‘beef’ and ‘mutton,’ are necessary aids to existence.”

Margaret had hitherto looked only on one side of the shield—on that side where rested the golden glow of romance, haloed by the glory of youth. On the more prosaic side she had never cast a thought; unfortunately for the world of dreamers, we live in a prosaic age, when the poetical episodes are few and far between, and even then

scarce lasting for the passing hour. Real actual life is a very different matter from the visionary fancies of "love's young dream." There is, perhaps, more pure, unadulterated tenderness and loyal faith in the earnest life we live than could ever be enjoyed in [the idyllic life we dream of in the flush of youth and fulness of fancy. Who would not weary of an eternal bed of roses ?

Since Cecil Slade had lifted Margaret into the heaven of his love, she had had no time to think of the future ; the present hour was enough ; everything was absorbed and comprehended therein.

She felt, rather than thought, that she and Cecil were going to spend their lives through the long stretch of coming years together. The idea of any plans, how they were to live, what they were to do, never once entered her mind. Of course the question would have arisen and been dis-

cussed in time, for Cecil Slade was a practical man, and had long outgrown his foolish, dreamy days, wherein some men linger so long and fruitlessly.

George's brusque suggestion seemed premature, but for the moment it made Margaret look grave ; the necessity of the father's "cashing up," as George forcibly put it, or the possibility of his refusing to do so, came upon her as a surprise. She did not take much heed of money—she had always had enough, and to spare. Lady Erlescliffe often talked of poverty ; but as her struggles with that terrific monster were kept in the background, and Margaret was never allowed to be an eye-witness of them, she had begun to regard it as a pleasant fiction rather than a hideous fact. How could she do otherwise, when its ugliness was covered up and wreathed with roses ?

"Well," she said slowly, as George

put the stern necessities plainly before her mind, "why should father refuse to 'cash up,' as you call it?" She paused reflectively a moment, and then added, with a brightening smile, "But if he does, I'm sure Cecil won't care."

"Won't he?" exclaimed George, making a wry face. "Cecil isn't quite a fool. He knows you must live. Besides, I've heard him say a dozen times that he would never marry a woman without money."

"Oh!" exclaimed Margaret, with a little angry petulance, "you may as well leave Cecil's name out of the question; and since you seem to have come on purpose to say disagreeable things, I think you had better go."

"I don't mean to be disagreeable, Madge," he answered apologetically; "only it is as well sometimes to put things plainly. The governor's sent me some pretty stiff letters

lately, I can tell you; and I'm not sure he won't cut up rough about this affair of yours."

"I'm not afraid," said Margaret, confident of her lover's power to make any amount of roughness smooth. "I'm too happy to be afraid of anything."

When, at length, Lady Erlescliffe joined them, she greeted George with great cordiality, in a sort of way acknowledging the embryo relationship. She insisted on his staying to luncheon, and even invited him to drive to the garden-party in the afternoon, as she was "a privileged friend, and was sure that any friend of hers would receive a welcome." George was highly gratified by his unusually warm reception, though he would not avail himself of her invitation in the matter of the garden-party.

The luncheon passed off pleasantly enough, and when a little of his shy *gaucherie* had rubbed off, he talked more freely, and



told some funny anecdotes in a sprightly, off-hand manner, which took Lady Erlescliffe by surprise ; and, after he had said "good-bye," she expressed herself much pleased with him.

"Your brother is wonderfully improved, Margaret, indeed, quite agreeable and entertaining. I used to think him rather hobbledy-hoyish ; but, of course, associating so much with my dear Cecil would naturally improve anyone." With which assertion Margaret perfectly agreed.

It was one of the brightest of June days, the sun shone gloriously ; the air was soft and fresh, more genial, indeed, than it generally is during the heat of the midsummer-day, when the hot air, if there is any, blows like a sirocco, stifling and choking rather than refreshing us ; but this was altogether an exceptional day, with the warmth of Summer and the balmy breath of the sweet

Spring weather ; just such a day, indeed, as the giver of an out-door party would "order," if she had the power to command the weather.

Their destination was ten or fifteen miles from town. They drove in an open carriage. Cecil, though he hated that kind of entertainment, yielded to the desire of the ladies, and accompanied them. They soon left the hazy atmosphere of the great metropolis behind them, and drove on through quiet country lanes, between hedgerows, clothed in their rich Summer foliage, and all abloom with honeysuckle and brier-roses; the sweet-scented air blowing over fields of clover, and, as they passed by clusters of cottages, laden with the aromatic perfume of the fir and pinewood, had an exhilarating effect even on Lady Erlescliffe's somewhat jaded world-worn nature, while the lowing of the cattle and tinkling of the sheep-bells made

the sweetest music Margaret had heard for many a day.

Life seemed to have reached its culminating point of bliss, to have given her all, and left no wish, no lingering desire unfulfilled; without all was beautiful, fair, and bright, but within her breast there was a brighter glow of joy than was ever made by mortal sunshine; her world was smiling on her from Cecil's eyes, and occasionally the magnetic clasp of his hand closed over hers. The blooming beauty of the world around her seemed to derive all its attractions from his all-absorbing presence.

"We must hide our silken chains from prying eyes to-day, Margaret," Cecil said, "though I feel strongly tempted to parade my rights of proprietorship before the eyes of an envious multitude; yet, perhaps, it would be as well that our engagement should be made known to my uncle, and

the rest of the family, before it is announced to the world in general."

"Certainly, I stipulated for that," rejoined Lady Erlescliffe, before Margaret had time to speak, "the less things of this kind are talked about until they are finally settled the better."

"So you see you have a brief respite from my tyrannical rule," Cecil rejoined, looking like the most meek and benevolent of tyrants.

"I don't want any reprieve," said Margaret, "if I had my will I should pray for speedy execution."

As they were talking they heard the sharp ring of a horse's hoofs, ridden at a quick hand-gallop along the lane behind them. In a few minutes the rider, Colonel Dunstable—for he it was—came up with them, slackened rein, and after changing courtesies with Lady Erlescliffe and Cecil, he wheeled

round and rode on by Margaret's side for the rest of the journey, talking the while in an unusually pleasant fashion, but addressing the chief part of his conversation to her ; fixing his weird dark eyes upon her, when circumstances permitted him to do so, moving her with a strange fascination, she scarcely knew whether of attraction or repulsion. Lady Erlescliffe occasionally threw in an observation, and Cecil relapsed into silence, leaning back in the carriage in his usually careless *dolce far niente* fashion.

By the time they reached their destination they found a goodly sprinkling of the company already arrived. Gaily dressed women, like a bevy of gorgeous butterflies, flitted about the lawn, with their attendant black-coated cavaliers lounging lazily by their sides, as is the wont of masculine humanity on these mildly festive occasions, most of them wearing a decidedly bored look. Perhaps

they were thinking how much "jollier" a hard day's rowing up the Thames, or a day at Hurlingham, would be; or that even a loose-coated lounge, gun in hand, through the shady woods, would be far preferable to this lazy sauntering among the roses, exchanging an infinity of nothings with the fairer sex, with a lingering longing that the day was over, that they might rush back to town, and wind up the day in a less orthodox, though perhaps far more congenial manner than it began.

"England expects every man to do his duty" in many ways besides fighting her enemies, and society demands that men shall sometimes lay aside their love of freedom, and bow down before her altar of fashion or folly, according to the unwritten social law.

The crowds of ladies seemed far more in their element, frittering away the hours in

a desultory fashion among the many-hued flower-beds, flashing bolts from bright eyes, hurling shafts of saucy sayings right and left, in a sharp-shooting kind of way, but, on the whole, doing very little damage either to the heads or hearts of their attendant cavaliers ; but it needs a very strong case of flirtation, with a decided love flavour, to render a party of this description thoroughly enjoyable and delightful. There are generally some few couples to whom these gatherings are a boon, for they can avoid the full glare of society's eyes, and wander away to quiet, shady places, finding in themselves their sweetest company.

As they stopped at the gates, Colonel Dunstable threw the reins to his groom, and in another moment had dismounted and was assisting Margaret to descend from the carriage. Seeing Lady Erlescliffe already on Cecil's arm, Margaret without any hesitation

accepted Colonel Dunstable's, and receiving a laughing, warning glance from Cecil's eyes, entered the gates so escorted. A military band was pouring forth strains of martial music in one part of the grounds, while in another dancing was being carried on to the music of the "Devil's Own," to which corps the heir of the house belonged, carried on, it must be owned, not in the most energetic fashion; somehow dancing by daylight in hats and feathers and general out-door attire is always a languid affair; the furbeled draperies seem to hide the grace and poetry of motion. Lady Erlescliffe and her party, having paid their compliments to their hostess, were speedily surrounded by their numerous friends and acquaintances, among them Mrs. Burke, who shone conspicuously, and her manner was more than usually *empressé* to her "dearest Margaret."

Cecil plunged at once into a desperate



flirtation with an elderly spinster all angles, with high cheek bones and a generally faded look, who had danced away her youth in a garrison town long ago ; but was still admired, and in request among the youthful members of her father's company ; thanks to the renovating process she had undergone, she was redeemed for awhile from the clutches of old Time, who was striving hard to thrust her into the ranks of middle age. Cecil had been patronised by the lady when he was a boy in jackets, and in sacred memory of old days, installing himself leader of this "forlorn hope," he leaped manfully into the breach ; and the lady smiled, and brought her energetic forces and faded coquetries fully armed into the field ; but somehow the evening came and found her, in spite of fitful promises of success, a forlorn hope still.

The party soon separated, and drifted away in different directions. Margaret joined a group of young people, and they went for a saunter on the borders of the lake—a pretty, picturesque piece of water, of greater extent than is generally found in private possessions, winding in and out of the ornamental grounds; in the centre was a small island, whereon some laughing girls were seated under the trees, waiting patiently to be taken off, but their cavaliers, being masters of the situation, took a mean advantage of their position, and endeavoured to make terms too favourable for their own interests; the ladies refused to capitulate, and much jesting, badinage, and laughter was flung from one to the other; in the end, no doubt, the gentlemen, out of mere chivalry, gave in, though their exactions involved no great sacrifice on the ladies'

side—merely a bow of ribbon, a glove, or, perhaps, a flower.

On the opposite side of the lake there was a plantation of fir and pine-trees; the sunlight, glancing through the dark stiff branches, threw fantastic shadows in a kind of lace-work on the soft green moss that covered the ground below; it looked so cool and tempting compared with the open flower-garden, ablaze with colour and the light of the sun, for the breeze, which had been so fresh an hour ago, had gradually sunk and died away, leaving the sun in full possession of the field.

Colonel Dunstable still stalked gravely by Margaret's side, and though he joined scarcely at all in the light chatter that was going on, he showed not the slightest disposition to leave her. By degrees the group melted away, and they two were left almost alone; then sundry stragglers came drifting

up, and Margaret was besieged with petitions to join the dance ; but she only shook her head—" It was too warm for dancing," she said—" too warm for anything, indeed, but a lounge of the *dolce far niente* order in the shadiest nook that could be found." She had evidently made up her mind upon the subject, and it was no use to attempt to move her. One more persistent than the rest proposed that she should join the croquet party on the lawn close by, but she only smiled, and humbly acknowledged that she did not know how to handle the mallet—in fact, could not play at all.

" I'll teach you the right stroke in two minutes," suggested one.

" You would speedily repent your kindness," she answered, laughing. " I should croquet my best friend into the laurel bushes, and bring ignominious failure on the whole concern."

“Perhaps Miss Siward has some other game in view,” suggested a tall fair girl, slowly trailing her silk skirt beside them; adding, as she turned a slightly aggravating smile on Margaret, “You don’t really mean to say you *can’t* play croquet?”

“Indeed I really do,” exclaimed Margaret, blushing angrily, she hardly knew why, “and I should be ashamed of myself if I could; it is the slowest, stupidest, and most idiotic game that was ever invented.”

The lady shrugged her shoulders and passed on, saying languidly to her companion,

“What a vixen the girl is! Poor Colonel Dunstable!”

Meanwhile, the object of her compassion strode slowly on by Margaret’s side; she was too self-absorbed and happy just now to care for gay companionship, when she must put on her society mask, and talk or

listen to inane nothings from people she did not care about. Colonel Dunstable was just the companion she would have chosen in her present mood ; she was used to his taciturnity and quaint, unconventional ways, and liked them because they always took her out of the common groove ; besides, being with him was almost as good as being alone ; he made no demand upon her conversational powers, and did not trouble her with his own ; she might talk or not, as she pleased. On this occasion she did not please, but walked silently on, as though she were in dreamland ; her mind was full to overflowing with airy, happy thoughts and feelings, which fluttered her pulse, and buzzed about her brain like a swarm of invisible bees, bringing all the world's honey dew to her opening life ; she seemed unconsciously to absorb all the vivid, variegated beauty that was revolving round her. She felt so

light of heart and limb, as though, if she had wings, she would fly away, and be wrapt and lost in the limitless blue above.

Now and again her silent companion bent an earnest, wondering look upon the love-lighted face beside him, so still and silent, yet so full of something that was good and glorious to see. Presently she seemed to become aware that her escort deserved at least some word of recognition, and turning to him said brightly,

“Would it not have been more agreeable for you to have joined the croquet-party? I’m afraid I am a very stupid companion.”

“Are you?” he answered, “but it doesn’t matter, I don’t mind your being stupid.”

“Well, that is flattering,” she answered, with wide open eyes—“at least, you might have had the politeness to contradict me.”

“I did not know it was polite to contradict a lady.”

“Except when she depreciates her own attractions,” rejoined Margaret, “then it is not only admissible, but commendable.”

“Is it?—I’ll remember another time,” he said, smiling absently, as though he were thinking of something else, though his eyes were smiling with their strange weird expression into hers. So they walked on, she looking forward into a hazy vision of the future, he feeling, without thinking, that the present was all in all. Perhaps those two were the most silent, happy, and content in all that busy, animated scene. Presently Margaret spoke again.

“How nice it is not to feel obliged to bother ourselves with inane civilities and silly talk, isn’t it, Colonel Dunstable?”

“We can do better things than that; we can think and feel,” he answered, with low deepening voice, and eyes that, if she could have read them rightly, would have scared



her ; she would rather have flung herself to the other side of the world than have lingered in such happy innocence by his side ; but she only smiled acquiescently ; it was quite true ; what indeed could they do better than think and feel ?

The sounds of echoing laughter, mingled with merry voices, came wafted to their ears across the miniature lake ; the water looked so cool, calm, and tempting, the idea came to Margaret that a row across to the plantation and a wander there would be rather pleasant. The idea as soon as suggested was acted upon ; in another moment a small cockle-shell of a boat to hold two was drawn to the water's edge, and occupied by Margaret and Colonel Dunstable. They paddled slowly about before they crossed to the plantation. With a happy light shining in her eyes and flooding her face, Margaret leaned over the boat, bared

her hand, and trailed it along the cool water in a state of placid enjoyment, while Colonel Dunstable rowed her solemnly and slowly about, his dark eyes in grim satisfaction resting on her glowing face.

“How grave you are!” she exclaimed, lifting her bright eyes to his fathomless orbs. “You look like grim old Charon, as though you were rowing me out of this world into the next!”

“I wish to God I was, and we might never touch land again,” he said, laying the oars to rest, and leaning towards her added, in a voice full of significance, “Margaret! have you found so much good in this wicked world that you would be sorry to leave it?”

“Well, I don’t know,” she answered, leisurely shaking the water from her finger tips, the significance of his tone being lost upon her. “It seems the fashion to abuse the poor old world, but it is the best *I’ve* ever

known—at any rate, it is good enough for me, and I should like to get a little more tired of this before I try another. Not that way—towards the plantation, please,” she added quickly, seeing he was letting the boat drift in an opposite direction.

“How delightful! how deliciously quiet and solitary, isn’t it?” she exclaimed, as she ran up the bank, and stood beneath some weird old fir-trees, looking back upon the bright kaleidoscope scene they had just quitted. “Look on this picture and on that!” she added. “Here it is all peace, there is not a sound or sign of humanity. We are as much alone as though we were on Robinson Crusoe’s island, only,” she added, tripping daintily on to the rising ground, “this does not happen to be an island at all. Look,” she resumed, calling his attention to the surrounding panorama, and a very pretty bit of English scenery it was, tolerably

extensive too; soft undulating meadow-land and ripening corn-fields stretched as far as the eye could reach, with here and there thick copses, well wooded with stout old oaks or silver-rinded birch, with pretty cottages clustered here and there, and more than one quaint tower or pointed church-spire rising and pointing upwards.

Margaret seemed struck with a sudden thought that they had done wrong in coming here, as they were quite alone, no one had gone before, nor had anyone followed them; but Colonel Dunstable found little difficulty in reconciling her to her position. She only said,

“I’m afraid Lady Erlescliffe will be angry, but I don’t much care. She will only say, ‘Margaret, my dear, you have committed a sad breach of etiquette, indeed, an outrage upon society.’” She imitated Lady Erlescliffe’s formal but mildly reproachful manner, and

her companion smiled a surface smile that was unusual with him. "And I shall look very demure," she continued, "and say, 'I'm very sorry, but the serpent beguiled me, and I did follow him,' *you* representing the serpent, of course. But I think we ought to reverse the position. It was *I* beguiled *you* this time. But, now we *are* here, we may as well make a rural tour a hundred yards round."

Nothing loth, he sauntered by her side, and listened to snatches of the "Soldaten Lieder," which were wafted across the water.

"How ridiculous the dancers look whirling about like mad over there," she observed. "And the music, how much better it sounds in the distance, than when it is crashing in one's ears." After a few minutes' silence, during which they were pacing leisurely up and down, she added, half apologetically,

“It is so kind of you to come over here with me. I feel that I ought not to have dragged you away from the ‘gay and festive scene’; but you are always so good, so considerate of my whims. I did not feel inclined to talk to people to-day, I wanted to be quiet, and it is so delightful to have an old friend that we needn’t stand upon ceremony with, and you know,” she added, looking gratefully in his face, and holding out her hand, “I couldn’t have run away with anyone but you.”

He took her outstretched hand, and his long thin fingers closed over it with an iron clasp, his eyes were ablaze with a hidden fire, and his voice, low as it was, had a husky, broken sound, as though he tried to control it but could not. He drew her nearer to him.

“You should not look and speak like that,” he said, “unless you wish to drive me

mad! I wanted to keep my secret a little longer, but you draw it from me. Margaret, you *know* I love you—you must have seen it every day and every hour of my life.”

“No, no, please don't say that, you cannot possibly mean what you say!” exclaimed Margaret, scared by his tone and manner, as well as discomposed by his words; but he continued, without heeding her, “I have been searching for you for years, and I knew I should find you, as I did at last. You remember our first meeting in the park? I recognized *you*, soul of my soul, the more perfect half of myself, surely you recognized something of *yourself* in *me*?”

He looked eagerly in her face for a reply. She could not but answer him, which she did confusedly.

“How could I do that? I don't quite know what you mean.”

“But only look back,” he said impatiently, peering into her face, “you must remember—you must. Why should I love you—how *could* I love you as I do, if it were not written that you also should love me? Be my wife, be always with me through this world and the next; after all, I want nothing from you but what I have a right to have. No man’s life is perfect till he finds his counterpart; *I* have found mine in *you*—I know it, it came to me as a revelation the first time we stood face to face. You do not comprehend yet, but you will one day; you will look in my face and recognise yourself—your spirit self, I mean. I’m afraid you would laugh and think me a drivelling idiot, if I told you all I feel—all I *know*. Often I have lain awake for hours, thinking of you—wondering when I dare speak as I am speaking now; but this accursed world is always surging and wrapping you round that I cannot reach



you, but when we are sleeping, Margaret—you and I at the same hour—our spirits meet and wander away from this pitiful flesh and blood life, *then* we are one, not two, as we are now. When you awake, you forget; your soul is hidden away and lost in your beautiful body; it can't speak, it can't rise and look out of your eyes, or bubble in broken words from your lips, but it can—it must make you *feel* I love you. Margaret, love, speak to me—say you will marry me, and when.”

There was a concentrated force in his manner, in his utterance, that swept her along with it, like a cork on a rapid river, hurling and swirling her thoughts into a state of chaotic confusion. She had no time, no power to answer him; indeed, she understood but imperfectly all he had been saying; his eccentricities had never taken this form before, and his vehemence fright-

ened her. But now that he paused, and looked with such earnest expectation in her face, she collected herself to answer his decided and pertinent question, "Say, will you marry me, and when?"

"Never, Colonel Dunstable—never!" she answered. "It is impossible; I could not——"

"You can, and will!" he rejoined emphatically.

"No—please believe me. I—I am fond of somebody else, and I am going to marry him."

"Some lying fiend shapes your lips to say that—it is not yourself," he said calmly, without the least excitement in his tone, "and I don't believe you; but it doesn't matter, Margaret, love—it doesn't matter at all. Before we come into the world our fate is fixed for us; we cannot run away from it, for, however fast we run, it is sure

to overtake us. What is to be, will be. You think you love some other man to-day; you think you will marry him, but you never will, Margaret—never! You will marry *me*.”

“How dare you talk like that!” exclaimed Margaret, her eyes flashing angrily through the excited tears which now filled them. “What have I ever done to you that you should wish to make me miserable?”

“*I* wish to make you miserable, Margaret!” he exclaimed, gazing on her tearful face in some perplexity, “but you *won't* understand that I love you so well—have been so strangely drawn to love you, that I would rather die this minute than live my life through without you. I must have you for my own—my very own. *I* make you miserable! It is you who will make yourself miserable, if you attempt to take your life into your own hands and fashion

it to your own foolish fancy. It has been all wrought out for you—for us, and written down by a higher law than you have power to cross. You remember Christian, how he floundered in the Slough of Despond? exactly as you are floundering now in a slough of worldly passions and vanities which will suck you down and smother you, unless you have courage to struggle through.”

“I don’t know anything about the Slough of Despond,” she answered impatiently, “and as for worldly vanities, I don’t suppose I am any worse than my neighbours; at any rate, *you* have no right to preach to me. Take me back directly. I wish I had not come here with you at all.” Seeing a cloud fall over his face, and the fitful fire flicker and fade out of his eyes, leaving them dark and sad, with a yearning sadness, she added regretfully, remembering all his kindness, “Oh, dear! I’m sorry to speak so

rudely to you, but you ought not to have said such things to me, indeed you ought not."

"No," he said, and there was something in his tone which touched her in spite of herself. "We should never let our hearts speak; we should strangle our souls, and let only our lying lips talk in the common jargon—we must 'do as the world doth, say as it sayeth.' If we attempt to lift our feet out of the common groove, and talk or think of things outside this visible life, we are called 'odd,' 'eccentric,' as the world calls me, because in some things I walk out of its beaten track, and differ from its common brood. You cannot deny you have heard me so spoken of?"

He looked curiously into her face, and waited for an answer.

"Everybody says you are rather eccentric; and so I think you are," she answered.

“Because I have not praised and prated of your beauty, and made that the text of my affections. You doubt whether I am in my right mind, because I talk of my soul’s hunger, rather than my eye’s longing; but it is my invisible soul that loves yours, Margaret! You can be to no other man what you are to me. Think over what I have said, and see me or send me a line to-morrow.”

“What would be the use of that?” she replied, much distressed at his earnest entreating tone, but feeling compelled to answer firmly. “I could only repeat to-morrow what I say to-day. I have told you there is somebody else I—love—and if there were not,” she added quickly and emphatically, “I could never care for you in the way you want; you *must* believe me, please, and forget all the foolish things you have said.”

While they were talking, she had been

gradually making her way back to their landing-place—he was compelled to quicken his steps in order to keep up with her. When they reached the borders of the lake, they found their boat drifting away some yards from where they had left it.

“See ! see !” exclaimed Margaret, in dismay, “our boat is drifting away ! How shall we get back ?” As she spoke, she began waving her handkerchief to the crowd on the other side, who seemed much amused by the position of the stranded pair.

“A moment’s patience and it will be all right,” he exclaimed. “Don’t grudge me a few brief moments more ! God knows when I may have an opportunity of speaking to you again !”

“I wish you had never had an opportunity of speaking to me at all,” she answered ruefully, “things can never be the same between us again.”

“No,” he exclaimed joyfully, “they never can. You know *now* that I love you, try as you may you can never forget that. Like Eve, you have grown wiser in an hour, plucked from the tree of knowledge fruit which will last your life—you may try to hide it out of sight, or throw it to the winds, it will rise up, it will wing its way back to you, sink into your heart and fill it with the thoughts of me! You are right, Margaret, things will never be the same between us. You will never forget that I love you. Your lips deny me now, but your heart will turn to me one day—it is so written, Margaret—till then—well, you may amuse yourself with this other man’s brummagem passion, and——”

“Don’t! don’t!” exclaimed Margaret, snatching away her hand, and rushing down to the edge of the water. “You frighten me! You make me shrink from you!” and



so, indeed, she did. Somehow she felt as though he was laying a grip upon her invisible life, and would keep fast his hold in spite of her. "Ah, I am so glad! they are bringing a boat for us."

"Think what a ghastly thing some people make of their lives," he added, laying one detaining hand upon her arm, and with the other pointing to the other side. "Look at that tawdry mass! If you could strip off their fine clothes and false humanity, leaving their miserable souls naked, you'd see such a ghastly, mismatched company as would make you tremble—a death's head grinning at the feast of every day's life. Don't join their ranks, Margaret, for God's sake—and mine."

The last word was lost almost in a whisper as the light cockle-shell of a boat was brought back to them. A hand was outstretched, and a genial voice (not Cecil's) exclaimed—

“Come, Miss Siward; you two must have been amusing yourselves rather. But you hardly deserve a rescue, after the shameful way in which you deserted us.”

Margaret concealed her agitation as best she could, and made some laughing rejoinder as she stepped into the boat. Colonel Dunstable relapsed into grim silence, and followed her, took up the oars, and slowly pulled back to the other side.

Margaret felt as though she carried a lump of lead in her breast—so different from the light, buoyant heart she had carried across the water an hour before.

## CHAPTER II.

## AN OLD LOVE.

THEY had scarcely landed on the other side of the lake when Colonel Dunstable and Margaret drifted apart, and met no more for that day at least. No one thought of making any inquiries concerning him, as he was in the habit of dropping out of society as suddenly as he dropped into it, and resented any remarks upon his disappearance as an impertinence; so he went his way unquestioned. He could afford it; a rich man may play off antics in society's face, and it only smiles upon him, whereas a poor man would be frowned out

of its magic circle. In just so many minutes as it would take him to struggle through the crowd of friends or acquaintances, Colonel Dunstable passed out of his friend's hospitable gates, and went round to the stables. He knew his way well, and in the absence of groom or stable-help, who had been drafted into the general service, he saddled his horse, and started at a swinging gallop back to town. As the mare's hoofs rung sharply on the hard gravel roadway, Mrs. Burke, who was within hearing, looked that way, and knew at once that the horseman was her brother. What could have driven him away so early?

"Margaret," she exclaimed, turning quickly to the girl whom she had taken under her sheltering wing, "that is my brother Sidney riding away! How very strange! What have you done to him?"

"*I!* nothing. What could I have done?"

she answered, blushing deeply, but trying to laugh to cover her confusion, hypocrite as she was.

“He has spoken to no one but *you*, Margaret,” said Mrs. Burke, casting a scrutinising glance upon her face. “I noticed that, and he has been with you for the last two hours.”

“Perhaps he got tired of my company; there is no accounting for taste, you know,” rejoined Margaret lightly.

“That is not very likely. Something has annoyed him. There are very few people who have the power to hurt him, Margaret, and *you* are one of them.”

“I assure you I have not taken advantage of my position; for I have not hurt him, any more than he has hurt me.”

“That is a jesuitical speech,” said Mrs. Burke, “you may have had a tilting match, and been mutually wounded.”

“At any rate he has given me no chance to try my healing powers—you see he has gone.”

“Yes,” sighed Mrs. Burke, as her softening eyes followed the figure fast receding in the distance, “poor Sidney! he is the only care and anxiety I have—my dearest comfort too,” she added, and a half smile quivered on her lips. “You have no idea what a good, noble fellow he is, Margaret; but so dreamy and visionary, so full of quaint fancies, people don’t understand him.”

“No,” said Margaret vacantly, feeling she must say something.

“They call him *odd*,” resumed Mrs. Burke, “whereas his eccentricities merely arise from the over-refinement of a sensitive nature. He idealizes everything, and the common realities of life jar upon his spirit—you must have observed that.”

“No,” said Margaret, “I have always

thought him strangely eccentric, and singularly attractive, but I have never wondered why, or in what special things, he differed from other people.”

“ Because he differs in everything ; he is so reticent too, he never talks of himself, though I know at times he is very depressed —ah ! how I wish !—but then it is no use, there are no good fairies now to lend us a wishing-cap.” Mrs. Burke grew prolific in her praises of her dear brother, indeed, she appraised his perfections so highly, she might have been setting him up at auction, to be knocked down by a lady’s fan. If there was anything in this world that this worldly-minded lady loved with all her heart and soul, it was this strange brother of hers ; and she was never happier than when relating anecdotes and escapades of his boy life ; these had always been amusing to Margaret, but somehow they were

more attractive to her to-day ; she could not tell why, she was not given to self analysis, she only felt an interest in him that was half pain now, and found herself piecing together such scraps and fragments as she gathered from Mrs. Burke's lips, vaguely trying to make out something definite respecting him, for the psychology of his nature perplexed and puzzled her. She tried to drive the thought of him from her mind, but it would not be driven away ; it fell like a shadow over her for all the rest of that bright Summer day. She tried to listen to the music, and even allowed herself to be persuaded to take a turn to the enlivening and graceful strains of the "Blue Danube;" but all the spring seemed to have left her feet, for though, of course, they kept time to the music, they seemed weighted with lead, it was an exertion to move them, and



the elasticity had passed out of her spirit too.

She could not call the usual glad, happy smile to her lips; though she laughed and chatted with her young companions of the hour, it was an exertion to her to keep up the tone of light badinage that was usually so easy; to all outward appearance she was her old natural self; it is only those who love us well that notice the shades of difference which mark upon our faces the lines of real or assumed gaiety. Once during the third figure of the Lancers she caught a glimpse of Cecil as he passed among the laurels, talking gravely to some one, she did not know who, except that it was a woman with a salmon-coloured feather in her hat; in another moment they had passed out of sight.

As soon as the dance was over, she began

to wish it was time to go home, and wondered in which direction Cecil had strolled away, and who was his companion. She grew impatient and half vexed with him; for though they were not to appear outwardly devoted, he certainly might have sought her for a few sweet stolen moments. Glancing round somewhat discontentedly, she saw Lady Erlescliffe seated with a party of elderly friends, chatting and daintily playing with ices beneath the huge elm-trees, which afforded a delightful shade from the burning sun. She did not feel disposed to join them, and in a somewhat lonely and discontented spirit, sauntered on with a small party of acquaintances; the soft, musical voices, and low rippling laughter, which broke in tremulous waves of sound, only served to make her feel lonelier still; nothing seemed real or genuine. The sweet

Summer air had lost its freshness, and sighed through the waving trees, instead of stirring them with a welcome, whispering gladness; the blooming flowers were already drooping beneath the hot sun's fiery eye; the very echo of merry voices seemed like dead sounds galvanized into momentary life; so true it is that our own eyes make the glory of things round us. When our hearts are light and glad, the world gives us back a reflection of our own gladness; if we are gloomy, it is in vain that nature smiles on us with her face wreathed in Summer flowers, and a thousand sweet sights and sounds clustered round her; we only see in them the reflection of our own gloom, as we catch the reflection of our own face distorted and caricatured when we look into the bowl of a spoon.

A rush of sombre-hued feeling swept over

her, stirred into life, it seemed, by Colonel Dunstable's ill-omened, professedly prophetic words.

“How dared he say she would never marry Cecil, but would one day marry him?”

Then she began to wonder where Cecil was—whether the owner of the salmon-coloured feather was detaining him, and why did he avoid her all the day? There was surely no occasion for that. If she had only known how things would turn out, she would not have come there at all. She felt like a wandering ghost among that animated variegated crowd; she wished the day was over, longed for the time to go home.

Presently, by a sudden turn in the path, they came upon Mrs. Burke sitting quite alone in a shady nook; they lingered a few moments, exchanged a few common-places, and then passed on. Margaret remained

behind with Mrs. Burke, glad to escape from the high pressure of small talk, wherein she was obliged to play her part, although she played it badly. Mrs. Burke greeted her, as she always did, smilingly.

“These rural festivities are very fatiguing, my dear. I have been seated here some time watching the world go by; I am rested now—it is delightfully shady about here—shall we take a turn?”

Margaret gladly availed herself of the invitation, though she often grew tired of Mrs. Burke’s company, yet at the present moment she found it more endurable than her own. Mrs. Burke was always bright and amusing, full of tittle-tattle; she raked in the social gutter, and dished up little bits of social scandal about everything and everybody; she pointed her remarks with little pungent satires or humorous touches, which made even the most good-natured smile, in

spite of the inward conviction of the scandal-loving propensities of the relater—but how would society amuse itself without the circulation of these succulent scandals?—they may not be true, but they make it laugh, provide entertainment for the harmless kettledrum, and if things are wrong to-day, they can be set right to-morrow. “So runs the world away.”

In spite of the element of danger in her composition, Mrs. Burke was a general favourite. Polished manners, smooth address, and a pleasant face go a great way towards establishing the world's favourites. She had a good stock of small talk, that sort of small change which circulates with brisk currency through all classes of society, while the pure gold of reflective minds would scarcely pass from hand to hand. However, she had seen a great deal of the world, and made it her business to know a something

of everybody's affairs. She crept up the back stairs of their lives, as well as entering by the front entrance. What she did not know as a truth, she made up for by skilful invention. Strangely enough she never got convicted of circulating a falsehood, there was always a certain amount of truth, which gave the matter fair currency.

“The lie that is all a lie can be fought with and battled outright,

But the lie that is half a truth is a harder battle to fight.”

She turned on the favourite tap, and set the stream of gossip gently flowing; she was just regaling Margaret with a tit-bit concerning an episode she had witnessed between “that demure little prude, Agnes Grey, and the wicked Major, whose lightest vices were enough to scare even a penniless bride from St. George's altar,” when the flood of her eloquence was stopped by an exclamation from

Margaret, the colour flashed into her face, and the light into her eyes. Glancing round to learn the cause of this emotion, Mrs. Burke observed Cecil Slade coming down the winding path towards them, now in full view, then disappearing as the path wound in and out. He was still engaged talking to the lady of the salmon-coloured plume, which Margaret now observed was perched on the head of a tall, fair, and remarkably handsome woman, whose hand was upon his arm, and her eyes lifted to his face. She could not detect the expression, as they were too far off; but she hated that woman on the spot.

Mrs. Burke slightly elevated her eyebrows, with an expression of well-bred surprise, as she exclaimed,

“Mr. Slade and Lady Randolph! What an unfortunate rencontre! My dear Margaret, we had better turn back.”



“Why?” inquired Margaret, determined to go on.

“Because—well, my dear, we may be interrupting an interesting *tête-à-tête*. Poor dear Mr. Slade! I quite feel for him. I am sure he must be taken dreadfully by surprise. *She* is the very last person in the world he would care to meet.”

“Why,” exclaimed Margaret impatiently, “dear Mrs. Burke, how mysterious you are! Why should Ce—Mr. Slade object to meet that lady? She looks very charming, and *he*—well, at least he does not look as though the meeting was especially unpleasant to him.”

“Looks don’t always interpret feelings, nor words either, for that matter,” said Mrs. Burke, “indeed they are often used to conceal them; and Cecil Slade is a man of the world. If you were to treat him like an

eel, and skin him alive, he'd look as though he liked it."

"But about that lady?" said Margaret interrogatively. "Mr. Slade seems to know her very well, and I've never seen her nor heard of her before."

"I don't suppose she is on Lady Erlescliffe's visiting list," replied Mrs. Burke; "and, considering all things, I should say she was the last person in the world you would hear them talk about."

"Why not?" inquired Margaret very impatiently. "Is there anything very bad or wicked about her?"

"Oh! dear no," said Mrs. Burke, laughing lightly, adding, with unconscious satire, "if there was, no doubt you would have heard of it—the little peccadilloes and vices of our friends give a <sup>a</sup> piquant flavour to conversation, and are always largely circulated. No, there is no harm about her,

poor thing! Some say she had a very narrow escape, and some say she has jumped out of the frying-pan into the fire."

"Well, but tell me, please," exclaimed Margaret, greatly excited by those half intelligible inuendoes, "I want to know all about her."

"You are very curious, my dear, and I really don't see why you should be; Lady Randolph is not a specially interesting person."

"Oh! yes," exclaimed Margaret, "everybody is interesting who has a story or even the slightest mystery attached to them, as I am sure she has, and I shall not rest till you have told me."

"There is really no mystery in the matter, only a little delicacy, and perhaps neither Lady Erlescliffe nor Mr. Slade would like the affair talked of; though for that matter, all the world knows it, and all the

world ignores it. Of course you will not speak of what I tell you?"

"Of course not," said Margaret eagerly, intent on what was to follow.

"Well, a few years ago Mr. Slade was engaged to Miss Wyatt; the affair was an acknowledged fact; everybody observed their mutual devotion; the day was fixed for the marriage, the guests were invited, *I* was one of them; well, the very day before the wedding it was broken off! Nobody exactly knew why; it was quite the talk at the time; everybody wondered about it. Some said it was a question of *money*—she was an heiress, you know—they say her father and Mr. Slade could not agree. Ah, well! when a girl is rich and a man poor, there is *always* grave cause for suspicion—at any rate, she said it was her money and not herself he wanted, and broke off the marriage on the spot; she was a strong-

minded girl, and could not really have cared much for Mr. Slade, for in less than three months she married her present husband, a Scotch baronet, Sir Colin Randolph, who resided chiefly in the north. I don't suppose she and Slade have met since—they seem very good friends, however—I daresay there are many things to be explained on both sides, though it is no use *now*; it is too late.”

“A very good thing it is too late,” said Margaret indignantly. “I should think he was very glad to get rid of a girl who could think so meanly of him. I don't think it matters much who has the money, so that there is enough for both.”

“Why, Margaret! little firefly,” said Mrs. Burke, smiling placidly, “surely there are no naughty drones hovering round your golden honey-pot?”

“Don't be afraid, *I* am quite safe,” re-

plied Margaret, laughing a light laugh with her lips, which her heart echoed not at all.

“I have watched you with great anxiety, Margaret, love,” rejoined Mrs. Burke, “and I should be sorry for you to become the prey of a fortune-hunter at last—the worst of all fates that can befall a woman.”

Why will she harp upon that subject? thought Margaret, as she gulped back something that rose like a lump in her throat, though she answered with aggravating placidity.

“Dear Mrs. Burke, you are very hard to please, and not quite consistent in your views either.”

“How?” she exclaimed, in slightly surprised accents.

“Well,” replied Margaret, “I hardly see on what terms you would arrange matrimonial engagements. When a couple marry

for love, pure and simple, without regard to money, I've heard you call them improvident idiots."

"So they are," she answered shortly, "people can't live upon love—none but fools have tried it, and they have soon found out their mistake, and locked up its miserable skeleton in the closet ever afterwards."

"If a poor girl marries a rich man," continued Margaret, in a business-like, matter-of-fact tone, "you call it a sale. I've heard you expatiate quite eloquently upon the sacrifice of soul and body offered up at St. George's altar. I've heard you say there was as much sale and barter carried on there as in a slave-market in the East, only the manner of it was different."

"That is perfectly true," she answered, mildly reproachful, "though, of course, there are exceptions; and I certainly should

never have used such language except in the strictest privacy, and I think it is mean to bring my own words against me."

"It is all fair in argument," said Margaret, smiling, "and I've not quite finished mine. If a poor man marries a rich girl, no matter what good, noble qualities he has, you brand him as a fortune-hunter! What right have you to do that?" Her voice grew hard and cold in spite of her endeavour to keep its even tenor.

"Because, in nine cases out of ten, he is one," she answered, "no right-minded man of honour and spirit would care to take everything from his wife's hand."

"When he wins her warm loving heart, he takes the best part of her; the rest that follows is mere dross—the mere want of it, I know, has killed the happiness and crushed out the better part of many lives, separated loving hearts, and sent them different



ways to cold, loveless homes. Why should the possession of it have the same effect? What is the use of money if it will not help us, in our own way, to gain what we long for?"

"Money is the root of all good, as well as all evil, my dear, I never denied that; but it should not be all on one side; I would have it equally divided."

"Is anything in this world equally divided?" exclaimed Margaret. "You cannot rule and square these matters by plummet and line. What a pity it is we cannot love to order! Have love and money weighed grain by grain, so much a side, without heeding hearts at all, or have them put, like a kind of sandwich, inside two bankers' books, and be crushed between them! Bah! it sickens me to think of these things. If a girl is rich, what better thing can she do than marry the man she loves, even

though he be as poor as a beggar's dog! If you let her fortune be the barrier between them, you turn her gold into her gravestone, and bury her best affections beneath it."

"My dear child, I really don't like to hear you talk in this very pronounced way about love! When I was a girl we should have blushed even to think upon so delicate a subject."

"And yet you married!" exclaimed Margaret, interrupting her, "and I should think marriage required a great deal of love to flavour it."

"I was a very happy wife, Margaret; but I never dreamed of loving my husband. Mr. Granville Burke was a dignified man, quite above that sort of thing—no woman would have taken the liberty of loving him."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Margaret, elevat-

ing her eyebrows, "I wonder you took the liberty of marrying him."

"That is another—quite another question—we had a decorous regard for one another," replied Mrs. Burke, looking severely virtuous. "And that was quite sufficient. I have no patience with that foolish, sentimental sickness called love."

"Perhaps your patience has not been very severely tried," suggested Margaret demurely; but Mrs. Burke added, without heeding her interruption,

"Young people are very badly brought up, or they would not dream of such a thing; to any well-conducted, modest girl, one man is the same as another—at least, he ought to be, until, of course, he has a legal right to be held differently."

While they were talking and sauntering slowly along, Margaret had cast many a searching glance forward; but Cecil Slade

and his companion, instead of coming straight forward, to meet them face to face, had turned down one of the many narrow winding paths which intersected the wider way, and disappeared. Margaret's cheeks flushed, and she bit her lip with vexation. "Was it mere chance, or had he seen and turned out of the way to avoid her?" She had not spirit to bandy any further words with Mrs. Burke, but let her ramble on as she pleased, answering her by a simple monosyllable, or, perhaps, answering not at all. She had vexed and irritated her enough, buzzing about like a bloated bluebottle, fluttering about over the sweetest sentiments and feelings, tainting all with her poisonous touch.

In due course the music ceased; the festivity of the day was at an end. What a long, dreary day it had been!—a day of "seed time and sowing," which might bear

thorns or flowers thereafter, who could tell? In small knots, or groups of twos and threes, the gay company, looking slightly fatigued and weary now, came surging towards the entrance gates; there was a great buzz among the parting and departing friends; one by one the carriages drove up, were speedily filled, and rolled back in the pleasant sunset, through the green country lanes to town. While Lady Erlescliffe and Margaret were dropping a few last words and smiles among their rapidly departing friends, Cecil came sauntering across the lawn, exchanging here and there a nod or passing word till he reached his mother and Margaret. He was alone, and her eye glanced quickly round, but the salmon-coloured feather was nowhere visible; meanwhile, he was by her side, a few soft-whispered words passed between them, which made her cheeks glow and her heart pulsate with a joy she had

not known through all that long, long day. As the sun's rays tinge all they touch with gold, so his magic presence changed the aspect of all things, visible and invisible, round her. The clouds which had gathered so darkly over her spirit did not burst, but melted rapidly away. Assuming the sweet cares of proprietorship, he handed her into the carriage, wrapped a light shawl round her, and having seen her comfortably seated and arranged for the homeward journey, placed himself opposite her, still keeping her hand close clasped in his. Lady Erlescliffe, with a comfortable middle-aged "thank God the day is over" kind of feeling, leaned back in the carriage, and after a few common-place observations, being drowsily inclined, floated away into the land of Nod, and remained in a half sleeping and waking state all the way home. Cecil

and Margaret had the conversation all to themselves.

“Had a pleasant day, Madge?” he inquired cheerily, “though I certainly must say you don’t look like it.”

“No-o, not especially,” she answered.

“Because *I* wasn’t with you?” he rejoined, with masculine assurance. “Was that the reason? Flatter my vanity, and say yes.”

Her eyes answered him, there was no need for words.

“But what have you done with your grim Colonel? I saw him walking off with you, looking quite triumphant.”

“He soon got tired of me then, for he left the garden and returned to town hours ago,” she answered, with an aggravating conscious blush, which puzzled him then, though he fancied he understood it afterwards. “But what have *you* been doing,

Cecil?" she added. "How strange that we have not crossed one another's path all day! It seems as though we had purposely avoided one another."

Her heart beat; she glanced with a shy, nervous expression into his face, wondering if he would tell her anything of that meeting with his old love. If he concealed it, would it be fair or upright? Her heart answered and excused him, even if it were so. He may conceal it out of regard to me, she thought, lest the mere presence of a rival's ghost might vex or hurt me. It can be but a ghost of the past to him. She was not left long in suspense.

"I've been flirting with an old flame, Margaret," he said, with a frank, open air, that would have set the most doubting heart at rest; "the very last person in the world I expected to see. You remember that story I told you last night?"



“Oh, yes, I know,” exclaimed Margaret excitedly—“the lady with the light feather. I saw you together. I knew who it was. She married a Scotch baronet, and lives in the north. I—I wondered if you would tell me about it, and——”

“Why shouldn’t I, *ma mie*? There are no secrets between us,” he answered, with a slightly amused smile.

“Oh, I am so angry with myself, Cecil. I have been so mean, I thought——” She hesitated, hardly knowing how to frame her thought.

“What!” he said, “you thought I had a skeleton in my closet, eh, Madge? Well, if there were, I certainly should not dangle its ugly bones before your sweet, innocent eyes. I should hide it away in some hole or corner where you would never find it.”

“I have been so foolish! But, Cecil, are you quite sure? You know, if you stir

a smouldering fire, sometimes it will blaze again. Are you sure you don't regret? You are not sorry you lost her?" She spoke in a low voice, with her face turned away, as though she was half ashamed of what she was saying.

"Sorry! Don't ask such a foolish question even of your own heart, Margaret," he answered gravely. She could not tell whether he was annoyed or not. "No, I shall never regret what I have lost, and I pray God I may never regret what I have won."

## CHAPTER III.

## MAMMON.

THE few following days were the very happiest of Margaret's life ; they seemed to be made up of sunshine and the essence of all sweet things. She had never dreamed such perfect bliss could be ; every light cloud-shadow passed from her mind. Cecil was devoted to her ; the hours and moments flew only too quickly. The time of parting trod too quickly on the heels of meeting. The day was never long enough—night came too soon.

They rode together in the morning, and took their noonday ramble beneath the glorious

old trees in Kensington Gardens, and sauntered about hither or thither, according to their own sweet will. Lady Erlescliffe had relaxed in her strictly conventional rule; perhaps it was as well she slackened the rein, lest they might strain and break it. For those few days at least they enjoyed as much freedom as their hearts desired.

One whole morning they spent lounging through the splendid galleries of Burlington House; of course Margaret had "done the Academy," gone in with the fashionable crowd at the private view, and again on the opening day, but now everything was new to her. Animated by Cecil's spirit, she took an interest in art for art's sake. He pointed out to her what to admire, and explained to her the reason why it should be admired; every picture seemed to glow with fresh colour and beauty beneath his discriminating and eloquent word-painting. He directed

her attention to the grace of conception and the artistic carrying out of such conception, and brought out points and delicate details that form the beauty of the whole, but which are little comprehended by the mass of brilliantly-arrayed ignorance which storms this temple of art. Margaret inquired if he had ever exhibited there, or if anything of his decorated the walls now.

“It is a most humiliating thing to confess, Madge,” he answered, “but my genius has hitherto been unappreciated by the hanging committee ; my pictures have been ignominiously rejected, but perhaps the council of carpenters have had something to do with that. We must give the committee *all* the blame.”

“What a shame !” exclaimed Margaret, “and how dreadfully disappointing ! If I were you, Cecil, I’d give up painting altogether. Can’t you do something else ?”

“Yes,” he answered deliberately ; “I can

do a great many other things—for instance, I can dance like a dervish, ride anything—from a rocking-horse to a Mexican destrier; swim like a fish, dive like a duck, and shoot!—yes, I can shoot anything—from a skylark to a wild elephant, but I doubt very much if these are profitable accomplishments.”

“That’s nonsense! You know I don’t mean such things as those. I should like to travel, Cecil, and see strange countries—couldn’t you go as ambassador somewhere? I am sure you could do or be anything in the world you liked.”

“Archbishop of Canterbury, for instance,” he suggested.

“Well, even that,” she answered, with some slight hesitation, being rather hazy concerning the qualifications necessary for that high office. “I don’t exactly know what the archbishop has to do, except keep the clergy in order, and I don’t suppose he

is really a much cleverer man than you are ; at any rate, I am sure there must be plenty of posts that you would be able to fill, and I should like you to do something to make people write and talk about you—to be something besides a mere gentleman, as you are now. You understand what I mean?”

“You are of an ambitious turn of mind, Madge,” said Cecil, “and I am rather lazily, luxuriously inclined, of slightly epicurean tendencies. No, I should decidedly decline to enter into diplomatic relations, except, indeed, Providence would instal me as Inspector-General of the universe. How well I’d keep the world in order ! I’d do away with the east wind, cut off the comet’s tail, muzzle the great bear, and keep the naughty little stars from winking.”

“You may as well order the sun to be always shining while you are about it,” laughed Margaret. “How delightfully kind

your mother is, Cecil! It is so nice for us to be together like this, and to think that one day we shall be together always!"

"With no chance of getting tired of each other," he suggested.

"Not the least in the world," she answered; adding, gravely, "Do you know, I am sometimes afraid we are *too* happy! We cannot go on being so happy—it seems that there *must* come an end to it."

"Well, Madge, darling," he said fondly, drawing her to him, and feeling slightly amused at her low, earnest tones, "things cannot *always* remain at the present high pressure. When we have blown a little of the steam off, I daresay we shall settle down to a more equable temperature. I hope we shall never get into hot water, and never let ourselves down to freezing-point."

"Now, Cecil, I'm serious," she began.

"And sentimental," he rejoined, "while



I am perfectly matter-of-fact. I'm content with what is, I don't trouble about what may be. When my eyes feast on love's bright plumage, and my soul hungers after its sweetness, I never remember that it may moult its feathers, and become a ragged scarecrow, and its sweetness turn to gall and bitterness."

"I don't know what yours may turn to, mine will be *always* exactly as it is now," she answered, with a sublime faith in the unchangeability of her nature.

"Always!" he repeated, and a slow inquiring smile broke over his face. "No storms or thunder-clouds to clear the matrimonial atmosphere?"

"It will always be the brightest of blues, and will never want clearing," she rejoined confidently.

"What! no light feathery cobwebs of jealousy to be swept away?" he exclaimed.

“Oh! now it is mean to throw that in my teeth,” she answered, laughing and blushing at the same time. “But that was nothing really, only a little light effervescence.”

“Suppose I were disposed to effervesce in the same fashion!” he said.

“Ridiculous! You have no cause.”

“I don’t know. Perhaps if I were to look carefully round, I might find some rustic rival hidden away somewhere. By-the-by, that reminds me, your old friend Robert Kestrel was up at our place last night, and a remarkably clever, intelligent fellow he is.”

Margaret was furious with herself, for at the mention of Rob’s name her cheeks flamed scarlet. Like a flash of light the thought rushed through her mind, “Had Lady Erlescliffe ever spoken to him, or hinted or suggested anything of her father’s

foolish fancy, which had so vexed and humiliated her?"

"Nell's brother," she rejoined, and there was a slight embarrassment in her tone and manner which she could not repress. "You remember my pretty blind friend Nelly. But I didn't know you had ever seen Rob."

"Yes, he comes to the studio sometimes," he answered. "He and George did not hit it off well at first, but they get on very well now. *I* like him; he is full of that robust life and energy that has an almost mesmeric attraction for me; and he is desperately devoted to you, Madge."

"He is a true, loyal friend," she answered. "I believe he would have his right hand cut off, if it would do me any good. I may say we have grown up together, for he and Nellie were the only companions of my childhood, you know."

"Yes, I know; and—you've spoilt the

poor fellow's life for him, Madge!" She was going to deny the insinuation angrily, but he gave her no time, as he added, "It isn't your fault, so don't be remorseful. If a fellow will cry for the moon, he mustn't be disappointed if he cannot get it."

"I should think not," she answered, half mollified; "it was great presumption if he thought of me at all, and still worse impertinence to speak of it to you."

"He never did," answered Cecil; "but I've got eyes, and occasionally I use them. I could not help noticing his dog-like devotion to *you*, which you have never suspected."

"How could I?" she answered—"I so seldom see him; besides, I don't see what there is to be suspicious about."

"I believe he has constituted himself your invisible guardian," resumed Cecil. "I know he has been dogging Colonel

Dunstable's steps for the last few months ; he actually fancies that grim old *beggar* has taken the liberty of falling in love with you, Madge, and Master Rob doesn't approve."

"What silly talk!" said Margaret, really vexed—"as though it could matter to him whom I married!—as though he had any business, indeed, even to think of the matter at all!"

"That was exactly my opinion," replied Cecil. "I think I must ease his mind, and tell him that I mean to carry you off myself."

"That is the most sensible thing you can do, but you must first consult father about that 'carrying off.' I don't think he will forbid the process." She turned to him with a tender, loving smile as she spoke, and slipped her hand into his. The action, slight as it was, spoke volumes, and he bent

down and kissed her with an answering caress. "You are going down to Clinton to-morrow, Cecil, are you not?"

"Yes, I start early in the morning," he answered. "I shall be glad to get the matter settled and over."

"I should like to go with you," resumed Margaret—"not only for the pleasure of seeing father and Nell, and all the dear home-folk, but I should like another ramble with you in the orchard. You remember our first walk? I shall never see the white apple-blossoms fluttering in the soft Spring winds, but I shall feel exactly as I felt then; but, as Lady Erlescliffe objects so strongly to my going, perhaps I had better give it up."

"Perhaps she is right," said Cecil. "I really do think that my first interview with your father had better be a strictly business affair. But suppose he doesn't approve?—"

he may not appreciate my virtues and attractions so highly as you do."

"Pray don't suppose anything so ridiculously impossible," she answered; the possibility of her father offering any objection never entered her mind; the bitter, galling sense with which she had first realised the humiliating fact that she had been sent to Lady Erlescliffe for the purpose of "making a good match," as it is called, had never left her mind; the feeling had softened down, but it was wormwood to her spirit still. She could conceive no more perfect bliss than that of being Cecil Slade's chosen bride; she thought nothing of his position, or his elevated family connections; she thought only of himself, and felt proud and honoured that out of the whole world of women he had chosen her.

"But really one must face all possibilities, Madge. Suppose things don't turn out

quite as we wish, you would never have the courage to leave the 'gay and festive scenes,' and——”

“Try me!” she answered. “I am getting heartily sick and tired of society—I am indeed. Of course I liked it at first; everything was so new, and gay, and bright; society was an entirely fresh world to me; I thought I could run a ceaseless round of pleasure, and *never* get tired of it, but it soon got to be up-hill, wearisome work. I found out how hollow and false it all was; now I don't care about it any more. If I had to choose for always between this gay world of London and my quiet world at home, I should not hesitate a moment—I should choose home.”

“You think so now, because your nerves are highly strung from over-excitement; but as the tiger, when he has once tasted blood will never go back to water, so a woman,



when she has once mixed in gay circles, and tasted the feverish pleasures of this kaleidoscopic London world, will always hanker after it, she may get tired of it, may abuse it, laugh at it, but she will always long to come back to it."

"Well, say what you like," she rejoined, with a light laugh, "so that we love one another, Cecil, there seems to be nothing else in the world worth caring for. Somehow I begin to think that wealth is altogether a mistake; it makes one so awfully selfish; it is a kind of hot-bed which forces our worst feelings into rank, unhealthy flower."

"It is a delightful hot-bed all the same, Madge," said Cecil, "where men love to wallow like gilded swine; wealth is a grand and noble possession, Madge! After taking care of our own luxurious selves, see how largely we can contribute to

the pleasures of other people; we can give——”

“Oh! of course we can give,” interrupted Margaret, “and no doubt we do give grandly to full-blown, self-asserting charities; but real hollow-eyed want and suffering may go shivering along in the gutter, and we never look at it. I’m sure that real substantial wealth makes us cold and ostentatious, while poverty has a nice romantic aroma about it; fancy having to make our own sunshine, being our own world, everything to one another, the poorer we were the closer we should cling together, the more we should love one another.”

“Experience proves the contrary, *ma mie*,” rejoined Cecil, with a touch of his old cynicism. “Love and poverty never did agree well together; they swear an al-

liance one day and break it the next ; poor little love is crushed into nothing when poverty grips him by the throat."

"What a horrible way you have of illustrating sentimental things, Cecil," she exclaimed impatiently.

"A practical way, Madge."

"I hate practical people—at least," she added, qualifying the expression, "I don't mean that I hate *you*, for I suppose it is necessary to be practical sometimes—only—I—I—" she hesitated in some little embarrassment, and played nervously with the button of his coat as she added, "I wish you did not think so much of *money*; of course I shall have plenty, but I daresay we could scramble on very well without it." He lifted the drooping head, and holding the sweet face between his two hands, regarded it with a grave, tender smile as he said,

“It sounds very well to talk of ‘scrambling on,’ darling, I’ve tried it and know what it means. A fellow can scramble on well enough by himself, a few hard knocks, an extra turn of the torture-screw does not hurt *him*; but with a dainty piece of womanhood like you, it would be different—God forbid you should ever have to undergo the ‘scrambling’ process! I’m a stout swimmer, Madge,” he added, and the old smile broke over his face, “I should not fear to strike the stormiest water *alone*, but with your light feather-weight resting on my exertions I should be paralyzed and sink outright; but there is no need for us to talk of sinking or swimming,” he added, as he saw the tears well into her eyes, and a dark flush creep slowly over her face, though with all his penetration he could not guess wherefore those signs were rising. “I shall go down to Clinton early in the

morning, and no doubt come back with all things arranged to set us afloat in calm waters."

A month ago it would have been impossible for Margaret to have doubted the success of such a mission to her generous, large-hearted father; now a vague sense of uneasiness came over her. She could not have explained it; she did not know how or why it had arisen—she only knew that it was there.

"I wish he did not think so much of money!" was the unspoken thought that rose again and again in her mind; it lay like a gravestone on her warm, impulsive heart.

"All for love or the world well lost!" would have been her motto. She would have preferred the mad, reckless passion that plunges into anything, anywhere, without a thought beyond the present, rather

than this tender, conscientious affection, which put the reality before the romance of love.

She had heard of leal, true men and women plunging heart and soul into the world's great battle, fighting their way side by side, inch by inch, till they had gained the vantage ground, success, together. She knew—her own weak woman's heart told her—that love is the great motive power which incites men to work, and enables women to endure. This strong, energetic love, whose indomitable will sweeps all obstacles out of its way, and is willing to do all, dare all for love's sake, she knew it was not in Cecil's nature to feel; yet this was the love which in her inmost heart she craved for.

“I suppose it is all right,” she thought, leaning her head listlessly on her hand.

“But I wish he was not so wise and practical. Perhaps, if he loved me better, he would reason less.”

## CHAPTER IV.

## THE ROCK AHEAD.

MARGARET'S letter informing her father of her engagement, though it was couched in even more affectionate terms than usual, and was filled with enthusiastic praises of her lover, failed entirely, however, in producing the effect she intended. In fact, her communication came at a most inopportune time, when Mr. Siward was vexed and troubled in many ways. In the first place, business matters were not progressing in so satisfactory a manner as he had been used to have them. His head man, in



whom he placed implicit faith, had been killed in a railway accident. Since his death Mr. Siward had discovered some slight hitches and complications in his affairs, and, with all his busy, energetic mind, he found it difficult to get things into their regular working order. In addition to this annoyance, he had been foolish enough to invest largely in American bonds, anticipating the exorbitant interest they promised. He never calculated that the larger interest he received, the greater was the risk he ran. He lost heavily; a crash had come before his first year's dividend was due.

Then he recalled his son George home, thinking he had had enough of the pleasures of the world, and must now enter into its more important labours. Here again he had met with disappointment; for, though George did not exactly refuse to come home and settle down to his father's way of

life, yet he postponed his coming from time to time, and made his reluctance so evident that the continued postponement, for which there was no sufficient reason, became tantamount to a downright refusal. Mr. Siward grew peremptory, and commanded him to return at once, or he would cut off the supplies. This aggravated the case, and made matters worse.

A threat is rarely a preventive; it generally acts as a spur to a fiery young spirit. It did so to George, who rebelled and returned an angry reply. "He would rather roost among the chimney-pots of London," he said, "than luxuriate in the deadly dullness of Clinton." As for cutting off the supplies—well, that certainly would be awkward, but he did not mind; he dared to think he should rub along as other fellows did. The sting lay in the tail of his letter. His father had desired to have a schedule of

his debts, *if any*; his liabilities greatly exceeded his allowance, and increased his disgrace at home; the correspondence which ensued between father and son widened the breach between them. George had gone cantering along on the road of life easily enough till now; like a restive horse when he first feels the curb or spur, he kicked over the traces, and went off at a tangent. Mr. Siward was perplexed in the extreme. What could he do with the wayward boy? Instead of receiving sympathy from his old friend Kestrel, he gained cold comfort, half consolatory reproaches or covert sneers—a sort of “it serves you right, I told you so,” feeling animated Kestrel’s most cordial seeming.

“I’m sorry things are as they are,” he said, “but not a bit surprised. What could you expect, cockering the lad up wi’ lords and ladies, and all that sort of kittle-kattle,

that he's no natural right to be among."

"You forget!" exclaimed Mr. Siward, tetchy, as of old, on all points respecting his son. "George has had greater advantages than you or I; he has been well brought up and highly educated."

"So highly that he has got out o' sight of his father's ways altogether," said Kestrel. "You made money, and sent him to London to spend it. So far as that goes, he seems to have answered your expectations."

"Gone miles ahead of 'em," said the poor father dejectedly, remembering the pile of bills he had just received.

"So far as things go, I think you're rather hard on him," continued Kestrel; "you fling the lad into all the dissipations of a life of pleasure, and expect to fish him out as clean as he went in. I think you'll be lucky if you don't find dirtier things than a few paltry debts clinging to him."

“Debts!” groaned the old man. “Ay! it’s a small word, but it is like strongly-forged fetters that bind and drag a man down to perdition, and keep him there. I was so proud of the boy.”

“Why can’t you go on being proud of him? Of course he’s a fine gentleman—you’ve done your best to make him one; ’tain’t likely he’ll ever settle down among us. If you’d meant him to follow in your footsteps, you should have set him in the right track, and not sent him off the line entirely. *I* don’t see what’s to be done; you can drag a horse to the water, but you can’t make him drink.”

“He’s a high-spirited, headstrong lad,” said Mr. Siward reflectively, with a vague feeling that they stood at a turning-point, and that the future good or evil of his son’s life depended on his action now. If he drew the curb too tightly he might break

away altogether ; if he slackened the rein he might go careering wildly off, and plunge into fresh difficulties, or do some foolish, mad thing which would cloud or compromise his whole life ; either way, he was sorely perplexed. "I don't want to drive the boy too far," he added, "nor yet to give way to him too easily."

"In that case you'd better go on making money and hand it over to him to get rid of. You couldn't expect a fancy article like him to turn out a useful man."

"Never mind what I expected," exclaimed Mr. Siward, angrily. "I've done all for the best for both my children ; if I'm to be disappointed—well, I'll take my punishment like a man, and never show my wounds to you." He turned abruptly away, and strode into the counting-house. Somehow, in his own mind, he connected Cecil Slade with his son's wrong-headedness ; he knew

they were living in a state of intimate "chumdom." He knew that Cecil Slade was an older, worldlier man, and set down the greater number of his son's follies to his account, believing he had led him into all kinds of extravagancies and crooked ways; it was a comfort to him to be able to blame somebody, he could not bear that his wrath should lie too heavily on his boy's shoulders. He began to grow suspicious, and considering all things, he thought it more than strange that his son's chosen friend should be the son of the lady to whose temporary guardianship he had entrusted his daughter. When Margaret's letter came, informing him of her engagement, he was infuriated. He could not write to congratulate her, he would not answer it at all. If he had followed his own inclination, he would have rushed up to town, given Lady Erlescliffe a "bit of his mind"—a most unpleasant bit—

and brought Margaret home in triumph. Circumstances rendered it impossible, or, at least, most impolitic for him to leave Clinton at the present time, so he waited in ominous silence till he should receive some further communication from her.

The first gust of his wrath blew over, and he settled down to a state of angry determination that he would do nothing either to make or mar the match; they had settled the matter without consulting him, and they might carry it on to the end on their own responsibility without any help of his, he would have nothing to do with the matter either directly or indirectly. He did not choose to confess, even to himself, how grievously he was hurt by Margaret's reticence, and bitterly disappointed too. He had hoped and believed that a London season would open a brilliant prospect for Margaret; she would go into the world



under distinguished chaperonage, and with her youth and beauty, combined with the expectation of a handsome fortune, would marry into a family of rank and wealth. Since his own prospects had begun clouding over, and money growing scarce, he had still hugged himself with the belief that *her* future was secure, and he had been in daily expectation of hearing from Lady Erlescliffe of some brilliant prospect opening before her.

The news of her engagement had fallen on him like a thunderbolt, and filled him with vexation and angry suspicions. He was irrational in his wrath, and worked himself into a wild belief that Margaret had fallen into a trap, that Lady Erlescliffe had undertaken her chaperonage for the express purpose of furthering her son's pretensions; he regarded her as a conspirator against his peace, and the polite world generally as a

nest of iniquity, and he bitterly regretted having allowed his daughter to enter it. He could not, or would not, look things calmly in the face, but attributed the most natural chance occurrences to a cunningly planned and elaborately executed design. He shut his eyes to the fact that he had himself made the first move, that *he* had sought Lady Erlescliffe, and of his own free unprompted will committed his daughter to her care; but, in the blindness of his anger and his sorrow, he saw things through a glass darkly, he could regard nothing in the plain matter-of-fact light of reason; he was resolved to think the worst, and thought it, to the torment of his own spirit.

For years past things had gone so smoothly with him that these small complicated troubles, falling on him from different sides, overwhelmed him quite, and in sad, solemn silence, the few next days passed on; to no

one, not even to sympathetic Nellie, his daughter's best friend, would he breathe a word of his bitter disappointment. He was still wandering in this slough of despond when Cecil Slade's card was brought to him. The visit had taken him by surprise—he was quite unprepared for it.

“Show Mr. Slade into the library,” he said, and remained for some minutes leaning his head upon his hand: he laboured hard to gather courage to face this unexpected and most unwelcome visitor. With a bitter wrath stirring his heart, and clouding his judgment, he rose up at last, and went out to meet his son's friend, his daughter's lover, and the man who, at that moment, he held his mortal enemy.

The thorough-bred air and courteous kindness of his visitor's manner, as he stepped forward with outstretched hand to meet Margaret's father, took the old man

somewhat aback, and, before he was aware of it, he found himself shaking hands almost cordially with Cecil Slade, the rough, rude words which were surging up from his angry heart were stopped by the way, and instead of overwhelming him with a storm of parental wrath, he found himself giving a welcome—a gruff one, it is true, but still a welcome—to the man whom, five minutes ago, he hated and suspected above all the world. In spite of himself he was compelled to treat his visitor with that amount of deference and respect which self-possessed good breeding forces from the rough and uncultivated.

Cecil Slade's keen perception took in the position of affairs at a glance; he saw he was unwelcome, and that Margaret's father was not disposed to look so favourably on the proposed alliance as she had fondly expected. Cecil was not surprised at this; regarding things from a worldly point of

view,—and of course Mr. Siward regarded things from no other,—he was a very bad match for Margaret; she might have looked higher, and won position and wealth together; for position is a poor shadow without wealth to uphold it, and scarce worth a fool's grasping. He was just enough to comprehend Mr. Siward's disappointment, and generous enough to excuse it. He had none of those small vanities which would make him writhe with a sense of humiliation, or rouse him into wrath against the man who looked unfavourably upon his pretensions. He endeavoured to propitiate Mr. Siward, so far as he could without losing his own self-respect. He took the bull by the horns at once; and when Mr. Siward sullenly inquired, “as he had come forward with a proposal to marry his daughter, what were his own prospects, and what provision he was prepared to make for her?” he candidly

acknowledged that at the present moment his prospects were nil, he depended entirely on his own exertions; hitherto he had dawdled along through his bachelor days, content with bachelor comforts.

“Now,” he added, “for Margaret’s sake I am ambitious. I feel there is some good stuff, some latent power in me somewhere. I am going to find it out, and do great things in the future.”

“A man who has lived over thirty years and done nothing,” said Mr. Siward, feeling he was getting on his own ground, “has possibly done all he can do. If there was anything in him, it would have come out before that time.”

“In that case,” said Cecil, annoyed at his tone of superiority, “Margaret must depend for all the luxuries of life on you.”

“Exactly,” said his father-in-law elect, morally buttoning up his pockets, “I quite

understand, I am to provide a luxurious home for my daughter, for your benefit—but I don't exactly see it. I've worked hard for my money, and I'm not inclined to spend it to keep an idle man of fashion."

"Pardon me," said Cecil, and the colour rushed to his face, "*I* have resolved to take no benefit from your wealth. I am no idle man of fashion; but let that pass. I shall insist that whatever fortune you may be disposed to give your daughter shall be devoted wholly and solely to her use, so that it may not be in my power, as God knows it is not my desire, to touch a penny of it."

"Pooh! you talk nonsense," replied Mr. Siward. "It is true I may tie the money up as tight as wax, so that, legally, you could not lay a hand upon it; but I know what fools women are when they are in love with a man; if you had a mind you

could wheedle her out of every farthing."

Cecil chafed under the insinuation of this possibility, but he did not brim over with self-asserting indignant virtue that such a suspicion should be even vaguely thrown upon himself. He knew that such things were, that scores of women are plundered by the hand that should protect them, or sometimes, perhaps, more frequently reduced to abject poverty by the over sanguine speculative spirit of those who love them best; mentally he assumed a neutral attitude; regarding Mr. Siward as a kind of worldly-wise-man, he could not blame him for trying to protect his daughter from one who, for all he knew, might be a mere "fortune-hunter." It is true his self-love was wounded, his honour doubted, but then he did not shut his eyes to the fact that, regarding things from a worldly point of view, his motives were open to suspicion;



he was not inclined to pose indignant. In answer to Mr. Siward's last remark, he said,

“Perhaps it would be as well to put the ‘wheedling’ process out of my power; keep everything in your own hands; treat your daughter as you would do if she were under your own roof; put me out of the question. I promise you, on my honour, I will not touch one iota of your daughter's property, or reap the benefit of a single luxury secured to her.”

“Ah! that all sounds very well, but it is not possible, Madge is not the sort of girl who would live in clover while you were feasting on black bread—I shouldn't care much for the woman who would. You see I'm a bit suspicious, and I don't mind owning it; I feel as though things were not all square and above board.”

“In what way, may I ask?” said Cecil, with unruffled calm.

“Well, it seems odd that you should have come down here, in the first place, reconnoitering, as it were, the very day I had gone up to arrange with Lady Erlescliffe; it looks like a planned thing.”

The danger lights were slowly kindling in Cecil's eyes as he interrupted Mr. Siward, saying—

“Please leave my mother's name out of the question. No one can regret more than I do the terms on which Margaret was received under my mother's roof, but I cannot discuss that matter with you. Margaret and I have acted quite independently of her—we have made our arrangements against her desire, in opposition to her will. Margaret is the last girl in the world whom my mother would have chosen me to marry.”

“Your mother and I might take an oar in the same boat then, for you are the last

man I should have chosen for my daughter's husband."

"You are hard upon me," said Cecil, his colour rising. "I see the bent your mind has taken. You may believe me or not, but I loved your daughter from the first moment I saw her here; her reputed wealth—I do not know if it is real; I have never inquired—has been the barrier between us. I have endeavoured to keep it always before my eyes, but fate or chance has driven us beyond it." He hesitated a second, and added conciliatingly—"Come, Mr. Siward, I really do not see why you should object so strongly; I am a gentleman of good family and desirable connections. If you give your daughter wealth, I can give her position; my uncle, Lord Norreys——"

"Ay, ay, you need not puff your attractions as a pedlar puffs his penny wares; and as for your relations, it is easy enough to

invent relationships with great families.”

“That is true,” rejoined Cecil; “it is by no means difficult, but the matter is greatly simplified when you have a good pedigree to fall back upon—it saves all the trouble of invention.”

Mr. Siward walked slowly up and down the room for a few moments; he was not quite satisfied that he was getting the best of the interview so far as it went. Cecil Slade’s cool, self-possessed attitude, that did not rise to aggression nor sink to indifference, rather disarmed him of some of the harsher feelings; if he had only been somebody else’s lover, he would have appreciated him, and perhaps advocated his cause. He liked the straightforward way in which he had expressed his feelings in regard to Margaret’s fortune, “but then,” whispered the spirit of distrust, “they were only words, which may mean nothing; he would be a

poor rogue who could not say as much."

Cecil walked to the window, and looked out upon the garden where they had walked and talked together, such a happy, careless trio, on that bright Spring morning. After a few moments' silence, seeing that Mr. Siward seemed still disinclined to speak, Cecil turned to him and said,

"I do not know that we have either of us much more to say, but I wish to understand you perfectly. Am I to conclude from this interview that you refuse to sanction my marriage with your daughter?"

This direct inquiry took Mr. Siward somewhat aback; he wavered—he did not wish to decide.

"I will take a little time to think it over," he began, but before he could proceed, Cecil Slade interrupted him sharply.

"I hardly think that is necessary," he said. "No amount of consideration can

change the facts as they stand. I am going back to consult with Margaret; I shall lay things plainly before her, and leave the decision in her hands."

But Mr. Siward did not mean to conclude the matter so hastily; he had never thwarted Margaret in his life, and there was a strong feeling tugging at his heart that would not let him do it with impunity now, while she was far away, and could not plead for herself; it was like striking a blow in the dark, for he knew, if they once stood face to face together, and he felt her soft arms about his neck, heard her voice, and looked in her shining eyes, he could deny her nothing. The idea that his course of action now might raise a barrier between her heart and his for evermore, was too terrible to be thought of, so he temporised, and, though not yielding, put things in a fairer light. After some consideration and discussion, he said that he

was unwilling to lose the pleasure of his daughter's society; already he felt lonely and lost without her, and at the end of the season he should certainly have recalled her home; "but if she has really resolved to marry you," he added, "though I don't like it, I'll give way, and I tell you what I'll do." He leant back in his chair for a moment reflectively, looking as though he were about to make a most important announcement.

"There is a nice snug little place about a mile and a half from here wanting a tenant; it is covered with honeysuckle and wild roses—just the thing for a honeymooning couple. I'll take it, furnish it handsomely, and you and Margaret can live there. Of course, *I* shall take care of my daughter's comforts; she must live like a lady, as she has been always used to do; she will be near me," he added, "and I shall not feel that I have quite lost her."

Cecil smiled to himself at the bare idea of his living in the wilds of the country, and of such a desolate, lonely part of the country as that appeared to be, he would die of *ennui* in a week. He was not fond of country sports or pastimes, and was so essentially a town-bred bird that, as he told Mr. Siward, "he should moult his feather, and drop paralyzed off his perch." He loved Margaret with all the strength and power of mature manhood, but he had long outgrown the Arcadian notion of "Love among the roses;" he knew that was a dream from which there is too often a most sad awakening. However, he did not express himself too strongly to Mr. Siward; he decided that the matter must be laid before Margaret and left for her to decide.

Mr. Siward offered, but did not press upon him the offer of a bed at Clinton, and Cecil did not care to accept it, well knowing that



it arose from forced civility, not from a genuine hospitable desire. He preferred taking a bed at the village inn, he said, as he would have to leave early in the morning.

So they shook hands and parted in a cool, semi-friendly manner, neither well pleased with the other; and, if the truth may be told, neither was well satisfied with the part he had individually played during the interview. Each felt that some words had been left unsaid which might have dispelled the light shadow cloud that fell between them. Cecil, too, felt that he might have borne himself more deferentially to Margaret's father, and he, on his part, wished he could have felt more kindly towards the man whose greatest sin, and, at the same time, whose greatest merit was that he loved his daughter Margaret.

Possibly if Mr. Siward's business affairs

had been in a more flourishing condition he might have seen things in a different light. Now the fortune he had originally intended for Margaret must be applied to a different purpose—he had indeed very little to give her, and he was too proud, he did not care, to own it; besides, he could not quite rid himself of the feeling that he had been tricked, he could not exactly tell how, but in his own mind he laid all his son George's delinquencies on the influence of Cecil Slade.

## CHAPTER V.

## WRECKED.

CECIL SLADE felt that his negotiation had been a dead failure; he did not exactly know what he had expected, his ideas had been rather vague, but he had certainly hoped to bring matters to a more satisfactory conclusion. Now there was nothing settled, things remained as they were before, and as the train whirled him homeward, back to London, he looked out on the flying landscape in a more thoughtful and reflective frame of mind than he had known for many a day. His usual *laissez aller* spirit woke up now; he hated unpleas-

ant thoughts or things, and, as a rule, drifted away from them as long as he could ; but he must drift no longer, he must drop anchor, and look steadily round and decide in what direction to steer his course. His first consideration must be for Margaret, he must protect her against his own too strong affection and against herself. He knew that in her pure, passionate love she would shut her eyes to all worldly considerations, and take a leap in the dark with him anywhere, never asking whither they were going or caring where their journey was to end, satisfied that his hand guided her ; but he resolved to take no mean advantage of her sweet unworldliness, and plunge her into what, in his cool judgment, would be a life of petty shifts, and the most heart-breaking of all miseries, genteel poverty, which kills all the higher feelings and nobler aspirations of whatever it touches.

The idea of appealing, *ad misericordiam*, to Mr. Siward if they ventured to act in direct opposition to his will, was not to be thought of. Many a man in his place, he knew, would shake his fist in the face of poverty and say, "I will buckle the woman I love to my heart, and fight with her and for her against the world;" but he was not made of that energetic kind of stuff; so far as he was concerned, that would have been mere "tall talk," fit enough for the melodramatic stage of social life, but not for the sober seriousness of his. The one proposal Mr. Siward had made, that they should live near him, would seem feasible enough in the world's eyes, and perhaps Margaret herself, being country-born and bred, might think the prospect delightful; but it was just the one offer which he found it impossible to accept, or even to entertain for a single moment. The idea occurred to him that possibly Mr.

Siward was not so rich as he was at first supposed to be, and as they had believed him to be; perhaps some fluctuations in the trade or money market had affected him. At any rate, it was evident that, even if he were able, he was not willing to provide so handsomely as had been expected for his daughter's future.

Cecil's great Eastern eyes grew humid, and a lump seemed to rise in his throat as an idea floated through his brain that the force of adverse circumstances might compel him to put the bright young face out of his life for ever. From his own family he had nothing to hope for; the idea of his marrying Margaret at all, even when she was considered rich, had been distasteful enough to them; but now that the glory of gold had faded from her, they would consider it irretrievable ruin. He knew that not one among them would stretch out a hand to

help him, even if he were disposed to ask them, which he decidedly was not. He had never feared to look a woman in the face—*now* he dreaded the sight of Margaret. He was bodily weary and heavy-hearted when he reached London, and he entered his mother's house with lagging footsteps.

Much to his annoyance (for he was in no mood for polite company), he found Mrs. Burke, her brother, Colonel Dunstable, and another gentleman, whom Mrs. Burke presented to him as “a friend of my brother's—Mr. Walpole.” Cecil was too well-bred to show the annoyance he felt. He hated the inquisitorial presence of Mrs. Burke at all times, but in his present frame of mind it was especially distasteful to him. However, he hid his vexation, and drifted away into the land of polite nothings, wherein society is so often wandering, and so often lost.

On glancing a second time on Mr. Walpole's face, it seemed familiar to him—or, at least, if not familiar, he recognised it as one he had seen before, though he could not at the moment recall the when or the where. It might have been fancy, but he thought he caught a glance of recognition flashing from the other's eye. His attention was absorbed by Mrs. Burke and Mr. Walpole; he could not extricate himself from the conversational web they weaved round him. Colonel Dunstable had crossed over to where Margaret was seated, engaged upon some filmy piece of woman's work, while he seated himself beside her, and talked in a low, earnest voice; anyone could tell that by the expression of his face.

Cecil wondered what he was saying. He stretched his ears figuratively, but could only catch a single word here and there.



What could he be talking of? It was evidently something that interested—indeed, slightly embarrassed—Margaret, for she reddened to the very roots of her hair, and kept her eyes glued to her work, never giving him an answering look, and when she spoke it was in a low, monosyllabic fashion. Once she lifted her eyes to his face in a deprecating kind of way, as though he were saying something that grieved her. As soon as courtesy to his mother's visitors would allow him to do so, Cecil lounged across the room and interrupted their *tête-à-tête*. He was rewarded by a glad, grateful look from Margaret's eyes.

On the entrance of Lady Erlescliffe, some few moments after, the conversation, such as it was, became general. Before their visitors departed, Cecil, addressing Mr. Walpole, said,

“I am sure you and I have met some-

where before, Mr. Walpole, but for the life of me I can't remember where."

There was a receding look in Mr. Walpole's eyes, as though he remembered perfectly well, but, for some reason or another, did not wish to be called to mind.

"It may have been in some public conveyance or street stoppage. Sometimes, as we are passing through the kaleidoscopic streets of London, a strange face photographs itself on our mind, and haunts our memory for years. I know, in more than one case, it has been so with me."

"Well, it is no matter where we have met before," said Cecil, as they shook hands previous to parting, "I hope we may have the pleasure of meeting again. Are you residing in London?"

"No, I live in Shropshire, but at present I am staying on a visit to Colonel Dunstable."

“And why not?” said the Colonel, striking in quickly. “Who objects to your paying a visit to me?”

“Not I,” replied Cecil, elevating his eyebrows, surprised at the irritated look and tone of the inquiry. “I am glad you are getting sociable enough to entertain your friends. We shall hear of your entertaining a wife next.”

“I’ve used my best endeavours to provide for him that way for the last ten years, but without success; you see, he still hangs upon my hands,” interrupted Mrs. Burke, shrugging her shoulders as though he were a burden she would be glad to get rid of.

A constant stream of visitors kept flowing in and out, till Cecil lost patience, and despaired of having a word with Margaret for the present. He was half disposed to leave the house, and come back when there was a better chance of having a few words with

her alone. She saw his intention, and by a whispered word detained him, and he threw himself into a seat at the other end of the room, and sat there, turning over a packet of photographs with what patience he could.

He was rewarded at last, for in the course of an hour the last visitor departed, and on his suggestion, the order "Not at home" was given.

Lady Erlescliffe made a casual, commonplace inquiry of her son, and then left the young people to themselves, knowing they would have a great deal to say to each other, before Cecil communicated the result of his visit to Clinton to her.

The door had scarcely closed upon Lady Erlescliffe when Margaret flew to Cecil's side, and addressed him with impatient curiosity.

"Well, Cecil, darling, what news? You saw father, of course? Well, how does he

look?—what does he say? Come, sit down.” She dragged him to a chair, and plunged him into it, and nestled down close by his side. “There, now tell me everything, from the very first moment you entered the house. I want to know every word you both said. Was he glad, Cecil? Did he seem very glad when you told him?” And a shy, happy look came into her eyes.

“Well, I don’t think he manifested any very strong symptoms of delight, Madge, darling!” said Cecil, in his quiet way.

“Oh!”—and there was a slight fall in her voice—“but then he is never very demonstrative, the dear old pater! and you are quite a stranger to him, you know. It seems odd, doesn’t it, that you two, who love me so well, should be strangers to each other? But don’t be so aggravatingly quiet, Cecil. It is hard work pulling every word from you, and I don’t get exactly what I

want either. No matter how father looked, tell me what he said ; that is more important. You know what I want to hear, without my asking a single question."

"Well," he said, laying his hand with a caressing gesture on her head, his voice was tender, though his words were light enough. "All I have to tell might be contained in a nutshell. Your father had the bad taste not to be overjoyed at the prospect of having me for a son-in-law ; in fact, he rather threw cold water on the notion, and made me feel half ashamed of my presumption. I am sure he regarded me in the light of a pocket-poacher."

Then in sober seriousness he told her the substance of all that had passed between them ; softening down all tone of harshness or severity, but still letting her know her father's most decided objection to their wishes, and held out no hope of their

speedy fulfilment, so far as the matter rested in his hands. She listened to him with downcast eyes and quivering lip. She had been so hopeful, nay, so certain of the bright happy future that lay so near the present; the drop of disappointment now falling into her brimming cup was like gall and bitterness to her sanguine spirit. Something there was, too, in the calm, grave, albeit tender tone of Cecil which made her heart sicken within her; a dull, grey mist seemed to creep over the brightness of her life, her very youth seemed to wither and die, as though a breath had killed it. She was yearning, longing to drag from his lips some words of passionate regret, such as were surging up from her own heart, or catch a glimpse of hopeful enthusiasm from his spirit—but there was none. His quiet tones beat upon her ears, and made her temples throb with a dull aching pain. Instinctively she felt as though

some blow was pending, and he was shielding her from some evil knowledge as long as he could, she had no absolute reason for this feeling, but instinct is often a match for reason, and sometimes outwits it. The equanimity of Cecil's nature often irritated as well as attracted her; she knew his way; if he were going to be executed he would saunter along, puffing his cigar with an unruffled spirit, and fling away the end with a passing cynicism to the executioner, as he laid his head upon the block—but now, when her inmost soul was shaken, and every nerve quickened and quivering with suppressed pain, his quiet calm jarred cruelly upon her.

“What does it all mean?” she said, raising her changed face to his. “I’ve heard all you’ve said, but I can’t quite understand how it is decided. I don’t know what we are going to do next.”



“Nor I,” he answered, and his voice had a touch of strange gravity, “I was asking myself that question all the way up to town, Margaret, but I am, mentally, staring at a blank wall. I can see nothing beyond to-day, and I can’t quite penetrate to the end of that; only this one fact is evident, we can do nothing without money.”

She twined her hands nervously in his as she said in a low, agitated voice—

“Is there nothing we can do, Cecil? If I were to go down and tell father he is breaking my heart—”

“Good heavens! do you think I would allow such a thing,” exclaimed Cecil, interrupting her quickly, “wring tears from your eyes, to melt gold from his pocket! I’d die first. I’m not often carried away by my feelings, I ought to have considered well before—before I said I loved you.”

“If you *had* considered, it would only

have proved you did not love me at all. Love that can be stifled or stilled by *any* considerations for *anything*, would never be worth having."

"And that feeling which leads people to plunge recklessly, to take a moral header into a union of lives, without counting the cost, is mere selfish passion, and not love at all," rejoined Cecil, who was always strong on the side of prudence. "I love you better than you love yourself," he added. "I dreamt once that you and I were in the water struggling for our lives, Margaret, and with wild desperation we clung together; suddenly I found that my clutch—I held you so tight in my arms—endangered *you*; there was a chance for one, not both of us, and I flung you free, and left you clutching at some frail support, and I went down, the waters were smiling above and around me as I fell lower and lower, and I was still

falling when I woke—well, I think I have courage, I *hope* I have, to re-act in reality as I acted in my dream.”

“I would rather you had dragged me down with you,” exclaimed Margaret, smothering a half sob. “My mind is in such a whirl, Cecil, I can’t think in a sensible, straightforward way ; but I am sure if father knew how things were with us, he could not be so cruel ; he would give us a chance.”

“Ah, to be sure ; so he did !” exclaimed Cecil, who had really, for the time, forgotten the one offer Mr. Siward had made ; it was so impossible for him to accept it.

“Yes,” said Margaret, with eager, feverish impatience. “Well, what is it ? Tell me quickly.”

“Well, darling,” he answered, speaking slowly, “there’s some place, ‘The Elms,’ I think they call it, wanting a tenant just now ; he proposes to furnish it, that you and

I, if we determine to marry, may go down there and live under his generous auspices."

"The Elms!" exclaimed Margaret, her whole face brightening. "Oh, yes, I know the house well. Oh, Cecil, how delightful! and how cruel of you to say or to insinuate all those dreadful things! You frightened me! You looked so grave, I thought," she shivered slightly. "I don't know what I thought; and you'd got this delightful bit of news for me all the while!"

"Delightful news!" he repeated. "Why, Margaret, love, you cannot surely, for a moment, contemplate the possibility of *living* at Clinton!"

"Ah! now you are trying to worry me again," she rejoined, with playful pettishness. "Wasn't I born there? Isn't it home? We can see father every day, and all day long if we like; we shall be so happy, Cecil—oh! so happy." Her accents softened, and

her hands crept softly round his neck ; she grew demonstrative in her innocent delight. He circled his arms round her and held her fast, but he turned his head away and did not speak. "We shall really and truly live for ourselves then, Cecil," she added, "with no thought nor care for the world beyond. You are glad, aren't you, Cecil? It is all so much more delightful than we expected."

"Delightful ! For God's sake, don't talk so, Margaret ; it is the one prospect in the world which I could not endure even with you !"

"But you don't care for this London world, Cecil," she answered. "I've heard you rail against it, and say you hated it, a score of times."

"But yet I *could* not live out of it," he said. "I hate its fashionable follies, its shams and hollowness, but they attract me all the same ; I could not break away from

all my old ties and associations, and live under your father's eye, a dependent upon his bounty."

Margaret winced at his allusion to her father's "bounty." Something in his tone jarred upon her feelings, but she only said,

"Perhaps you think it would be lonely, but it would not be dull, really; it is only about half a mile from the works, and there are plenty of nice people, if you cared to know them."

"My dear Madge, do you think in these days of civilization we can ever go back to a state of semi-barbarism?"

"It pains me to hear you speak so contemptuously of the people among whom I have been brought up," a slight frown for a second puckered her fair, open brow.

"I am sorry for that," he said, "but when I feel strongly I speak strongly; it would be simply impossible for me to exist

in the neighbourhood of those attractive iron works. Iron is a very good thing in its way, but to *live* among it——”

“You would not object to live *upon* the money the iron brings,” she exclaimed, in accents of uncontrollable anger, for she was stung into rebellious wrath. She flung his hand away, and rose impetuously from her seat as she spoke.

“What!” exclaimed Cecil, as he, too, started up in amazement at this sudden outburst; his eyes grew dark as a thundercloud before the lightning breaks through, but in a second he mastered himself, and added, with a forced calm——“Say that again, Margaret, and in the same tone, please, if such a stroke of genius can be re-acted—for it must be acting, but, I hope, not true to nature.”

“It is true to nature!” she exclaimed, her rebellious passions rising in proportion

as her feeling had been wounded. "You don't love me at all—you never loved me, or you could not be so cool and calculating now, when you see—you must see—that my heart is breaking." A passionate flood of tears choked her flow of words.

"Margaret, Margaret, for God's sake don't cry so! Do *I* feel nothing?—do I not suffer? Can I tear you out of my life without tearing away my heartstrings too?"

"Words, words—it is easy to talk so!" exclaimed Margaret, in no wise calmed by his appeal; the flood-gates of her feelings were open now, and they would not be driven back—they would find expression. She had been in a state of nervous irritation, and kept it under repression for days past. The prudent, reasonable state of Cecil's affections galled her deeply. *Hé* was always reasonable, never carried away into the regions of romance, where her excitable



soul so often lost itself. If he had been wild and reckless, ready to take her youth and beauty to his heart, joyful in the present, heedless of the future, never caring whether they would have to drag through the slums of pecuniary distress, or look the world fairly in the face, she would have been content; but this sober, reasonable love of his was beyond her comprehension; it was not love at all, she said—not the love she fondly hoped she had won.

Small, poisonous particles of something, too slight to be called suspicions, yet akin to nothing else, had been floating through the air lately, and circulated a report that her reputed wealth had formed part of her attractions. One thing weighed with another; past and present things known and things reported worked unconsciously in her mind, till they took form and shape and grew into an ugly suspicion. A few

loving words from him would have dispelled it in a moment, but the words came not. He was in reality so troubled in his own mind, so harassed altogether with the perplexities of his position, that he did not realise the effect his manner would produce on her, or, indeed, upon any woman in her position. It is hard, when you are hungry, for bread to receive a stone, or, when you are pining for loving words and sympathetic passionate regrets, to be compelled to look upon the cold dull face of reason. Her feelings were too strong, and had been too long repressed, to be easily stifled now.

“You never loved me,” she went on to say—“never; you would have married *me* as you would have married others—you would have married me for my money.”

“You think that?” exclaimed Cecil, and the words came slowly from his compressed lips.

“Yes, I do think that,” she answered, in the bitterness of her wrath, and she poured forth a torrent of hard words which, in her saner moments, she would rather have died than utter to him; but she could not help it; she was not then mistress of herself—a single grain of sand will mar the mechanism of the finest watch—and the mechanism of human nature is disturbed and thrown out of order by intangible things as slight. He was bewildered, taken by surprise; for her wrathful outburst was as incomprehensible to him as his reasonable affections were to her. He let her go on for awhile, making no attempt to interrupt her or answer her reproaches even by a word of justification or denial; and though her anger was still bubbling and boiling over, not half exhausted, he spoke at last, and his voice was terribly calm, whatever he felt, and the expression of his face showed that he did feel

acutely—he had not a woman's hysterical way of showing feeling.

“We cannot descend to vulgar recriminations, you and I, Margaret,” he said, “but I want to understand you clearly. I gather from your angry words that you suspect me—and dare to tell me to my face—that you believe I wished to marry you for your money?” His manner was painfully calm, and irritated her still more.

“Yes, I do think it,” she answered, in firm, decided tones—“from the bottom of my heart I think it now. If I had been a poor penniless girl, you would never have loved me, never have cared to marry me at all! You cannot look me in the face and say you would!”

He did look her in the face, and calmly too.

“I might have indulged in the miserable luxury of loving, but have contemplated marrying, no,” he answered.

“There!” she exclaimed, with agonised exultation, “I said so, and you dare not deny it. Oh! Cecil! Cecil! to think it was all true!—that you were a pitiful fortune-hunter after all—you would have married me for my money!”

“That does not follow. I would marry no woman for money, but I could not marry without it. I would subject no wife of mine to the petty shifts of gilded poverty and domestic miseries I have known some women undergo. I have loved you as I never thought it was in my nature to love any woman; the words I have said to you I shall never say to any living woman again. I love you now as I shall love you always till I die.”

He spoke with an intensity which it is impossible to convey in written words, and carried away by an irresistible under-current of feeling, he caught her in his arms

and kissed her again and again on lips, cheek, and brow, and held her close to his heart as though he never meant to let her go. Bewildered by the suddenness of his action, breathless beneath his passionate caresses, she could make no attempt to extricate herself—she did not think, she had no time to think, but a strong wave of feeling carried her for a second out of sight of present difficulties, and sorrows, and angers, and she caught a glimpse of the fair land of promise, a bliss that might be—her face, her soul was breaking into smiles when the wave rolled back and left her stranded upon a barren land—some delirious, foolish words broke from her lips, and his voice answered,

“No, it cannot be after that cruel, humiliating taunt—‘You married me for my money.’ I should feel it on your lips, I should read it in your eyes, I should see it

in every action—your father's gold would come too late! If you were to fling a million at my feet, and kneel and ask me, I would not marry you now!"

He spoke sternly, as though he meant every word he said. And she, in her agony of regret, repentance, and passionate yearning to snatch back the love her intemperance had flung away, would have flung her arms round him and detained him, and perhaps melted his hard resolve, and made him unsay his last words. Who can tell? But he gave her no chance. He was afraid of her, or of himself, for he rushed out of the room—out of the house. Lady Erlescliffe heard the street-door slam after him, and knew that a crisis had come.

## CHAPTER VI.

## HE HAS GONE.

MARGARET sat with a white, stricken face, looking out over the sun-lighted park for hours after Cecil left her. She was always susceptible to the atmospheric influence of the outer world, but instead of gladdening her now, the sunshine saddened her; it was such a striking contrast to the grey gloom of her own spirit. A hush fell over her senses; the stormy passion of her nature had exhausted itself, and she was calm and quiet, but in the calm there was no peace, in the quiet no repose.



She felt like one who has been suddenly hurled downward in a maddening, wild career, and holds on by a straw, while waiting breathlessly, knowing he must be dashed to pieces on the rocks below. The worst of all was the fact that it was her own work. In her first passion she had let herself fall, and was falling still, every minute farther and farther, away from the heaven that had been in sight. What had she done? What had she said? What cruel, ugly words could she have spoken to have driven him away in such a hard, unrelenting spirit? He would come back! Surely he would not leave her for ever for a few hasty, passionate words! Her heart beat wildly, and she strained her ears to listen for his footfall on the stairs. He had been so patient and tolerant with her always, and only laughed at her little impetuosities, heeding them no more than the stormy

petrel heeds the breaking of a tiny wave.

She watched and waited in vain. Then her soul grew heavy and sad within her, she remembered what she had said—she had uttered words pointed to stab him in the tenderest part of his proud, haughty nature; her cheeks burned with blushes as she remembered them now. Oh! if he would only come back!—if they could only stand face to face with one another again!—she would cling to him, find her way to his heart, and wring forgiveness out of it. She felt so miserable, so lonely, she would have liked to creep away somewhere, and hide herself from the light of the world; but life, with its every-day, common-place necessities, was before her. She must put her own sorrows and regrets out of sight, and face it. Her mind needed time to recover even slightly from the shock. She shrank from seeing anybody, most of all from seeing

Lady Erlescliffe ; but she must see her, and the sooner she got over the interview with Cecil's mother the better.

With desperate energy she pulled herself together, opened the door, and, with heavy limbs, and an aching heart, carrying a dead hope within it, went slowly down to Lady Erlescliffe, who awaited her in some anxiety, for she had heard Cecil's abrupt departure, and wondered what could have happened, that he should leave without a word to her when he must know how anxious she would be to hear how his errand had sped. Margaret's face told her that all was not well, before she uttered a word.

“Why, Margaret, child, what is the matter? I am afraid you have heard bad news from your father?”

“No.”

“Then something is wrong between you and Cecil!” added Lady Erlescliffe. “Have

you been quarrelling? Well, never mind. I daresay we shall soon be able to set things right. What has gone wrong between you?"

"Everything, and nothing can ever be put right again."

"Strong words those," said Lady Erlescliffe, gravely. "What has Cecil done to give you such serious offence?"

"Nothing; it is my fault—all my fault—Cecil and I have parted!" The last words broke from her like a sob; she flung her arms round Lady Erlescliffe's neck, laid her tired head upon her breast, and cried such tears as keep the overcharged heart from breaking.

Lady Erlescliffe soothed her tenderly, and did not torment her with questions—she thought it best to leave the delicate ground of inquiry untouched. She knew that no common cause, which was likely

soon to blow over, could have agitated Margaret like this. She felt intuitively that matters were ended between them; that was why Cecil had left the house so abruptly. How had this state of things come about? She longed to know, but would not ask, for inquiries would only irritate and keep the wound open. Her feelings on the subject were not very complicated; she was sorry to see Margaret suffer, sorry for her son, too; but there her sorrow ended. She knew *he* was strong enough to pull himself through any slough of despond; matters of sentiment and feeling affect men and women differently. It is the nature of the one sex, in their monotonous uneventful lives, to brood over and nurse their tender sorrow, the other goes out into the world and shakes it off, or rubs against other people, till not a vestige remains, his love troubles drop off him like old clothes, and he

puts on a new suit, wears a new love's livery. He falls so often a victim to female fascinations that, if one stabs a little deeper than another, it soon wears off and never lasts long.

Her chief anxiety then was for Margaret ; she must endeavour to distract her mind with some new interest. Some girls struggle through a world of sentiment in a single season, and though they sometimes come out worsted, with shattered hopes and wounded feelings, yet they gather courage to try another campaign, when perhaps they come out victors of some manly heart and manorial acres. Why should not Margaret do the same? Of course she must have time to rally from her present state. So far as she was concerned in the connection, she by no means regretted that it was broken off. Had the affair been carried through, she

knew what the world would say—indeed, what her own family had not scrupled to suggest already—that she had angled and fished for the girl that she might land her in Cecil's arms; this was gall and wormwood to her proud spirit, though she had had no hand either in making or marring the match; she was glad it was broken off, and did not trouble herself much about the why or the wherefore.

Three days passed by and there came no news of Cecil. On the morning of the third a letter in Cecil's handwriting, addressed to his mother, lay upon the breakfast table. Margaret took it up, and turned it over and over, as though from the outside she could gather some idea of its contents—in impatient curiosity she paced up and down the room, holding it in her hand. She thought Lady Erlescliffe would never

come—the breakfast bell had rung twice when the door opened and she sailed leisurely into the room.

“Oh! I thought you were never coming!” exclaimed Margaret. “See, here is a letter from Cecil—read it, please—what does he say? Does he say anything about coming back?”

“No,” replied Lady Erlescliffe. “Read for yourself, Margaret;” she placed the open letter in her hand. It was brief enough. “He was sorry to leave,” he said, “without a word of farewell; but he thought it best. Margaret would give her any explanation she desired, and he begged her to rest content with whatever Margaret pleased to tell her, and not tease her with superfluous inquiries. As for himself,” he added, “he had long desired to make a sketching tour through Norway, and there he was going now. He could fix no definite time for



his return, as he did not know when or where his wandering would end."

Margaret handed the letter back without a word, and as she did so choked back a sob of bitter disappointment. She did not know how much she had hoped till certainty had come and struck hope dead.

It was now the end of July; London was hot, dusty, and empty—empty, at least, so far as the fashionable world was concerned. Some had gone off to the moors on shooting expeditions; some had taken wing and flown off to the Continent to recruit their strength among the Swiss lakes and mountains; others had gone to keep solemn state and entertain select circles in the good old English fashion, on their own ancestral acres.

Lady Erlescliffe was undecided in her movements; sometimes she thought of taking Margaret to Scarborough to see what the

brisk sea breezes would do for the girl, who had been looking pale and worn with the fatigues of the season, even before this sorrow fell upon her, and, of course, she was both looking and feeling much worse now. Sometimes Lady Erlescliffe thought of spending a few weeks at her brother's seat in Yorkshire; Margaret did not care for either plan, all plans were alike to her now. She wanted to get away from everything and everybody that reminded her of him. She was home-sick, and yet, somehow, she shrank from going back to Clinton. Lady Erlescliffe was so kind and sympathetic, it seemed ungrateful to propose to leave her. However, while they were still undecided, neither knowing which plan would be most agreeable to the other, the matter was taken out of their hands and decided for them.

On their return one morning from the

now deserted Row, they were told that a gentleman was waiting for Miss Siward in the library.

With lagging steps she crossed the hall and opened the door; in another moment a cry of surprise broke from her lips.

“Oh, father! father!” She threw herself into his arms, and hugged and kissed him, laughing and crying with hysterical delight. Her unaffected demonstrations took him by surprise, he had expected a different kind of reception. It had taken some little courage for him to nerve himself up to undertake this visit; he felt a little shy at facing Margaret under the present aspect of affairs, not knowing how Cecil might have reported their interview, wherein there was much that might grieve and offend her. He had come up now to see if he could try to set matters right. He had summoned up courage to tell her that, although he could

not give her the fortune he had originally intended, yet he would do what he could to make them happy.

“ You’re glad to see the old dad, Madge ?” he said, and his voice was hoarse and shaken with emotion.

“ Glad ! Ah, so glad ! If you only knew how I’ve pined for the sight of you !”

“ My child—my darling Madge !” he exclaimed, folding her close in his arms again. “ I was afraid these fine folks would have taught you to look down on the rough old father.”

“ You never thought that ! You could not. Oh ! father dear, you have come now like an answer to an unuttered prayer. I am so miserable !” She laid her head on his broad breast, sobbing bitterly, and her tears began to flow afresh.

“ Hush ! hush ! for God’s sake don’t cry like that,” exclaimed Mr. Siward, in a state

of bewildered agitation. "I never meant to be hard with you; but I've had troubles, my dear, troubles that you can't understand; besides, I was angry, and said many things I did not mean. There, there! dry your eyes, we'll soon set things straight. Where is he? I should like to see him at once, and tell him I did not mean half the things I said."

"Oh! he has gone—he has gone—and we shall never, never see him again!"

"What!" he exclaimed, holding her at arms' length, and gazing at her intently, he realised how ill and unhappy she was looking—her pale, sad face struck him to the heart—he had not had time to notice her before—the flush of glad surprise at seeing him had for the moment covered her haggard looks, which were only too evident now. "I see how it is," he muttered from between his teeth; "the scoundrel!"

the mean-spirited scamp! I'll break every bone in his skin!" He clenched his fist, as though to proceed with the operation of bone-breaking at once. His vehement expressions did more towards checking her tears than the most soothing consolatory words would have done.

"Father!" she exclaimed, "I'll not have you speak of him like that. You don't know——"

"Nor I don't want to know," interrupted Mr. Siward, "your poor little white face tells me enough. So he has gone, has he, the villain! Broken my child's heart, because——"

"No, father, no!" she exclaimed, trying to smile up in his face, "not so bad as that; please don't say hard things of him; he does not deserve them, indeed he does not; or you will hurt me more than he has done. I am so tired, father; take me home with

you now at once; I long to get away." Her father could scarcely believe his ears.

"And you'll come, Madge?" he exclaimed, in overjoyed accents. "My darling child, you will really come back to Clinton—back to the old home? You'll leave this gay city without——"

"Without a sigh—without a single regret, father," she answered, eagerly. "Glad, oh! so glad to be at home—in our own old home with you once more."

The old man's brain seemed to reel with bewildered feelings; one sensation seemed to be borne so quickly after the other, so swiftly upon his indignant rage against Cecil Slade there rose the delighted prospect of having his daughter's undivided love again. He had found things altogether so different from what he had expected that his thoughts were suddenly thrown into such a state of

confusion he found some difficulty in disentangling one from the other.

“I have been so lost and lonely without you, Madge; if it had not been for Nell I should have been moped to death—*she* did not care much about him—her blind eyes sometimes see clearer than ours. You’re quite sure you’re glad to come home, darling?” he added nervously, twining his fingers in her hair; “you will not regret; you will not begin to fret about this——”

She laid her finger on his lips, and said softly, “You are quite wrong in all your thoughts of *him*. Our parting was *my* fault—all *my* fault. I can’t tell you how it all happened, and don’t ask questions, please; it would torture me to go over the ground again; it is enough for you to know that it is over.” With all the self-command she had called up, her lip quivered as she added, “I said things to him that he will



never forgive—that he never ought to forgive. Don't be afraid, father, I—I shall not fret at all. I shall be quite well when we are once away from here.”

“Why did not you write and tell me how things were going with you?” he said.

“When did all this breaking off business happen?”

“More than a week ago,” she answered; “but I could not write—I should not have known what to say. I thought you were angry and—but never mind, nothing matters now——”

“No, nothing matters now,” he answered, glad he had not got her reproaches as well as his own to endure; for, in spite of what Margaret had said, he believed that his refusal in the matter of “money” had really been the cause of the rupture.

He was scarcely sorry for it now, for he thought that a man who could allow money

to strike the balance against such a girl as Margaret was not worth having. His wrath was ready to boil over against all Cecil Slade's kith and kin.

"How has she behaved to you?" he pointed his thumb over his shoulder, indicating some invisible presence.

Margaret knew, of course, that he alluded to Lady Erlescliffe, and hastened to assure him of the kind, sympathetic friend she had always found her. Margaret knew that her father must necessarily have an interview with Lady Erlescliffe, and, desiring that it should be as pleasant as it could possibly be under existing circumstances, endeavoured—indeed, succeeded in divesting his mind of the slightest prejudice against her; consequently, there was more cordiality in their meeting than could perhaps have been expected. A shake of the hand, a few earnest, sympathetic words on both sides in

allusion to the state of affairs between Margaret and Cecil, were all that passed between them.

Lady Erlescliffe was grieved to part with Margaret so suddenly ; but, all things being considered, she quite agreed that it would be well for Margaret to go quietly home for awhile.

“ You can return to me when you will, Margaret,” she said, embracing her warmly. “ You know I shall always receive you with open arms.”

Margaret’s arrangements were soon made ; she wrote little brief notes of farewell to those among whom she was more intimately thrown, and the next morning she and her father departed by an early train for Clinton.

## CHAPTER VII.

## DRIFTING AND DREAMING.

SUMMER was over ; Autumn had come—  
nay, was passing away quickly—the  
harvest was all gathered in ; the waving  
corn had fallen under the reaping-hook ;  
the purple fields of clover no longer scented  
the air with their perfumed breath ; the  
earth, shorn of her rich burden, looked  
barren and bare. The trees had lost their  
Summer glory, and no longer waved their  
leafy banners in the golden sun, but looked  
sombre and lonely in their sober Autumn-  
tinted dress—no joyous birds carolled and

chirped beneath the branches now ; the leaves were shrivelled, withering, and falling day by day.

Uneventfully and slowly the time had passed with Margaret. During the first few weeks of the old home-life she had brightened up ; old associations came crowding round her, and demands upon her sympathetic recognition rose on all sides of her. For awhile she exerted herself to get up an interest in the things, and the still untroubled lives that were flowing round her, with which her own life must mingle now, and flow side by side, it seemed, for all the years to come. She renewed her old friendship with blind Nellie, who was as affectionate and devoted as ever. Her life had been stagnant and unstirred by any outer interest since Margaret's departure. She could have picked up the very thread of conversation exactly where they had dropped it so many

months ago, but the very sound of Margaret's voice told of the change within.

Somehow, Margaret felt that she had floated away from the old ties and associations, and with all her struggling desire she could not touch land again. She could no longer tread the familiar paths as lightly and carelessly as she had trodden them in days gone by. The strong, confidential intimacy which had existed between her and the blind girl was weakened; a prickly wall seemed to stand between them, which they could not touch or tear down.

It was with great grief poor Nellie realized the fact that things could never again be the same between them. Their castle-building days had gone by, they no longer shared their girlish confidences, and hopes, and aspirations together. Nellie tried to creep in, and find her old warm corner in Margaret's heart, but found the entrance

shut and sealed up. She knew, so much she had discovered from Mr. Siward, that Margaret had met with a bitter disappointment, and wanted, with Eve-like curiosity, to know all about it, to talk it over and gain some grains of comfort or consolation; but no endeavour could win Margaret to talk about herself; she felt too keenly, and was altogether too sensitive, to make her delicate affections the subject of conversation even with those who were nearest and dearest to her. Those who talk most feel least, as shallow waters make most noise. She could not be drawn to talk of the past or the future—the present hour seemed to be all to her. She was willing enough to join in conversation about things of local interest which were passing around her, but her own warm heart, crowded with hopes, fears, and vain regrets, beat behind a veil which not even her father's loving

eyes could penetrate. He was content, and thought she had "quite got over her fancy for that aristocratic fortune-hunter," so he phrased it.

She was more devoted than ever in her attentions to him, was always at hand, looking fresh and pleasant, ready to pour out his tea, to pet him, see that all his surroundings were arranged exactly as he liked them, and in the evening she was always ready to take her place as of old, and sing or play him to sleep. If her lips smiled, he took it for granted that her heart was smiling too. He had not penetration enough to discover that there was no soul in anything she did. The mechanism of her life, well oiled and greased for its daily duties, went smoothly enough; she talked, ate, drank, slept, exactly as other people did, and was apparently calm and composed enough; no one could see the



aching, longing restlessness that agitated her below the surface. She had tried to take up the old life, and invest it with its old interest; but it was impossible, she could not do it. She had not thought she cared at all for the gay London world she had left behind her, but she could not reconcile herself to the wearying monotony of this. She exerted herself, and tried, for her dear father's sake, to be like the Margaret of old, and succeeded so well as to deceive him into a belief of the fact; but she did not deceive herself. She knew she had passed over the bridge of her careless girlhood, and could never go back into the happy land again. She felt as though she had departed this life altogether, and it was only the ghost of the old Margaret that rambled among the old haunts now. She would spend whole hours in the apple orchard, wandering beneath the stript branches,

looking up at the leaden, grey November sky, which seemed so much in unison with her own heavy heart. She was quite alone there, away from prying eyes, with no one to observe or speculate about her; she could slip off her mask of severe content, and let her face fall into the expression of utter weariness she felt. Sometimes, as she paced beneath the leafless boughs, she fancied the early Spring had come back again; she could see the light, flaky apple blossoms fluttering and falling; she could see *his* face looking into hers as he lifted the laden branches for her to pass under. All was so distinct to her mind's eye; she lived, absolutely lived, those happy moments over again. The tones of his voice, too, rang so plainly on her ear, she half expected to hear his footfall beside her; she felt that if she looked up she must see his face graven on the still air. With a

start she roused herself from this waking vision, and shivered slightly as she continued walking up and down, feeling oh! so lonely!—the most lonely thing beneath all that Autumn sky.

She looked forward through the long stretch of years, and wondered how she should be able to live through the dreary days and hours which made up their sum. With blinding tears she realised the fact that what had been could never be again. She recalled and repeated, over and over, his last words, and lashed herself into a state of bitter rage against him. “He ought not to have been so hard and cold—it was a cruel punishment for a few hasty words—to throw her off for ever, take all the sweet savour out of her life, and leave her to live on with only half a heart. What could *he* have said or done that *she* would not have forgiven him?” The angry mood

scarce lasted beyond the hour. She reproached herself for keeping his memory so tenderly, when he had so evidently forgotten her, "for he has forgotten me," she thought, "or surely he would have made some sign before this!"

Human nature is full of inconsistencies, especially the human nature of womankind; while she was still yearning for the sound of his name, repeating it over and over to herself, dwelling on it with soft caressing accents, she succeeded in persuading herself that she was growing indifferent to him, that her love was dead, and he was no more to her than any other man. She put on the armour of philosophy, and covered herself with it; as though philosophy could take the sting out of sorrow! or exercise any healing power over a wounded heart! She fancied there was no vulnerable spot in her nature now. She longed to go out into the

world and put her new-born philosophical spirit to the proof; she walked up and down the room smiling to herself. She longed to meet Cecil Slade face to face, not with the old love-longing, but in a fierce, angry spirit, born out of her pain; she practised how she would look at him and smile with strange eyes, exactly as she would smile on other men, her heart should not throb, nor her pulse quicken at all. In this frame of mind she fancied she had settled down in a stronghold that nothing could break through.

Everyone about her noticed she had changed somehow, not changed exactly to the sweet, light-hearted Margaret of old, but still changed and brought back nearer to them. She laughed more frequently, and laughed at things which at one time would not have moved her at all.

With Mr. Siward things were growing

worse and worse ; in trying to recover certain losses he had lost more ; indeed, matters altogether seemed taking a turn in the wrong direction. He had supplied some very large exportation orders, and the contractors had failed, paying only sixpence in the pound. He saw the dread possibility that, through the failures of other people, he might be driven into a state of bankruptcy, or have to take some measures to keep himself afloat. When George Siward found that his father was really in difficulties, and that he was adding to his distresses and increasing his anxieties, the selfish outer-crust of his boyish nature crumbled away, and the better and more genuine part asserted itself. "The poor old governor's hard hit somehow," he thought. "I don't suppose *I* can be of much use, but I may as well go down and see what I can do."

It was much easier for him to tear himself

away from London now that his sheet anchor, Cecil Slade, was gone, for though he loved the artistic circle dearly, it lost a considerable part of its attraction when Cecil Slade dropped out of it. He knew nothing of the rights of the matter, but he was very angry with Margaret, who, he believed, had been what he called "playing the fool" with Cecil, broken up their happy studio life, and driven him abroad. And in spite of all Cecil's assertions to the contrary, he drew his own conclusions, and settled himself into the conviction that Margaret was to blame. On his return home he ventured on some mild reproachful "chaff" upon the subject, but his facetious spirit met with such a sharp reception he never repeated the attack.

Mr. Siward was happy in the one thing, that he had his son and daughter with him, which was a great consolation to him in his

trouble. George put himself under his father's direction, and set to with right good will to do whatever was required of him. Not that he ever allowed his father to hope he would settle down at Clinton, even should business matters rise again to their most successful height. His father, during his days of prosperity, had been most liberal to him, he had had a fine time hitherto, he had a good deal of the wandering element in his nature—and purposed going over to one of the various colonies to try his luck there. To this proposal his father regretfully consented. He knew it was hard to bind the desire of youth to the will of age, and had sense enough to feel that it was best to let the fire of youth burn out, for if it is smothered with wet blankets it only smoulders, and one day bursts forth in a most disastrous flame.

It was Winter now, not half and half



wintry weather, but a real old-fashioned Winter—the pools and ponds and every tiny stream in the neighbourhood were frozen over, the air was crisp, the skies blue, and the ground was covered with snow. In spite of all Margaret's care to feed her feathery favourites, who came hopping round her window, chirping for their daily bread, she one morning found her pet robin frozen in the snow.

Lady Erlescliffe wrote to her occasionally, but their correspondence was not of the briskest or brightest description, there was a certain restraint about it; neither could write of that which lay nearest her heart; consequently there was a false ring, and scarce one true note running through the whole.

One more than usually dull wintry morning, a most diffusive and affectionate letter came from Mrs. Burke. She was staying on a visit about ten miles off, and had only

just learnt they were in the vicinity of Margaret's home. "She was quite *longing* for a sight of her dearest girl, and would come on the heels of her letter and spend a few hours with her that very day."

The memory of Mrs. Burke was closely connected with that of her brother, Colonel Dunstable, and Margaret's thoughts naturally drifted to that day at the garden-party; she remembered all he had said, how prophetically he had spoken, how earnestly he had pleaded for himself, and how harshly and rudely she had behaved to him—she was too happy then, too exultingly happy in her own blissful present, to be able to feel very sympathetically with anyone; all sad things seemed to be so far away outside her own life that they were dwarfed and small in her sight. She was sorry now; she had suffered herself and knew what it was to bear the pain of wounded or unrequited

affections. His words came back to her, and kept repeating themselves in her mind with strange persistency.

The prospect of seeing Mrs. Burke excited in her a feeling of feverish impatience. It would be like a flash of the old life lighting up the dull monotonous present. True to her announcement, Mrs. Burke appeared upon the scene, and was as gushing and demonstrative as ever, and probed Margaret with pointed curiosity as to the real why and wherefore of her sudden exit from town. "Just at the time, too, when there were so many little pleasant things lighting up the tail of the season. Of course, my dear," she added, with a confidential squeeze of the hand, "*I* quite understand, I know how things were between you, and of course I knew how they would end, if certain conditions were not complied with. It had happened so before more than once. Ah!

well, my dear, you have had a lucky escape. These mercenary marriages never turn out well; somebody's heart generally breaks in the business, and, as a rule, it is not the masculine heart."

She would go on till she had said all she desired to say; it was no use Margaret trying to interrupt her, she put all her endeavours aside with a comprehending nod or sympathetic pat, and went on again. Margaret sat as quietly as she could, while her heart was being vivisected in the most sympathetic fashion by Mrs. Burke's sharp tongue. It was best to let her have her way, for if she were hindered in one direction she would start in another, and perhaps come to more mischievous conclusions, and send them circulating round the world.

When she had said all she desired, and, indeed, exhausted all her surmises on the

subject, Margaret spoke out more frankly and freely than she had hitherto spoken to anyone. She forced herself to speak of Cecil, and tried to set him right in Mrs. Burke's eyes, assuring her that the money question was not the thing that separated them. "Great things, you know," she added, smiling, "from trivial causes spring, and for both our sakes I think things are as well as they are."

To this Mrs. Burke unhesitatingly agreed. Margaret inquired after Colonel Dunstable before they parted.

"My dear, he has been more eccentric than ever," Mrs. Burke answered, "dashing about the country in the wildest way, no one knows where to find him for two days together; but I shall tell him I have seen you, my dear, and——" she hesitated a second, then added, "I am not sure that you are not responsible for some of his

eccentricities. Why, you're blushing, positively blushing, Margaret!"

"No wonder," she answered, "when you throw such an accusation as that in my face." Then she adroitly shifted the subject, and drifted off into other matters. She took her round the garden, showed her all her pets, and pressed her very much to stay till her father came home.

"He would be so glad to see you," she added, "and to thank you for all your kindness to me."

"I should be very happy to make his acquaintance, my dear Margaret, but that pleasure must be postponed to a future day." She departed, promising to renew her visit at an early opportunity.

Her visit certainly did Margaret good, for after it she brightened considerably. A breath from the old world had broken the monotony of her life here, and stirred her

rapidly sinking spirits, scattering her thoughts broadcast through the land of wild imaginings, and so the days rolled on.

## CHAPTER VIII.

## AWAKENING.

A FEW days after Mrs. Burke's visit, as Margaret was returning from one of her solitary roundabout rambles, she heard the sharp rattling of a chaise, driving rapidly along the frosty road. She stepped on one side, almost into the ditch, indeed, and waited for it to pass, feeling, it must be owned, a little curious to know who could be coming along that lonely road, which led to nowhere, indeed, except to her father's, and was rather a roundabout way to get there, consequently it was rarely used. In another moment the carriage drove



up and passed—no, not passed; it stopped suddenly, and a gentleman sprang out. Margaret's heart beat suddenly for a moment. She turned away her head, for that second a flood of hopes and fears blinded her. A few hasty steps brought him to her side. Ah, it was not he whose image had risen up like a flash of light in her mind's eye—it was another unexpected, less welcome, but still a familiar face, which she could not feel altogether sorry to see. It was Colonel Dunstable who took her hand and held it close clasped in his as he greeted her in his old characteristic way. He could not even say "How do you?" or "Good morning," as other people do so many thousand times in all their lives, never varying the greeting by a single word.

Having looked upon her face, his eyes glowing with feverish delight, as though they would never leave off looking, he

said, in tones of suppressed excitement—

“At last—at last I see your face again! I came by the express, but my thoughts flew forward at a greater express still. I was afraid you would be spirited away before I arrived. I can hardly believe it is you yet.”

“Can’t you?” she answered. “Well, I’m a tolerably substantial presence, sensible to feeling as to sight.”

“You looked like a grey ghost standing here among these shadowy trees. I was afraid you might melt away like a mist maiden before I came up.”

“I wish I could,” she rejoined, half in jest, half in earnest. “I would dissolve myself into nothing without a moment’s warning.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Colonel Dunstable, taking her seriously and eyeing her with curious scrutiny, “the world is not such a

very nice place as you fancied? Everybody finds that out sooner or later. Ah, well, fortunately for us—for you and me, Margaret—there is another.”

“Fortunately for all the world, I think,” she answered, looking calmly at and yet beyond him. “I suppose there is more pain than pleasure here. I used not to think so once, but——”

“You’ve changed your mind.”

“Yes.”

“I told you it would be so, and my words have come true.”

“Ah, but you told me many other things that have not come true,” she answered, a spirit of badinage infused into her tone. “Do you remember that day when you drew my horoscope?—what wonderful things you prophesied! You promised and vowed such fine things in the name of ‘fate.’”

“Did I? I had forgotten that. But

there are some things I never forget—never.”

She continued her way homeward, and he sauntered on by her side, the empty chaise, at a slow, rumbling pace, following them.

“May I walk with you?” he inquired, after they had gone some distance in silence. “I was going on to your father’s. Do you mind my walking with you?”

“Certainly not; and I am sure my father will be very glad to see you—he has heard me speak of you often.”

“Has he? Well, I don’t believe you can have spoken of *me* so often as I have thought of *you*.”

He stooped and peered eagerly into her face, as though expecting an answer, but it was a delicate question, and as Margaret’s wits were not kept polished ready for use, she relapsed into a somewhat embarrassed silence, for which she was very angry with

herself. He did not seem disposed to speak, so they tramped on in profound silence. When a gap falls in the conversation between two people, it is generally difficult to bridge it over, neither knows how or where to begin in a new direction, and the longer the silence lasts the more embarrassing it becomes. It was Colonel Dunstable who broke the silence now, as though he were following his own thoughts merely.

“Do you know it is nearly six months since we have met,” he said, “yet I feel as though we have never been apart at all. We never have, we never can be really.”

“Ah! I know your theory,” she answered, brightly. “It is a very agreeable one. I only wish it were true. It is a pleasant thing to feel that, wherever we send our thoughts, our invisible selves follow them.”

“Yes, and some are conscious of the journey, and some are not,” he answered,

eagerly. "Some souls, as well as some bodies, are born blind, and never open their eyes until they die."

She did not mean to be drifted away into his land of theoretical fancies, wherein she was always lost; she could not follow him through his wild wanderings, which she called "metaphysical," though she had a great respect for his grasp of thought and things which were above and beyond her comprehension, yet she preferred resting her intellect among the generally accepted theories, which took very little trouble to conceive, and left the mind unstirred by wild imaginings. She knew that when he got lost in his dreamy fancies, it was difficult to draw him back, and she had no mind to be lost with him. She made some answering remark about the beauty of this world, throbbing with variegated loveliness—sea, sunshine, flowers, and all the myriad created

things of beauty, animate and inanimate, which were open to all eyes, and whose glories all hearts could feel.

While they were still talking about known and unknown lands, they reached Mr. Siward's house by a winding side way. Margaret unlatched the gate, and crossed the garden leisurely, he following. Mr. Siward was in the library, and thither Margaret at once conducted Colonel Dunstable, and presented him in due form to her father, who received him graciously, very graciously, and, after a very few minutes' conversation, invited him to stay to dinner with unusual warmth, no doubt feeling gratified by one of Margaret's "fine London friends" (albeit he affected to despise them) paying them a visit.

Margaret was glad that he should exercise hospitality where she was indebted for so much considerate kindness. She disappear-

ed to see that all things were satisfactorily arranged for the entertainment of an unexpected guest. She ransacked the conservatory for such flowers as she could find as an extra decoration for the table, and when her pleasant task was ended, she dressed, and, looking her freshest and fairest, went into the drawing-room, and let her fingers stray over the piano, playing nothing consecutively, but snatches of many melodies, till her father and his guest appeared. She felt a little nervous as to how her father and his new acquaintance would "get on" together, being so widely different in birth, education, &c.

Mr. Siward had not been in such good spirits for many a day, he chatted freely, cracked harmless jokes, talked of bygone days, illustrated by his early struggles, and then, at intervals, listened patiently while Colonel Dunstable brought forward some



hidden secret of his adventures in distant lands, to which Margaret had never heard the slightest allusion ; but then, she reflected, they had always been whirling round in the giddy maze of society, among whose pretty frivolous nothings the strong element of adventure, or a stirring incident that went an inch below the conventional surface of that society, was rigorously excluded.

Such an agreeable companion Mr. Siward found him that he insisted upon the fly being sent back empty, and ordered the spare room to be prepared for Colonel Dunstable, whom he invited to stay as long as he was able to amuse himself there. Strange to say, he never thought of asking what had brought him to Clinton. It was not likely a man of his stamp could have any business there ; nobody ever did have any business there except himself. Margaret was amazed at her father's open-

hearted hospitality to a gentleman of whom he knew so little, and between whom and himself there could be no real affinity, though so far they seemed to be getting on wonderfully together. She looked as though she half hoped and expected he would decline the offer, but it was eagerly accepted.

Neither Mr. Siward nor his guest joined Margaret in the drawing-room; by her father's desire she sent the coffee into the dining-room, where they remained till a late hour. Margaret, meanwhile, retired at her usual time to rest.

Her pillow seemed stuffed with anything but roses, judging from the restless way she turned her head from side to side. Life had gone on in such a dull, monotonous round for the last few months that the arrival of any guest, even for a passing hour, was an excitement to Margaret, but the com-

ing of Colonel Dunstable was fraught with something more. He brought back to her mind so many things she would fain forget—some sweet, and some strong with bitter pain; she wished to remember neither. Everything, from the first hour she arrived in London till the day she left it, was filled with the memory of Cecil Slade and Colonel Dunstable—she could not disentangle one from the other. They two were mingling together in her mind's eye now; the one perpetually overshadowing the other. Why had he come there?—why? And so wondering, she fell asleep.

## CHAPTER IX.

## THE DAWN OF A NEW DAY.

MARGARET rose early the next morning, and waited a long time before either her father or his guest appeared.

Considering her wonder and excitement the last evening, she was strangely placid in the morning, only wondering what she should do with Colonel Dunstable, if he were to remain there all day; if it were only bright Summer weather, there would be no doubt at all so far as she was concerned. But he—how would he be able to employ his time? he must find it fearfully dull; he was cut off from all his old haunts,

his old associations, and could have no interest in anyone or in anything there. She wondered if Mrs. Burke was still visiting in the neighbourhood, and if she knew of her brother's visit to them. The one visit following so quickly on the heels of the other seemed as though she had suggested it. So Margaret for a moment thought, but she was wrong; Colonel Dunstable was not a man to act upon other people's suggestions. In all his doings he was guided by his own impulses only, and followed those impulses wherever they led him, and sometimes they swayed him wildly, and much to his own injury.

Margaret had become a fixed idea in his mind—indeed, she had taken entire possession of him; though he had never attempted to intrude upon her for all these months, yet he had never for a moment forgotten her. He left, or thought he left,

all things to chance or fate. They had drifted apart, and would come together again as sure as the sun rose and set. He knew that a few hours' travel would bring him face to face with her at any hour he pleased, he had no special reason for keeping away so long; but time to him was not like time to other men; sometimes he lost account of it altogether. Suddenly and strongly the impulse had seized him that he would see her; and he was there.

Her wonder respecting his coming was soon set at rest. The day following his arrival was bitterly cold and uncongenial; drizzling showers of rain and snow had fallen during the night, the ground was covered with half-frozen slush, and the air was still heavy with mist and impending showers.

Margaret, as a rule, did not pay much heed to the weather, but on such a day as

this it was impossible even for her to brave it. Colonel Dunstable had been with her father down at the works all the morning, being horribly bored, no doubt, and came back to luncheon half-frozen with cold and wet through.

When they sat down to table, Margaret felt some slight embarrassment at the idea of a *tête-à-tête* meal with him ; but she laid herself out to be agreeable. However, her endeavours fell flat, he did not respond, and scarcely answered her at all, and when he did he made some most wandering remark, which showed that he was not paying attention to what she was saying ; then she, naturally, relapsed into silence, at the same time being perfectly conscious that his eyes were regarding her with their old fitful, strange expression. She was glad when luncheon was over, and she went away into her own sanctum, intending to occupy herself there

till dinner-time; but he followed her; he stalked into the room behind her and closed the door, looking grave as usual, and never speaking a word. She was surprised at his want of tact in following her; but as he was there, she could not very well turn him out. She seated herself in her low-cushioned chair, and drawing her work-basket towards her, busied herself in sorting some bright-coloured filoselle silks; he leaned his elbow on the mantel-piece, and stood attentively regarding her; she smiled up in his face, and in playfully rebuking accents said—

“Do you know that no masculine presence is allowed here without my express permission? and you have never asked it!”

“No,” he answered, vacantly, and then relapsed into silence.

Her usual glibness of tongue generally failed her in his presence; it did so now,



and while she was wondering what she should say next, he strode to her side, took the silks gently from her hand and tossed them aside, saying—

“I hate to see women working; they get so absorbed in their everlasting stitches they are blind and deaf to everything else.”

“Don’t you think it would be as well if we were all blind and deaf, and dumb, too, sometimes?” she rejoined, in light, careless tones.

“Sometimes, yes,” he answered, knitting his brows; “but not now. I want you to pay attention to me.”

“Yes,” she answered, half inquiringly, and, letting her hands fall in her lap, looked up at him and waited.

He answered her with unusual abruptness. There was no circling round about sentimental eddies; he put out no preliminary

feelers to see how she was likely to take his communication, but went straight to the point at once. The nervous excitement of his mind, however, exhibited itself in a certain light flickering of the eyes as he said—

“I have spoken to your father this morning. I thought he wondered why I came here, and I told him. Margaret,” he added, and his voice was low and earnest, quite free from excitement, “you remember the words I said to you six months ago?”

“Yes,” she answered, almost under her breath.

“Well, I have come to repeat them. Am I too soon? Has the time come when I may tell you again I love you?”

“Ah, Colonel Dunstable, it is better not to speak of it any more. What is the use——”

“Use!” he repeated, interrupting her—

“not much, perhaps. Truth may not be of much use, but it must be told sometimes. And—why should we keep apart, Margaret—why?”

“What should we do together?” she answered. “You know I don’t care—I mean, I don’t love you as you ought to be loved.”

“*I* am content,” he answered. “You love me better than you think; and when we are together, body and soul made one, things will be altogether different. You thought you loved that other—that *he* loved you. I knew better. I told you how it would end, and I was right. Why, Margaret, *he* could not love you in fifty years as I could love you in a single day! They say you are wearing the willow for him too, but, I say again, I know better than that. You knew I was coming, Margaret—say you knew it, and are prepared now to cast

your lot for ever and ever with mine.”

He took her hand, and spoke with such grave earnestness she had not courage to draw it away; her mind was agitated with so many conflicting feelings she hardly knew how to answer him, and before the words could reach her lips he added—

“You are not happy, Margaret—neither am I. I am miserable. I have waited—God knows how I have waited for you. It is no use your trying to cut yourself adrift from me—you can’t do it. You belong to me; you are the perfect half of myself. I am a poor, unfinished wretch without you. With you—ah, Margaret!—life will be worth living. We will go away from the stifling world of fashion, and out of this dull, dead life here. It is killing you, Margaret—it is killing you. I will not leave you to drag out your days here.”

A torrent of wild, half-connected words

broke from his lips and took her senses by storm, and whirled them round, mingling and co-mingling one thought with another, till she lost all power over them, and could grasp nothing distinctly. Some of his brief sentences burnt themselves into her brain. "This life is killing you," and "We will go to other lands and see strange countries," were among them.

Quick as the lightning strikes, a longing seized her to turn her back upon the present, to go somewhere, anywhere away from the blank future which loomed grey and leaden before her; a rift in the dark skies showed her a glimpse of a new life. Somehow there seemed to be a conflicting current in her destiny—one held her back, the other urged her forward. The magnetism of his presence had a powerful influence over her.

"Why not take the gifts that lay near at

hand? Why pine for that which had been snatched away?"

Her face flushed, and then paled again; he set her impulses strongly on the current of his own desires; she seemed to have no will of her own, no power to think or reflect upon this matter which held her whole life within it. He seemed to absorb and incorporate her spirit with his own, as he urged her to speak, and say things should be as he willed them. She laid her hand in his, and murmured softly,

"Give me till to-morrow."

"To-morrow may never come," he answered, eagerly. "I want you to tell me to-day—now—at once. I cannot live without you, Margaret, I cannot die either. Nay, I do not believe I could enter into heaven without you."

She shaded her eyes with her hand while she listened to his earnest, eloquent urging

of his desire ; his words glowed with a weird, strange eloquence, full of picturesque dashes just calculated to catch a soul prone to romance and dreaming. Margaret was so carried away by his passionate urging that for a second she wavered, and then answered him.

“ Things might be as he pleased.”

“ You consent, then ! You will marry me, Margaret, and soon ?”

“ Yes,” she answered, wearily.

An exultant light flashed from his eyes, and his dark face grew suddenly transfigured with a strange joy. With a burst of passion he clasped her in his arms, her head drooped upon his shoulder, her arms fell listless to her side ; she neither saw his face, nor heard the warm, glad words he uttered. The strain had been too much for her already weakened nerves—she had fainted. Instead of clasping the warm breathing

woman he loved within his arms, he held a mere form of insensible clay, for without the soul, which animates and kindles it into life, the body is naught.

He laid her back upon the sofa, and rang the bell violently for help—and the household speedily rushed to her assistance. For a very few moments she remained insensible, there was a tremulous motion of the eyelids, a twitching at the corners of her mouth, and she opened her eyes, smiling languidly, as she said,

“It was very silly of me to give you all so much trouble, but I suppose I am not strong. Leave me alone for a little while, please. I must be bright and well before father comes home.”

He lifted the tips of her fingers to his lips, and left her without a word.

With wide-open eyes, she remained as in a waking dream, long after he left her—



thinking, yes, really thinking, reconnoitering her position from all sides as fairly as she could, though at the present time her vision was limited, and she was disposed to take a distorted view of all things, whether near or far off. She knew that he had said truly that she "was miserable;" looking forward to live on the dull uneventful life she was living now was simple torture to her restless spirit. How was it? It had not been always so. A year ago this quiet home-life had been perfection; she had desired no other; content in the present, she had still looked forward with longing expectation to an undefined, beautiful future—her girlish thoughts had dressed that future gorgeously, scattering grains of hope broadcast, trusting to reap a rich harvest when the time for reaping came. But that future had become the present, and how barren and bare it was, shorn of all its glory! all that had made

the beauty of her life seemed dead and gone with the last June roses. She seemed to have lived an age in the last six months; they had been so long to her. It is only joy that goes galloping by; dull pain, fraught with disappointment and weariness, goes hobbling along with lagging footsteps.

She felt she had left her girlhood with its gay careless grace far behind her, all the sweet savour had gone out of life; but she was a woman now, and must face it with as brave a spirit as she could command. Strange that the mere drifting of one human being across the path of another, should darken and render it a tangled maze, for a time at least, if not for evermore. Why should it be so? She asked herself that question again and again. The memory of Cecil Slade, with his quiet cynicisms and tender ways, stirred her strongly, but she

winned and shrank from the thought of him,—if he had loved her at all he would not have neglected her, and made no sign through all these dreary months!

She turned from him, and forced the thought of Colonel Dunstable to the front. He at least loved her for herself—with a strange, incomprehensible, bewildering love that had been loyal and true to her through all the changeful days. Why should she waste her days pining for a shadow, and miss the substance that lay ready at hand? She reflected on all Colonel Dunstable's kindness to her during the past season, and brought herself to smile at some of the odd passages that had chanced between them. She so familiarized herself with the idea of him that she was surprised at the calm placidity of her feelings as she prepared to go down and meet him now as her accepted lover.

Mr. Siward returned home at his usual time radiant with delight. He managed to get a few minutes' private conversation with Margaret before dinner, wherein he showed his extreme satisfaction at the sudden turn her affairs had taken.

“This is the right sort of thing, Madge,” he exclaimed, “you are a lucky girl, devilish lucky! Colonel Dunstable is a fine fellow, a little eccentric in his ways, perhaps, but worth fifty of that—well, I am not going to say anything more—” he added quickly, as an impatient mutinous expression came into her eyes; “he is generous too, anxious to do things handsomely. I tried to tell him of the changed state of my affairs, fancying that he might be expecting a fortune with you, but he shut me up quickly, and said the word ‘money’ on my side was not to be mentioned between us; ah! he is something like a man!” In the joy of his heart Mr.

Siward could not lavish praises enough on his son-in-law elect.

He had a long conversation with Colonel Dunstable when dinner was over, and Margaret had retired ; judging from the expression of their faces, it was a satisfactory one too.

Margaret sang and played to them during the evening some of her father's old favourite songs ; his whole face broadened and beamed with smiles as he listened to her, occasionally giving vent to a satisfied chuckle of absolute contentment. Colonel Dunstable sat in profound silence, giving utterance to no polite platitudes in the way of acknowledgment or thanks, only gazing at her with a half furtive, curious, restless look in his eyes, which might have set some people speculating.

Before retiring to rest, when he bid Margaret "good night," he took her some-

what by surprise as he inquired, "What time in the morning the first train started for London?"

"At eight o'clock," she answered; "but surely you are not thinking of leaving us so soon?"

"Yes," he answered, quickly, "I must go. You don't mind; you are not sorry?" He looked very much as though he hoped she would say she was.

"No, no," she answered, hastily, and in some slight confusion; "only a little surprised; but of course you know best."

"Yes," he answered, "you see how it is, Margaret, things are smooth and pleasant between us now—and—and I'm afraid if I stayed I might say or do something to offend you; and," he added, hurriedly, "there's a great deal to be thought of—a great deal to be done, many arrangements to be made. There needs be no delay.

You will be ready soon ; how soon, Margaret ?”

“ Oh, pray give me breathing time !” she exclaimed, “ even in criminal cases execution does not follow so quickly on the sentence.”

“ Of course you shall have time. I must not grudge you a few weeks now, when we shall spend our lives—our eternity together.”

“ Don’t hold such a prospect before my eyes,” she exclaimed, with an irrepressible shiver, “ or, perhaps, I shall change my mind.”

He stooped and kissed her cheek before they parted, not her lips, these she sedulously turned aside.

When she went to bed that night she tried to sleep, to “ steep her senses in forgetfulness ” till morning. She was tired and exhausted, both in body and in mind.

Yet, as she laid herself down to rest, the ghost of the old dead day of that other engagement haunted her pillow. In spite of herself she could not help contrasting her feelings then with her feelings now; *then* she fought and struggled against sleep, for sleep shut out his image from her eyes, the memory of his love, his sweet caresses, from her mind. It seemed as though her whole life could not exhaust the blissful memory of that single day. *Now* she only desired to sleep and to forget.



## CHAPTER X.

## A CLOUD ON THE HORIZON.

COLONEL DUNSTABLE and Margaret saw very little of each other during the few weeks immediately following their engagement. He was very much occupied in town. She was very much occupied in the country; devoting herself most assiduously to her father, anticipating his every wish, fulfilling his slightest desire, trying by every means in her power to resuscitate the old days, and rekindle the old home-light of her early girlhood. The sound of her father's voice in the garden, or his step upon the stairs, brought her flying to his side.

She could not bear to be apart from him; from the moment he entered the house until he left it she hovered round him, petting and caressing him in a soft, unobtrusive way, twining herself closer than ever round his heart by a thousand endearing ways.

“I want you to miss me very much when I am gone, father, dear,” she said one evening, sliding her arms round his neck, and laying her soft, warm cheek to his; “and I want you to forget, and forgive me for all the naughty things I’ve ever done to vex you.”

“Tush, tush! why, Madge, my child, what makes you talk so? you’ve never vexed me in your life, except—well—except, perhaps, lately, when I’ve seen you looking sad and broken-hearted like, and I knew you were fretting for one—well, for one that wasn’t worth it. But everything has

turned out for the best," he added, cheerfully; "there is a silver lining to every cloud, and we are having the benefit of it now. There isn't a happier man for miles round than I am, and it is all your doing;" he paused a moment, then added, "I couldn't exactly tell what humour you were in, and I was afraid you might refuse him, and if you had you would never have such another chance; wealth, position, and a man that any girl might be proud of."

"Has the prospect of my marrying Colonel Dunstable made you so very happy, father?" she asked, in a low, tremulous voice.

"Happy!" he repeated, heartily, "I believe I am, rather! The word isn't strong enough, Madge; if I had had the carving out of your life for you, I'd have given you just such a slice as you've got. I'm gladder than glad."

“Then so am I, dear, so am I!” she almost sobbed, half under her breath.

Lady Erlescliffe had been duly informed of Margaret's change of prospects, and had written a most affectionate letter in reply, giving her most cordial congratulations, saying enough, but not too much, upon the subject.

Mrs. Burke, on the communication being made to her, was more gushing than ever, and insisted most urgently on Margaret coming to spend a few weeks with her in London; but this Margaret steadfastly refused to do. She intended to remain quietly at home with her father till the last; but she was not allowed exactly to carry out this desire, as Colonel Dunstable proposed making some very important alterations on his estate in Shropshire. Among other things certain rooms were to be arranged with a view to Margaret's special

occupation ; a great deal of re-papering and re-decorating was to be done ; a bay window to be thrown out here, green-house or conservatory to be erected there ; and he was naturally anxious to consult the taste of the future mistress of the house. He wrote asking her to come down with Mrs. Burke and remain a few days, that she might go over the place and give her own instructions, so that all things might be done exactly according to her desire. He made this request so deferentially, at the same time sending a most cordial message to her father, asking him to accompany her, that in common decency she felt she could not refuse it. Accordingly, she answered him at once, accepting his invitation, appointing the day of her visit, and arranging to arrive at Wittelsworth in time for dinner in the evening.

It was impossible for Mr. Siward to ac-

company her ; he had his business to attend to ; besides, he felt some little diffidence in mixing with such society as he knew would form the circle of Colonel Dunstable's intimate associates ; therefore, so far as he was concerned, the invitation was politely declined ; but it was arranged that Margaret was, for convenience sake, to sleep one night in town, and start with Mrs. Burke by an early train for Shropshire. Colonel Dunstable having gone some days before to prepare for their reception.

Of course Margaret's engagement had been talked over at the Kestrel fireside. Nell rejoiced at anything that promised to bring back the sunshine to her friend ; she knew that dark clouds had been shrouding her spirits lately, and the estrangement that had taken place between them had by no means lessened the blind girl's affection ; she had so few to love that she clung with

tenacious fondness to the one friend of her early days, from whose life sprang the sweetest memories of her own; the slightest matter which concerned Margaret was of the deepest interest to her. Her blindness prevented her carrying on any correspondence with her brother, to whom she was devotedly attached, and there was very little communication between the old people and their son; "there was very little to be said," they used to say, "and when they met there was time enough to say it."

The news that spread like wildfire at Clinton, travelled in a slow roundabout way to Robert Kestrel's ears, it being quite by accident that he heard it at last. He was busily engaged in assisting in some new arrangement of the sculpture gallery, while some visitors were lounging through it, and gathered in small knots and chatted by the way. From their lips he heard Margaret's

prospects discussed, and gathered from their desultory gossip that she was to be married to Colonel Dunstable almost immediately. They were divided in their opinions on the subject; some thought he had done very well for himself, others thought she had done better.

“I always thought she was playing a mild little game in that quarter,” said one; “people of that sort are always so demure, one never knows what they are about.”

“At any rate, she played her game fairly, and won,” said he who was evidently her staunch ally, “and I won’t hear her abused in my presence.”

“My dear fellow,” said his languid friend, “I’m not the least inclined to abuse her—she never injured me.”

“Nor anybody else,” rejoined her ally, gruffly, “every woman has a right to do the best she can for herself, poor things,” he



added, irrespective of his grammar; "they're hard run sometimes, and little innings they get for it."

"Well, I wish she had taken a fancy to me. She is a pretty creature, and I should have fallen a willing victim. I think that grim-looking Colonel's a deuced lucky fellow, he's got the best of it by a long chalk."

"Are you talking of that affair between Dunstable and that pretty Margaret Siward? Well, she has got her work cut out for her, poor girl! She'll have to tame her tiger; it is to be hoped he won't eat her up during the process."

"To be sure, there are some queer stories afloat," said another; "but that is nobody's business, and nobody cares about them."

They drifted apart and passed on. Rob heard no more; but he had heard enough to fill him with an anxiety that would not

have been understood by any of them.

He went direct to Mr. Wycombe, and begged to be released at once, before he had even finished that day's work, and if it would not be a very great inconvenience, he would like to be absent from the studio for a week at least.

Mr. Wycombe knew that nothing but a case of vital importance would have induced Robert, whose services had become of the utmost value to him, to make such a request, and gave him the required permission without inquiry or remark.

That evening Robert hurried to the station and caught the train for Clinton, reaching home and taking the whole family by surprise before they retired to rest.

He received from his parents all the information they themselves possessed concerning Margaret; but in the early morning he walked across the fields to pay a visit to

Mr. Siward, being anxious to have a little conversation with him before he left home for business. Mr. Siward's surprise on seeing him was plainly written on his face, which expressed neither annoyance nor pleasure, only simple wonder.

"Well, Rob," he said, shortly, "I thought you were getting on in London? What on earth brings you to Clinton?"

This was not a cordial greeting; but Robert did not expect cordiality from Mr. Siward, who could not help noticing the signs of perturbed embarrassment on the part of his visitor, which his own manner in no way tended to lessen. "Well, Rob," he added, "you seem tongue-tied! What have you got to say? Out with it!"

"I am afraid you'll think I'm interfering in your affairs," said Rob, slowly, "but I can't help it, and I am not going to apologise, because I think I'm doing right."

“You generally do think that, I fancy; but sometimes you make a mistake.”

“I’m making none now, at any rate,” began Rob.

“Well, well, make haste and have done with it!” interrupted Mr. Siward, hastily.

“It is about Mar—about your daughter,” he answered; “I hear she is going to be married——”

“And pray how does that interest you?” exclaimed Mr. Siward, his choler rising, “unless, indeed, you have come to forbid the match.”

“God knows I would do that if I could; and when you have heard what I have to say, you will own that he is the last man in the world who ought to marry any woman, least of all Margaret.”

“I shall hear none of your slanderous lies!” thundered Mr. Siward. “Do you suppose I would listen to a word such a

fellow as you could have to say against my daughter's affianced husband? Why, you are scarcely fit to be his shoeblack!"

"Abuse me as much as you like," returned Robert, calmly. "I don't care, so that I can save Margaret."

"Save the devil!" exclaimed Mr. Siward, his natural dislike to Robert mingling with his indignation at his daring to interfere by a word in his family arrangements. "Take your sneaking impertinent face out of my sight, and never enter my house again! I thought I had had enough of your insolence long ago. Be off, or I'll have you ducked in the horsepond."

How much farther his passion might have carried him it is impossible to say, for at that moment he received an unexpected interruption. Nellie, fleet of foot, and silent of motion, had followed her brother across the meadows—slipped into the house

after him. She was in time to hear Mr. Siward's last angry words, and laid her hand upon his arm, saying in her soft, persuasive voice,

“Dear Mr. Siward, at least let Robert speak; hear what he has to say; condemn him afterwards.”

“Are you, too, conspiring against me?” he said, shaking her off roughly. “You have been concocting some envious lies between you.”

“I don't know even what he has to tell you,” said Nell; “as for being envious of Margaret, you know that is impossible. For my sake, you must let Robert speak; it can do no harm.”

“Well, let him go on,” said Mr. Siward, with difficulty reining in his wrath. “I'll give him five minutes for lying. He may lie away his own soul by that time. Go on,

and then get out of my sight as quickly as you can."

"You remember old Goarly's Bill, that went away from here four or five years ago, and got a place in Shropshire? well, the place he got was under-gamekeeper at Wittelsworth. I went down to see him the year before last; he seemed to be comfortably fixed up. He said he had a capital place; his master was a bachelor. I heard his name, but as it didn't interest me I didn't take much heed of it. The servants were all old stagers, and belonged mostly to the tenantry on the estate. Bill was the only stranger that had been draughted in for years. Well, it is a fine country all round, and I used to walk about with Bill for miles and miles. One day when we were making our way through the brushwood in the wildest part—it is all pretty wildish

thereabout—we heard a loud whooping and hallooing. There was a large pond or pool close by, half covered with coarse weeds and reedy rushes ; on the other side there were some huge boulder stones, which must have been there for centuries, for tangled trees and stunted bushes had grown up among them, seeming to bind them to the earth with their twisted roots. Well, Bill held up a warning finger to me, as though he knew well enough what the sounds were, and we crept quietly through the brushwood till we came to the edge of the pool ; facing us on the other side there stood a man in a ragged, half naked state, shouting and gesticulating, and shaking his fists in the most frantic fashion.

“‘What on earth is the fellow making that row about?’ said I, turning to Bill, who laid his finger on his lips and beat a hasty retreat, drawing me after him.



“ ‘It is my master,’ he answered ; ‘ don’t let him see us, or he’ll think we’re watching him.’

“ ‘ Well, I should say he wanted watching,’ said I ; ‘ he looks as though he was out of his mind, poor fellow.’

“ ‘ Oh ! come on ; he’s all right ; we never bother about him ; he likes to be let alone.’

“ ‘ Well, it don’t strike me that he ought to be let alone ; he wants to be looked after,’ said I ; ‘ he’s more like a lunatic than——’

“ ‘ Hush ! you’d better not let anybody hear you say that,’ said Bill ; ‘ he’s a good master ; he’s got plenty of money, and knows how to spend it, and we know how to value him. I should pity anybody that came down here to interfere with the master.’

“ Well, sir,” added Rob, after a moment’s

pause, "that evening as we were having our tea, something made me turn round suddenly, and I saw that same dark face pressed against the window-pane, glaring in upon us with red wolfish eyes; before I could speak it was gone."

"What the devil has all this rodomontade to do with me?" exclaimed Mr. Siward "What are you driving at? Your adventure with your friend Bill has nothing to do with me."

"It has," exclaimed Robert, excitedly; "for that man—that madman—I saw again six months ago, and have seen many times since, looking quiet and dignified like a thoroughbred gentleman. That man is Colonel Dunstable. Hear me out, please. I saw him first driving with Margaret; there was a block among the carriages at the corner of the Strand; I had a full view of him; I recognised the face; I knew it at

once! Don't think I am mistaken, for I swear that it was he."

Mr. Siward took this information with strange quietude; for a second he seemed taken by surprise; he bent his brows and thought for a moment, then a half-scornful smile curled his lips, and he said,

"Look here, Rob, I believe you think you are speaking the truth; at first I thought you had hatched up some lying tale, though the Lord knows what you could have got by it; now I believe you mean well, only you deceive yourself."

"That's impossible—my own eyes and ears——"

"Tut, tut, you have had your say, let me have mine. I have no doubt you did see Colonel Dunstable gesticulating and what you call shouting, just as you say. Well, what of that? Colonel Dunstable talks of going into Parliament, and no doubt, it

being warm weather, he had thrown off his hat and coat, and was practising speechifying, little thinking he was being spied upon, and taken for a ragged lunatic. Don't you know that one of our great men—I forget who—used to put a stone in his mouth and go into the loneliest parts and talk to the rocks and trees, fancying he was haranguing the Parliament? I daresay Colonel Dunstable was playing the same game; as for your sensational bit of seeing the same face at the window, *that* was all fancy; the rest is servants' gossip—a set of prying, misconceiving hounds, spying at their master's heels, inventing lies because they can't understand the truth. There, now you can go; I think I've settled your terrible story into a harmless nothing. However, I shall advise the Colonel to change his household both inside and outside, tenantry or no tenantry."

Robert was so amazed at the strange

colour Mr. Siward threw over the affair that he hardly knew how to answer, what to say, for he knew the old gentleman was obstinately self-opinionated, and was not likely to be driven from his own idea.

“Good heavens, Mr. Siward!” he exclaimed, “do you mean to say you will do nothing—that you will blind your eyes to what is, or, at least, may be, such a terrible truth? Will you take no steps, make no inquiries?”

“I am neither a spy nor a detective,” replied Mr. Siward; “but I’ll tell you what I mean to do. I shall write down to the Colonel, and let him know what graceless rascals he has got about him, and I fancy it will go hard with some of them. These are fine times, when a man can’t indulge in a little harmless eccentricity on his own grounds without being stigmatised as a lunatic.”

“Let me see Margaret—I’ll speak to her, and see if she will take my communication as coolly as you do.”

“You should see her with pleasure, only she doesn’t happen to be here,” said Mr. Siward. “She has gone to spend a few days at Wittelsworth.”

“Gone there!” exclaimed Rob, recoiling as though he had been shot—“there, and alone!”

“Do you suppose I don’t know how to take care of my own daughter?” exclaimed Mr. Siward, impatiently. “No, she has not gone alone—she is under the care of Colonel Dunstable’s sister, the Honourable Mrs. Granville Burke; and as I am quite satisfied, I think you may spare yourself any further anxiety about the matter.”

“If you will do nothing, Margaret must take some steps to save herself,” exclaimed Rob, as he seized his hat and rushed out of

the house before Mr. Siward could utter another word.

It struck Mr. Siward that Rob might be mad enough to go down into Shropshire, and create some unpleasant scene or feeling there. It was too late for him to write that day to Margaret, so he stopped at the telegraph office, on his way to the works, and sent a brief telegram to Margaret—

*“Pay no attention to any mischievous communication you may receive from R. K. Will write fully to-morrow.”*

## CHAPTER XI.

## THE THUNDER BREAKS.

WITTELSWORTH is situated in the mildest and most picturesque part of Shropshire. It stands on an elevated spot in the centre of its own extensive, undulating grounds, and looks down on a wide expanse of the surrounding country, with an uninterrupted view for miles round. Some few acres, spreading immediately round the house, are carefully cultivated and tastefully laid out, and in Spring or Summer-time are aglow with rich-scented and gorgeous-hued flowers. The orchards are well stocked with various kinds of fruit-



trees. There is very little grass or meadow land, and all attempts at cultivation are gradually lost in the rough broken land beyond, where the wild heath and almond-scented furze flourish in luxuriant profusion. The landscape widens, and deepens, and darkens, till the grey hill-tops in the distance seem to touch the skies.

The property for miles round belongs to Colonel Dunstable, and though it is too rugged and broken to be productive, yet it is startlingly picturesque, and the scenery is of singular beauty, varied on every side. Here there are steep, rocky, winding ways, there a soft green glade, with perhaps a miniature lake nestling in its verdant arms; few houses in that, or, indeed, in any part of the country, have such varied, extensive views.

In a small library, lined with oaken book-cases quaintly carved, and furnished with

the rich though somewhat heavy upholstery of olden days, Mrs. Burke and Margaret sat at breakfast. A bright wood fire of scented pine was burning in the grate, and through the wide window they looked out upon the variegated landscape of earth and sky. The atmosphere was clear and bright, and as far as the eye could reach they had a distinct, uninterrupted view. They had arrived only twenty-four hours before, and with dreamy eyes Margaret sat now looking out upon the scene before her, when a servant entered with her father's telegram. That significant yellow envelope gives a momentary alarm to most people, for it is rare that interesting, pleasant news is communicated by electric wires.

In some trepidation Margaret opened and read it. As she did so, a perplexed expression crept into her face. In answer to Mrs. Burke's inquiry "hoping she had re-

ceived no unpleasant news," she handed the telegram to her, saying—

"Read it. I can't in the least understand what it means. R. K. must mean Robert Kestrel. I know no other R. K. How on earth is poor Rob likely to trouble me with news about anything, especially here? Why, he is at work in London. I suppose," she added, after a moment's pause, "it can be nothing relating to—to your brother?" and she lifted a pair of inquiring eyes to Mrs. Burke's face.

"Impossible," she answered. "If Sidney had anything to communicate, he certainly would choose some other medium, if he could not come himself."

"But he may be ill," urged Margaret. "His disappearance is so strange! Yet you don't seem at all anxious."

"No," Mrs. Burke answered, with her sweetest smile. "I have grown so accus-

tomed to Sidney's odd ways. Nothing *he* does ever surprises me."

"But he came down here purposely to prepare for us," rejoined Margaret, "and it does seem strange that he should go away the very day, indeed, the very hour, we were expected to arrive."

"Yes, it is strange, I don't deny that," said Mrs. Burke; "but no doubt he will be able to give a good account of himself."

"No doubt," said Margaret, in a vexed voice. "But, to tell you the truth, Mrs. Burke, I don't feel quite comfortable—it does not seem quite right for us to be staying here, while the host is absent."

"We are here under peculiar circumstances, my dear; remember *you* are regarded as the future mistress of the house, and there is so much to be settled and done before you can absolutely take possession."

"But things are all at a standstill," said

Margaret. "We came down here to have a consultation, and there is nobody to consult with."

"Perhaps he is preparing some pleasant surprise for us, my dear, and has been unavoidably detained by the way."

"Still he could write," persisted Margaret. "It is very unpleasant for me, very. I almost wish I had not come. Suppose he does not return soon, what shall you do?"

"I shall wait till he does," said Mrs. Burke, decidedly. "My dear child, you must not worry yourself about trifles. Sidney once invited a large party down to Wittelsworth—I was among them. When we arrived there had been no preparations for our entertainment, the gates were closed, the house shut up, and we were obliged to drive to Bishopscastle and sleep there. Sidney was always eccentric."

"But that was going beyond eccentricity,"

said Margaret, "beyond apology, it seems to *me*, and beyond excuse."

"Absence of mind is a very common failing among a certain class of men, my dear. I daresay when Sidney is settled and happy, he will grow out of it."

"I am very much annoyed," said Margaret, whose hurt feelings were not to be easily soothed. "He ought not to have forgotten his arrangement with me. If he suffers so much from absence of mind, he may forget his engagement altogether. If he does not return to-morrow, I shall go back, even if I go back alone."

"My dear Margaret, that would never do," exclaimed Mrs. Burke, reproachfully. "You must have patience; depend upon it, matters will come all right. Sidney will give a satisfactory explanation."

"He must," said Margaret, with some dignity. "It will take a great deal to ex-

plain away the annoyance I feel.”—Her thoughts then reverted to the telegram which she still held in her hand.—“I do so wonder what can be the meaning of this.”

“It is no use wondering. I daresay you will have a letter to-morrow. Meanwhile I’ll order the ponies round, and we will go for a nice drive; the fresh air will blow your vexation away.”

The novelty and the beauty of the scenery were a great delight to Margaret; the air was exhilarating, and the skies a cloudless blue. A warm, pleasant glow suffused her cheeks, her eyes brightened, and her pulse quickened with a free glad feeling as the ponies trotted briskly along, carrying them through some of what, in Summer-time, would have been the loveliest part of the country. It was picturesque and attractive now, in its brown barren beauty, for already the soft Spring green crowned the tall trees, and

crept down the hillsides, and touched the dark furze with tender green ; the way was preparing fast for the sweet fresh Spring and blooming Summer, both were travelling swiftly, and soon the whole earth would be dressed in gorgeous and luxuriant raiment.

Margaret's spirits rose, she was keenly alive to the beauties of nature, and enjoyed the drive greatly. The aspect of the country was new to her ; its rough, rugged grandeur differed so entirely from the rather flat, monotonous country surrounding her own home.

Although she said little to Mrs. Burke concerning her father's telegram, she thought of it a great deal ; it must mean something ; her father was not the kind of man who would set the wires in motion without sufficient cause ; but it was no use perplexing herself, she would have a letter from him, no doubt, in the morning, which would



tell her whatever there was to be told.

The day passed away, no Colonel Dunstable appeared. Margaret was more perplexed than ever, and resolved she would leave next day, with or without Mrs. Burke's goodwill.

The weather had been unusually fine and bright during the short time they had been there ; so far she had been fortunate, and had enjoyed more than one solitary ramble, for Mrs. Burke did not know the use of her feet, so far as perambulating the country was concerned ; in fact, like Miss Killmansegg :

“ She hated lanes, she hated fields,  
She hated all the country yields.”

The next morning was fair and bright, earth, air, and skies seemed filled with a message of coming glory. Margaret was up and out early, before the rest of the household was astir ; she carried her sketch-book

under her arm, more from habit than any idea of using it, the weather being too cold to admit of any artistic out-door occupation. She rambled along with the quiet companionship of her own thoughts, which, however, were not of the most agreeable kind, being somewhat contradictory and perplexing. The change that had been revolving round her for the last few weeks had roused her from the torpid state into which she was gradually sinking. She was looking brighter, more like her former self; she seemed to be walking over a bridge between the past and the future, not joyfully, nor yet sadly, only like one walking wonderingly through wonderland.

Sometimes she stooped and hunted, with a forlorn hope, to see if the ghost of a wild violet or golden crocus was peeping out of the earth. With a light step and elastic spirit she had wandered farther away than

she intended, forgetting the time it would take her to return. On looking at her watch she was surprised to find that it was already ten minutes past their breakfast hour; she had gone beyond the sound of the breakfast bell, and calculating roughly, she fancied she must be nearly two miles away from the house. Well, she was feeling a little tired, and, late as it was, she felt she must sit down for a few minutes' rest. She had reached such a pleasant, cosy nook at the foot of a mountainous mass of huge rocky stones, covered with lichen and wild ivy, while before and around her lay scattered broken boulders, some covered with soft green moss, others brown and bare, looking as though some giant, not being able to fix things exactly to his will above, had flung them, as a passionate child flings its playthings, on to the earth below.

Among these she seated herself; the

sketch-book fell at her feet, and with hands clasped upon her knees she gazed up through the bare branches at the bright blue sky, then down at the kaleidoscopic shadows the sunlight threw at her feet. Everything was what is called still and silent round her, for utter silence never is to be found, even in the loneliest places; though there may be no human sounds, no lowing of cattle, no song of birds, no sound of anything to which we can give a name, yet the mass of invisible insect life which fills the air, the stir among the grasses, the murmur of the gentlest breeze, creates a sound which we call silence.

Well, for a time Margaret sat wrapt in this kind of silence; presently she heard a slight sound, a kind of flutter as of a bird uprising from its nest, or a snake serpentining its way through opposing grasses. She looked round quickly, perhaps carelessly, for a second; then a swift change swept

over her face ; she leaned forward breathlessly ; a strange fear distended her eyes ; every touch of colour faded from her face and left it deadly white. As though stricken with a sudden horror, she kept her eyes fixed on one spot—first a hand stretched out from the thick brushwood, then a white face, with flaming eyes and a mass of dark, unkempt hair, peeped through ; she lifted her hands to her eyes, as though to shut out the terrifying spectacle, and uttered a shriek that rang out sharp and clear. She knew the face—knew it in spite of its wild, distorted state—knew it though the light of intellect had died out of it—it was the same, yet not the same, that had so strangely wooed and won her ! It belonged to Sidney Dunstable.

At the sight of her face, the sound of her voice, he leapt out and flew to her side, and exclaimed,

“Hush, Margaret, hush! don't cry out. I've been waiting for you—you've been a long time; but I knew—I knew you would come at last.” He took her hand, passed his arm round her; she felt his breath upon her cheek, and his dark flaming eyes fixed upon her face; she struggled for a moment, and with a violent effort tore herself away, with a loud shriek, and ran; but in a second he overtook her, and this time held her fast, and as she shrieked again, he laid his hand upon her mouth, exclaiming,

“Don't be foolish, Margaret! somebody may hear you! and I don't want the world to come between us, never any more.”

A revelation came to her at once—she knew she was in the grip of a madman. Instinctively she struggled to cry out again, lest his strong hand might stifle her; but the knowledge came to her in a flash that she might shriek till doomsday in this wild

lonely spot and her voice would reach no human ear ; except, indeed, it was just possible that some solitary gamekeeper might be strolling that way ; even if it were so, what could an ordinary man do against the super-human strength of a madman ?

From the very hopeless helplessness of her case, she gathered a certain amount of courage, and hushed down her fears ; some things she had heard respecting the treatment of the insane flashed across her mind ; if she valued her life she must be calm, and neither contradict nor cross him in the least ; every moment gained would be something. She called a ghastly smile to her lips, and veiling the terror that looked from her eyes, she lifted them boldly to his face and said,

“ No one shall come between us ; I will go with you anywhere, but—I cannot walk if you hold me so tightly.”

He released her slightly, but still clasped

her hand in his, and held it as tightly as though it was within an iron vice, and hurried her along.

“Where are we going? where are you taking me?” she asked, in a low, faint voice.

“To heaven, Margaret dear; no one can come to us there, darling—no one—there we shall be safe!” and he burst into a laugh that made her blood run cold. “They tried to part us, I know they did,” he added, with a maniacal chuckle; “but what can man do when God is with us? He told me I should find you here to-day, and I was to bring you with me; I can’t get to heaven—they won’t let me in without you.”

“Yes, yes,” she answered, despairingly; “but let us go home first—just to say good-bye.”

“How?” he exclaimed, clasping her closer with jealous suspicion. “They’d say



I was mad! Why, I'm obliged to hide—to hide away from my own servants because of that! It is a bad, wicked world, darling, and we shall be well out of it."

"But how are we going?—do you know the way?" she inquired, raising her voice almost to a shriek with a despairing hope of being heard.

"Oh, yes; I've planned it all. The lake, see, it is just in sight below there." He pointed forward, and there, enclosed by a mass of dank weeds and ragged bushes, was a large pool of dark, stirless water; it was so shallow that only a flat-bottomed, tiny boat could be paddled across it. "You're not a coward, you won't mind drowning; it is the easiest way." He spoke apologetically, then he shivered and added, "I hate the sight of blood!"

"But it will be so cold—so cold!" she shrieked.

“Hush!” he exclaimed, angrily, “I told you not to make a noise—it will not hurt much; you’re not afraid with me? It is scarcely deep enough, but I’ll hold you down; it will soon be over. Then I will lie down beside you, and we’ll look up through the bright, calm water to the stars.”

“Oh! no, no, not to-day; wait till to-morrow,” cried Margaret, in a choking voice, “perhaps somebody would like to go with us.”

“I don’t want anybody,” he answered, suspiciously; “besides, if they once get you back, I tell you they will want to keep you.” He glanced cunningly round and hurried her along. “They’re sure to look after us to-morrow, and they’ll think they’ve found us there, but it won’t be us at all; *we* shall be up there behind the sun, looking down laughing to see what fools they are!”

Margaret glanced despairingly round her, as with rapid strides he dragged her along. It was vain to struggle, for what could her puny strength avail against him? He muttered low incoherent words that were meant to soothe her as though she were a wayward child; in vain she tried to keep back the dry, choking sobs which only irritated him.

“Hush! do be quiet, Margaret,” he said, angrily; “I’ve told you there is nothing to be afraid of. I never thought you could be such a coward!” He stopped suddenly in his headlong course, and drew her back behind a clump of straggling trees, while he glanced suspiciously round and chuckled to himself. “There’s some one coming,” he whispered, as he clutched her closer to him; “I hear footsteps, but don’t be afraid, they shall not take you from me—they shall never take you alive.”

The steps came nearer; some one was

passing their place of concealment. Margaret, lying there with the madman's grip upon her throat, was dumb from sheer terror; her tongue clove to her mouth, she could not speak, but somehow a shriek longer, louder, wilder than the first broke from her lips. In a flash the whole earth seemed to be broken up and falling round her; she was conscious of a sudden crash, a fierce struggle between two men, while a familiar voice cried out,

“Run, for God's sake, Margaret, run for your life!”

She caught a glimpse of Robert Kestrel's white, hard-set face, and with flying feet ran shrieking through the wood, crying for help, leaving the two men struggling together. She did not know how far she had fled, when two stalwart keepers were attracted by her cries, and hurried towards her.

“This way, this way,” she gasped, and

turned, flying back the way she had come, they following rapidly on her heels; no more words were spoken, but they looked on one another with stricken faces, as though they felt some catastrophe was at hand. Everything was still; there was not a breath, not a sound as they approached the spot where she had left two struggling men. Now there was only one, and he was lying crushed and motionless beneath a huge mass of stone. Whether it had been in a tottering state above, and the madman's strength had sufficed to send it rolling down, or whether it had fallen by mere chance, would never be known. Margaret, in a state of frantic distress, tore at the stones with her weak hands, and the two men united their strength in a futile attempt to move the mass, but it would not stir. Seeing how vain it was to attempt to release him with their unaided strength,

one rushed off in search of whatever could be found that would act as a lever—the weight had fallen on Robert's body so that he could not stir a limb to help himself.

Although he must have been suffering frightfully, not a groan escaped him; only his compressed lips and white drawn face told of the mortal agony that was wrestling with the strong man's strength, and all their efforts were useless to help him. Margaret desisted from sheer exhaustion, and threw herself on her knees beside him, wringing her hands and sobbing piteously.

“Don't, Margaret, don't!” he moaned, in broken gasps, his glazed eyes meeting hers with something of their old tender light. “Your distress hurts me worse than the pain. Don't fret about this—ever—only—take my hand, and hold it till the last, and—if you wouldn't mind—for the first—last time—kiss me.”

Her eyes rained tears upon his face as she stooped down and kissed him more than once, sobbing bitterly.

“Hush, dear—don’t grieve. If I had lived, when should we have been so near together as this?—when would you have kissed me?—never. It is best so. I—I am glad I was in time.”

By this time they had brought some farm implements, the first that came to hand, and, hurrying back, used them as levers. After a few minutes’ exertion of all their strength the huge mass moved. “Once more!” they cried, and bent to their work again; another effort, and it rolled away. As it was lifted from his body a terrible cry, half groan, half shriek, broke from his lips, and tore away his life with it—for when they lifted him up he was dead.

## CHAPTER XII.

## THE CURTAIN FALLS.

**A**N account of the tragic occurrence which closed the last chapter, with all its surrounding circumstances, was at once conveyed to Mr. Siward, who bitterly regretted, and reproached himself for the disbelieving spirit in which he had received poor Robert's warning. If he had acted upon it promptly, the catastrophe might have been averted; but regret and self-reproaches came to him, as they generally come to us all, too late.

Mrs. Burke professed herself to have been ignorant of anything beyond great eccentricity on her brother's part, and solemnly



declared that she had not even a suspicion of his real malady, which, it appeared, had periodically afflicted him since his return from America. With the curious cunning which so often accompanies unsoundness of mind, he generally knew when those attacks were coming on; diseases of the mind, no doubt, like diseases of the body, have their premonitory symptoms. When he felt those coming on, he withdrew from society, went out of the world of men and women, and buried himself during these periods on one of his own estates among his own people, some of whom were too much attached to, and had too much interest in, him to chatter concerning him or his doings, and they blinded or misled the rest.

Occasionally, as we have seen, he went into society and enjoyed social intercourse with the rest of the world; though everybody acknowledged he was odd, yet, as his

oddities did not much concern them, they made allowance for his eccentricities.

In his lucid intervals, he knew how to direct and control his property. He was most liberal to his servants and tenantry, who knew they would never find so good and indulgent a master. When a man possesses a large property, and has no envious relations to interfere with his doings, it is not a very difficult matter, for a time at least, to baffle the lunacy commissioners. The last sad event, however, was soon bruited abroad, and the commissioners at once came to the front, and took all arrangements into their own hands. Colonel Dunstable disappeared out of the fashionable world for ever; though he was allowed to remain on one of his own estates under strict watch and ward.

Margaret was removed home with all possible speed, and lay for many weeks

stricken with brain fever, hovering between life and death for many days. The doctors watched in the gravest doubt and anxiety ; at last the balance was struck in her favour ; youth and strength had fought out the battle and won. Death was scared away, driven far off into the distant years, and by slow, painfully slow degrees, she was led through wearying, dangerous ways up to the table-land of breezy life again.

The May flowers were in bloom before she was able to creep into her garden and enjoy the blessed sunshine once more. Even then she was looking pale and wan, the very ghost of her old blooming self. Coaxed by the soft Spring breezes, the colour slowly dawned and deepened on her cheek, and the light rekindled in her eyes, but all the flashing fire had died out of them, and they smiled gravely, as eyes learn to smile when the soul within has gone

through its baptism of sorrow and suffering. It was a long time before her nervous system recovered from the shock it had sustained with the crowning grief of poor Robert's death. His white face haunted her long after he was laid quietly in the grave.

The events of the past year could never be wiped out of her brain, never. How truly she had realized the truth of his words spoken on that bright Spring day which seemed so long ago. "One man's friendship may be as good as another man's love."

By the time the rich June roses were in bloom, she was able to walk in her old ways. She had learned to school down her rebellious spirit, and to face life at least more resignedly, thinking more of the duties to be done than the pleasures to be gained. However, there were times when she felt that living was dreary work, and looked

with something like a shiver on the long, dead level that seemed to stretch to the end of her days. However, as at the darkest hour we are nearest dawn, there was a sudden rift in the clouds surrounding where the sun glinted through, and soon the clouds were lifted, and the fresh, fair sunlight brightened her path again.

She had gradually resumed her old habits, and one evening, after dinner, having played her father to sleep, she went out for a stroll under the green shadow of the orchard trees, where she had wandered, dreaming and hoping, in the long-ago Spring days.

She paced slowly to and fro, watching the low-lying sun set beyond the meadows, when the silence was broken by the sound of her own name.

“Margaret!” and a man stepped out of the evening shadows, and came eagerly towards her. Before she had time to recognize his

face, she knew that it was *he*—Cecil Slade ! Many times in her waking hours, as well as in her dreamy fancies, she had seen him coming to her, through the evening shadows, under the overhanging trees, just as he was coming now. She was struck by no special surprise, no sudden wonder, it seemed right and natural he should be there. He seemed suddenly to stand still regarding her ; in another moment, with outstretched hands and radiant face, a great sob rising in her throat, she was folded and held closely clasped in his arms, which she had dreaded would never enfold her again.

It never crossed her mind to wonder, or to ask him “why he had come?” it was enough that he was there, and that he loved her still, she knew that by his straining clasp, and the few fond, disjointed words he whispered, calling her his “poor pale Margaret.”

The night closed in ; the stars came out, and found them still wandering to and fro, talking their fond love-talk. They would not go in, they dreaded the sleep that must divide them till the morning. He had so much to say, so much to tell her ; and she ?—well, with quivering lip and sinking heart, she began to tell him how angry she had been, how she had tried to forget him, and—perhaps he did not know that she had even engaged herself to another—she would have gone on to tell him the whole of that sad story, but he stopped her.

“ I know everything, Madge, darling,” he said. “ Don’t speak, don’t think of anything that has pained you.”

“ But it was all my fault, all the fault of my own foolish self ! These dreadful things never would have happened if I had been strong and trustful.”

“ Ay, *if!*—there is a great *If* in all our

lives, darling," he said, soothingly; "but don't cast up your poor little feeble sins to *me*, mine outweigh them a thousand-fold. I was hard and cruel; it would have served me right if you had quite forgotten me; but you haven't, Madge, you haven't!" he added, bending down to look into her loving eyes, and taking his answer from the sweet red lips.

"At the time of your troubles," he added presently, "I was yachting with a friend in the Mediterranean, and on touching at the island of Capri, I accidentally took up a paper which chronicled the death of my brother, who was killed in a brawl in Algiers. This, of course, materially changed my position; he was my elder and only brother, you know, and by his death I inherit not only the family title, but the family property, which he had been fast dissipating.



It is not a large property, Margaret darling, but it is large enough for you and me."

"Oh! Cecil, you know I don't care about money; I would live with you upon nothing."

"I know, you foolish child, but I love you better than you love yourself. You don't know what living on nothing means—I do, for I've tried it. Things are changed now; I can come forward like a man, and not fear to be beaten back by harsh words and worse suspicions; so long as my brother lived, I should have been a beggar."

"Your poor brother, Cecil! I am so sorry that all this good fortune comes to us through his death—it must cast such a gloom on you."

"Not at all," replied Cecil. "My dear girl, good luck comes to most of us through the misfortune or disappointment of another.

I can't profess any very sentimental regrets about my brother, about whom I know very little, and that little not to his advantage. Besides, Madge, I could not regret anything that, without any sin of mine, brings us two together again."

Hand clasped in hand, they walked on in silence, with hearts that were too full for words. The old, old stars, drawn up in their glorious array, shone down upon them, as they have shone for myriad years on a world of lovers who are now dust and ashes.

Mr. Siward rejoiced that a happy fate swept his daughter's wrecked spirit out upon the wide ocean of a joyous life again. He and Cecil Slade became fast friends. Both regretted and apologised for the rough words that had passed between them long ago; neither would excuse himself, but gladly excused the other.

For many a year there had not been such festivities at Clinton as those which closed the wedding-day of Cecil, Lord Erlescliffe, and Margaret Siward.

THE END.



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