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THE ODD WOMEN

VOL. II.

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THE ODD WOMEN

BY

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Author of "New Grub Street," "Demos," &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.



VOL. II.

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THE ODD WOMEN

I.

AT NATURE'S BIDDING.

THE sick girl whom Miss Barfoot had been to see was Monica Madden.

With strange suddenness, after several weeks of steady application to her work, in a cheerful spirit which at times rose to gaiety, Monica became dull, remiss, unhappy; then violent headaches attacked her, and one morning she declared herself unable to rise. Mildred Vesper went to Great Portland Street at the usual hour, and informed Miss Barfoot of her companion's illness. A doctor was summoned; to him it seemed probable that the girl

was suffering from consequences of overstrain at her old employment; there was nervous collapse, hysteria, general disorder of the system. Had the patient any mental disquietude? Was trouble of any kind (the doctor smiled) weighing upon her? Miss Barfoot, unable to answer these questions, held private colloquy with Mildred; but the latter, though she pondered a good deal with corrugated brows, could furnish no information.

In a day or two Monica was removed to her sister's lodgings at Lavender Hill. Mrs. Conisbee managed to put a room at her disposal, and Virginia tended her. Thither Miss Barfoot went on the evening when Everard found her away; she and Virginia, talking together after being with the invalid for a quarter of an hour, agreed that there was considerable improvement, but felt a like uneasiness regarding Monica's state of mind.

"Do you think," asked the visitor,

“that she regrets the step I persuaded her to take?”

“Oh, I *can't* think that! She has been so delighted with her progress each time I have seen her. No, I feel sure it's only the results of what she suffered at Walworth Road. In a very short time we shall have her at work again, and brighter than ever.”

Miss Barfoot was not convinced. After Everard's departure that evening, she talked of the matter with Rhoda.

“I'm afraid,” said Miss Nunn, “that Monica is rather a silly girl. She doesn't know her own mind. If this kind of thing is repeated, we had better send her back to the country.”

“To shop work again?”

“It might be better.”

“Oh, I don't like the thought of that.”

Rhoda had one of her fits of wrathful eloquence.

“Now could one have a better instance

than this Madden family of the crime that middle-class parents commit, when they allow their girls to go without rational training?—Of course I know that Monica was only a little child when they were left orphans; but her sisters had already grown up into uselessness, and their example has been harmful to her all along. Her guardians dealt with her absurdly; they made her half a lady and half a shop-girl. I don't think she'll ever be good for much. And the elder ones will go on just keeping themselves alive; you can see that. They'll never start the school that there's so much talk of. That poor, helpless, foolish Virginia, alone there in her miserable lodging! How can we hope that any one will take her as a companion?—And yet they are capitalists; eight hundred pounds between them. Think what capable women might do with eight hundred pounds."

"I am really afraid to urge them to meddle with the investments."

“Of course ; so am I. One is afraid to do or propose anything. Virginia is starving, *must* be starving. Poor creature ! I can never forget how her eyes shone when I put that joint of meat before her.”

“I do, do wish,” sighed Miss Barfoot, with a pained smile, “that I knew some honest man who would be likely to fall in love with little Monica ! In spite of you, my dear, I would devote myself to making the match. But there’s no one.”

“Oh, I would help,” laughed Rhoda, not unkindly. “She’s fit for nothing else, I’m afraid. We mustn’t look for any kind of heroism in Monica.”

Less than half an hour after Miss Barfoot had left the house at Lavender Hill, Mildred Vesper made a call there. It was about half-past nine ; the invalid, after sitting up since midday, had gone to bed, but could not sleep. Summoned to the house-door, Virginia acquainted Miss Vesper with the state of affairs.

“I think you might see her for a few minutes.”

“I should like to, if you please, Miss Madden,” replied Mildred, who had a rather uneasy look.

She went upstairs and entered the bedroom, where a lamp was burning. At the sight of her friend Monica showed much satisfaction; they kissed each other affectionately.

“Good old girl! I had made up my mind to come back to-morrow, or at all events the day after. It’s so frightfully dull here.—Oh, and I wanted to know if anything—any letter—had come for me.”

“That’s just why I came to see you to-night.”

Mildred took a letter from her pocket, and half averted her face as she handed it.

“It’s nothing particular,” said Monica, putting it away under her pillow. “Thank you, dear.”

But her cheeks had become hot, and she trembled.

“ Monica—”

“ Well ? ”

“ You wouldn't care to tell me about— anything ? You don't think it would make your mind easier ? ”

For a minute Monica lay back, gazing at the wall, then she looked round quickly, with a shamefaced laugh.

“ It's very silly of me not to have told you long before this. But you're so sensible ; I was afraid. I'll tell you everything. Not now, but as soon as I get to Rutland Street. I shall come to-morrow.”

“ Do you think you can ? You look dreadfully bad still.”

“ I sha'n't get any better here,” replied the invalid, in a whisper. “ Poor Virgie does depress me so. She doesn't understand that I can't bear to hear her repeating the kind of things she has heard from Miss Barfoot and Miss Nunn. She tries so hard to look forward hopefully,—but I *know* she is miserable, and it makes me

more miserable still. I oughtn't to have left you; I should have been all right in a day or two, with you to help me. You don't make-believe, Milly; it's all real and natural good spirits. It has done me good only to see your dear old face."

"Oh, you're a flatterer.—And you do really feel better?"

"Very much better. I shall go to sleep very soon."

The visitor took her leave. When, a few minutes after, Monica had bidden good-night to her sister (requesting that the lamp might be left), she read what Mildred had brought.

"MY DEAREST MONICA,"—the missive began—"Why have you not written before this? I have been dreadfully uneasy ever since receiving your last letter. Your headache soon went away, I hope? Why haven't you made another appointment? It is all I can do to keep from breaking my promise and coming to ask

about you. Write at once, I implore you, my dearest. It's no use telling me that I must not use these words of affection; they come to my lips and to my pen irresistibly. You know so well that I love you with all my heart and soul; I can't address you like I did when we first corresponded. My darling! My dear, sweet beautiful little girl—"

Four close pages of this, with scarce room at the end for "E. W." When she had gone through it, Monica turned her face upon the pillow and lay so for a long time. A clock in the house struck eleven; this roused her, and she slipped out of bed to hide the letter in her dress-pocket. Not long after, she was asleep.

The next day, on returning from her work and opening the sitting-room door, Mildred Vesper was greeted with a merry laugh. Monica had been here since three o'clock, and had made tea in readiness for her friend's arrival. She looked very white,

but her eyes gleamed with pleasure, and she moved about the room as actively as before.

“Virgie came with me, but she wouldn’t stay. She says she has a most important letter to write to Alice—about the school, of course. Oh, that school! I do wish they could make up their minds. I’ve told them they may have all my money, if they like.”

“Have you? I should like the sensation of offering hundreds of pounds to some one. It must give a strange feeling of dignity and importance.”

“Oh, only *two* hundred! A wretched little sum.”

“You are a person of large ideas, as I have often told you. Where did you get them, I wonder?”

“Don’t put on that face! It’s the one I like least, of all your many faces. It’s suspicious.”

Mildred went to take off her things, and was quickly at the tea-table. She had a

somewhat graver look than usual, and chose rather to listen than talk.

Not long after tea, when there had been a long and unnatural silence, Mildred making pretence of absorption in a "Treasury," and her companion standing at the window, whence she threw back furtive glances, the thunder of a postman's knock downstairs caused both of them to start, and look at each other in a conscience-stricken way.

"That may be for me," said Monica, stepping to the door. "I'll go and look."

Her conjecture was right. Another letter from Widdowson, still more alarmed and vehement than the last. She read it rapidly on the staircase, and entered the room with sheet and envelope squeezed together in her hand.

"I'm going to tell you all about this, Milly."

The other nodded, and assumed an attitude of sober attention. In relating

her story, Monica moved hither and thither; now playing with objects on the mantelpiece, now standing in the middle of the floor, hands locked nervously behind her. Throughout, her manner was that of defence; she seemed doubtful of herself, and anxious to represent the case as favourably as possible; not for a moment had her voice the ring of courageous passion, nor the softness of tender feeling. The narrative hung together but awkwardly, and in truth gave a very indistinct notion of how she had comported herself at the various stages of the irregular courtship. Her behaviour had been marked by far more delicacy and scruple than she succeeded in representing. Painfully conscious of this, she exclaimed at length:

“I see your opinion of me has suffered. You don't like this story. You wonder how I could do such things.”

“Well, dear, I certainly wonder how you could begin,” Mildred made answer,

with her natural directness, but gently. "Afterwards, of course it was different. When you had once got to be sure that he was a gentleman—"

"I was sure of that so soon," exclaimed Monica, her cheeks still red. "You will understand it much better when you have seen him."

"You wish me to?"

"I am going to write now, and say that I will marry him."

They looked long at each other.

"You are—really?"

"Yes. I made up my mind last night."

"But, Monica,—you mustn't mind my speaking plainly,—I don't think you love him."

"Yes, I love him well enough to feel that I am doing right in marrying him." She sat down by the table, and propped her head on her hand. "He loves me; I can't doubt that. If you could read

his letters, you would see how strong his feeling is."

She shook with the cold induced by excitement; her voice was at moments all but choked.

"But, putting love aside," went on the other, very gravely, "what do you really know of Mr. Widdowson? Nothing whatever but what he has told you himself. Of course you will let your friends make inquiries for you?"

"Yes. I shall tell my sisters, and no doubt they will go to Miss Nunn at once. I don't want to do anything rash. But it will be all right;—I mean, he has told me the truth about everything. You would be sure of that if you knew him."

Mildred, with hands before her on the table, made the tips of her fingers meet. Her lips were drawn in; her eyes seemed looking for something minute on the cloth.

"You know," she said at length, "I

suspected what was going on. I couldn't help."

"Of course you couldn't."

"Naturally I thought it was some one whose acquaintance you had made at the shop."

"How *could* I think of marrying any one of that kind?"

"I should have been grieved."

"You may believe me, Milly; Mr. Widdowson is a man you will respect and like as soon as you know him. He couldn't have behaved to me with more delicacy. Not a word from him, spoken or written, has ever pained me,—except that he tells me he suffers so dreadfully, and of course I can't hear that without pain."

"To respect, and even to like, a man isn't at all the same as loving him."

"I said *you* would respect and like him," exclaimed Monica, with humorous impatience. "I don't want *you* to love him."

Mildred laughed, with constraint.

“I never loved any one yet, dear, and it’s very unlikely I ever shall. But I think I know the signs of the feeling.”

Monica came behind her, and leaned upon her shoulder.

“He loves me so much that he has made me think I *must* marry him. And I am glad of it. I’m not like you, Milly; I can’t be contented with this life. Miss Barfoot and Miss Nunn are very sensible and good people, and I admire them very much; but I *can’t* go their way.—It seems to me that it would be dreadful, dreadful, to live all one’s life alone.—Don’t turn round and snap at me; I want to tell you the truth whilst you can’t see me. Whenever I think of Alice and Virginia, I am frightened; I had rather, oh far rather, kill myself than live such a life at their age. You can’t imagine how miserable they are, really. And I have the same nature as theirs, you know.

Compared with you and Miss Haven, I'm very weak and childish."

After drumming on the table for a moment, with wrinkled brows, Mildred made grave response.

"You must let *me* tell the truth as well. I think you're going to marry with altogether wrong ideas. I think you'll do an injustice to Mr. Widdowson. You will marry him for a comfortable home—that's what it amounts to. And you'll repent it bitterly some day—you'll repent."

Monica raised herself and stood apart.

"For one thing," pursued Mildred, with nervous earnestness, "he's too old. Your habits and his won't suit."

"He has assured me that I shall live exactly the kind of life I please. And that will be what *he* pleases. I feel his kindness to me very much, and I shall do my utmost to repay him."

"That's a very nice spirit ; but I believe married life is no easy thing even when the

people are well matched. I have heard the most dreadful stories of quarrelling and all sorts of unhappiness between people I thought safe from any such dangers.—You *may* be fortunate; I only say that the chances are very much against it, marrying from such motives as you confess.”

Monica drew herself up.

“I haven’t confessed any motive to be ashamed of, Milly.”

“You say you have decided to marry now because you are afraid of never having another chance.”

“No; that’s turning it very unkindly. I only said that *after* I had told you that I did love him. And I do love him. He has made me love him.”

“Then I have no right to say any more. I can only wish you happiness.”

Mildred heaved a sigh, and pretended to give her attention to Maunder.

After waiting irresolutely for some

minutes, Monica looked for note-paper, and took it, together with her inkstand, into the bedroom. She was absent half an hour. On her return, there was a stamped letter in her hand.

“It is going, Milly.”

“Very well, dear. I have nothing more to say.”

“You give me up for lost. We shall see.”

It was spoken light-heartedly. Again she left the room, put on her out-of-door things, and went to post the letter. By this time she began to feel the results of exertion and excitement; headache and tremulous failing of her strength obliged her to go to bed almost as soon as she returned. Mildred waited upon her with undiminished kindness.

“It's all right,” Monica murmured, as her head sank on the pillow. “I feel so relieved and so glad—so happy—now I have done it!”

“Good-night, dear,” replied the other, with a kiss, and went back to her semblance of reading.

Two days later, Monica called unexpectedly at Mrs. Conisbee’s. Being told by that worthy woman that Miss Madden was at home, she ran upstairs and tapped at the door. Virginia’s voice inquired hurriedly who was there, and on Monica’s announcing herself there followed a startled exclamation.

“Just a minute, my love!—Only a minute.”

When the door opened Monica was surprised by a disorder in her sister’s appearance. Virginia had flushed cheeks, curiously vague eyes, and hair ruffled as if she had just risen from a nap. She began to talk in a hurried, disconnected way, trying to explain that she had not been quite well, and was not yet properly dressed.

“What a strange smell!” Monica ex-

claimed, looking about the room. "It's like brandy."

"You notice it?—I have—I was obliged to get—to ask Mrs. Conisbee for— I don't want to alarm you, dear, but I felt rather faint.—Indeed, I thought I should have a fainting fit.—I was obliged to call Mrs. Conisbee— But don't think anything about it. It's all over.—The weather is very trying—"

She laughed nervously, and began to pat Monica's hand. The girl was not quite satisfied, and pressed many questions, but in the end she accepted Virginia's assurances that nothing serious had happened. Then her own business occupied her; she sat down, and said with a smile:

"I have brought you astonishing news. If you didn't faint before, you'll be very likely to do so now."

Her sister exhibited fresh agitation, and begged not to be kept in suspense.

"My nerves are in a shocking state

to-day. It *must* be the weather. What *can* you have to tell me, Monica?"

"I think I sha'n't need to go on with type-writing."

"Why? What are you going to do, child?" the other asked sharply.

"Virgie,—I am going to be married."

The shock was a severe one. Virginia's hands fell, her eyes started, her mouth opened; she became the colour of clay, even her lips losing for the moment all their colour.

"Married?" she at length gasped. "Who—who is it?"

"Some one you have never heard of. His name is Mr. Edmund Widdowson. He is very well off, and has a house at Herne Hill."

"A private gentleman?"

"Yes. He used to be in business, but is retired.—Now, I am not going to tell you much more about him until you have made his acquaintance. Don't ask a lot of

questions. You are to come with me this afternoon to his house. He lives alone, but a relative of his, his sister-in-law, is going to be with him to meet us."

"Oh, but it's so sudden! I can't go to pay a call like that at a moment's notice. Impossible, darling!—What *does* it all mean?—You are going to be married, Monica? I can't understand it. I can't realize it.—Who is this gentlemen? How long—"

"No; you won't get me to tell you more than I have done, till you have seen him."

"But what *have* you told me? I couldn't grasp it. I am quite confused. Mr.—what was the name?"

It took half an hour to familiarize Virginia with the simple fact. When she was convinced of its truth, a paroxysm of delight appeared in her. She laughed, uttered cries of joy, even clapped her hands.

“ Monica to be married!—A private gentleman—a large fortune!—My darling, how shall I ever believe it? Yet I felt so sure that the day would come.—What *will* Alice say?—And Rhoda Nunn? Have you—have you ventured to tell her?”

“ No, that I haven't. I want you to do that. You shall go and see them to-morrow, as it's Sunday.”

“ Oh, the delight! Alice won't be able to contain herself. We always said the day would come.”

“ You won't have any more anxieties, Virgie. You can take the school or not, as you like. Mr. Widdowson—”

“ Oh, my dear,” interposed Virginia, with sudden dignity, “ we shall certainly open the school. We have made up our minds; that is to be our life's work. It is far, far more than a mere means of subsistence. But perhaps we shall not need to hurry. Everything can be matured at our leisure.— If you would only just tell

me, darling, when you were first introduced?"

Monica laughed gaily, and refused to explain. It was time for Virginia to make herself ready, and here arose a new perturbation; what had she suitable for wear under such circumstances? Monica had decked herself a little, and helped the other to make the best of her narrow resources. At four o'clock they set out.

II.

WEDDINGS.

WHEN they reached the house at Herne Hill, the sisters were both in a state of nervous tremor. Monica had only the vaguest idea of the kind of person Mrs. Luke Widdowson would prove to be, and Virginia seemed to herself to be walking in a dream.

“Have you been here often?” whispered the latter, as soon as they came in view of the place. Its aspect delighted her, but the conflict of her emotions was so disturbing that she had to pause and seek the support of her sister’s arm.

“I’ve never been inside,” Monica answered indistinctly. “Come; we shall be unpunctual.”

“ I do wish you would tell me, dear ”—

“ I can't talk, Virgie. Try and keep quiet, and behave as if it were all quite natural.”

This was altogether beyond Virginia's power. It happened most luckily, though greatly to Widdowson's annoyance, that the sister-in-law, Mrs. Luke Widdowson, arrived nearly half an hour later than the time she had appointed. Led by the servant into a comfortable drawing-room, the visitors were received by the master of the house alone ; with a grim smile, the result of his embarrassment, with profuse apologies and a courtesy altogether excessive, Widdowson did his best to put them at their ease, of course with small result. The sisters side by side on a settee at one end of the room, and the host seated far away from them, they talked with scarcely any understanding of what was said on either side,—the weather and the vastness of London serving as

topics, —until of a sudden the door was thrown open, and there appeared a person of such imposing presence that Virginia gave a start and Monica gazed in painful fascination. Mrs Luke was a tall and portly woman in the prime of life, with rather a high colour; her features were handsome, but without much refinement, their expression a condescending good-humour. Her mourning garb, if mourning it could be called, represented an extreme of the prevailing fashion; its glint and rustle inspired awe in the female observer. A moment ago the drawing-room had seemed empty; Mrs. Luke, in her sole person, filled and illumined it.

Widdowson addressed this resplendent personage by her Christian name, his familiarity exciting in Monica an irrational surprise. He presented the sisters to her, and Mrs. Luke, bowing grandly at a distance, drew from her bosom a gold-rimmed *pince - nez*, through which she

scrutinized Monica. The smile which followed might have been interpreted in several senses; Widdowson, alone capable of remarking it, answered with a look of severe dignity.

Mrs. Luke had no thought of apologizing for the lateness of her arrival, and it was evident that she did not intend to stay long. Her purpose seemed to be to make the occasion as informal as possible.

“Do you, by chance, know the Hodgson Bulls?” she asked of her relative, interrupting him in the nervous commonplaces with which he was endeavouring to smooth the way to a general conversation. She had the accent of cultivation, but spoke rather imperiously.

“I never heard of them,” was the cold reply.

“No?—They live somewhere about here. I have to make a call on them. I suppose my coachman will find the place.”

There was an awkward silence. Wid-

dowson was about to say something to Monica, when Mrs. Luke, who had again closely observed the girl through her glasses, interposed in a gentle tone.

“Do you like this neighbourhood, Miss Madden?”

Monica gave the expected answer, her voice sounding very weak and timid by comparison. And so, for some ten minutes, an appearance of dialogue was sustained. Mrs. Luke, though still condescending, evinced a desire to be agreeable; she smiled and nodded in reply to the girl's remarks, and occasionally addressed Virginia with careful civility, conveying the impression, perhaps involuntarily, that she commiserated the shy and shabbily dressed person. Tea was brought in, and after pretending to take a cup, she rose for departure.

“Perhaps you will come and see me some day, Miss Madden,” fell from her with unanticipated graciousness, as she stepped

forward to the girl and offered her hand. "Edmund must bring you—at some quiet time when we can talk. Very glad to have met you—very glad indeed."

And the personage was gone; they heard her carriage roll away from beneath the window. All three drew a breath of relief, and Widdowson, suddenly quite another man, took a place near to Virginia, with whom in a few minutes he was conversing in the friendliest way. Virginia, experiencing a like relief, also became herself; she found courage to ask needful questions, which in every case were satisfactorily met. Of Mrs. Luke there was no word, but when they had taken their leave,—the visit lasted altogether some two hours,—Monica and her sister discussed that great lady with the utmost freedom. They agreed that she was personally detestable.

"But very rich, my dear," said Virginia, in a murmuring voice. "You can see that.

I have met such people before ; they have a manner—oh ! Of course Mr. Widdowson will take you to call upon her.”

“ When nobody else is likely to be there ; that’s what she meant,” remarked Monica coldly.

“ Never mind, my love. You don’t wish for grand society.—I am very glad to tell you that Edmund impresses me very favourably. He is reserved, but that is no fault.—Oh, we must write to Alice at once ! Her surprise ! Her delight ! ”

When, on the next day, Monica met her betrothed in Regent’s Park,—she still lived with Mildred Vesper, but no longer went to Great Portland Street,—their talk was naturally of Mrs. Luke. Widdowson speedily led to the topic.

“ I had told you,” he said, with careful accent, “ that I see very little of her. I can’t say that I like her, but she is a very difficult person to understand, and I fancy she often gives offence when she doesn’t at

all mean it. Still, I hope you were not—displeased?”

Monica avoided a direct answer.

“Shall you take me to see her?” were her words.

“If you will go, dear.—And I have no doubt she will be present at our wedding. Unfortunately, she’s my only relative; or the only one I know anything about. After our marriage I don’t think we shall see much of her”—

“No, I dare say not,” was Monica’s remark. And thereupon they turned to pleasanter themes.

That morning, Widdowson had received from his sister-in-law a scribbled post-card, asking him to call upon Mrs. Luke early the day that followed. Of course this meant that the lady was desirous of further talk concerning Miss Madden. Unwillingly, but as a matter of duty, he kept the appointment. It was at eleven in the morning, and, when admitted

to the flat in Victoria Street which was his relative's abode, he had to wait a quarter of an hour for the lady's appearance.

Luxurious fashion, as might have been expected, distinguished Mrs. Luke's drawing-room. Costly and beautiful things superabounded; perfume soothed the air. Only since her bereavement had Mrs. Widowsen been able to indulge this taste for modern exuberance in domestic adornment. The deceased Luke was a plain man of business, who clung to the fashions which had been familiar to him in his youth; his second wife found a suburban house already furnished, and her influence with him could not prevail to banish the horrors amid which he chose to live: chairs in maroon rep, Brussels carpets of red roses on a green ground, horse-hair sofas of the most uncomfortable shape ever designed, antimacassars everywhere, chimney ornaments of cut glass trembling in sympathy

with the kindred chandeliers. She belonged to an obscure branch of a house that culminated in an obscure Baronetcy; penniless and ambitious, she had to thank her imposing physique for rescue at a perilous age, and though despising Mr. Luke Widdowson for his plebeian tastes, she shrewdly retained the good-will of a husband who seemed no candidate for length of years. The money-maker died much sooner than she could reasonably have hoped, and left her an income of four thousand pounds. Thereupon began for Mrs. Luke a life of feverish aspiration. The Baronetcy to which she was akin had inspired her, even from childhood, with an aristocratic ideal; a handsome widow of only eight and-thirty, she resolved that her wealth should pave the way for her to a titled alliance. Her acquaintance lay among City people, but with the opportunities of freedom it was soon extended to the sphere of what is

known as smart society; her flat in Victoria Street attracted a heterogeneous cluster of pleasure-seekers and fortune-hunters, among them one or two vagrant members of the younger aristocracy. She lived at the utmost pace compatible with technical virtue. When, as shortly happened, it became evident that her income was not large enough for her serious purpose, she took counsel with an old friend great in finance, and thenceforth the excitement of the gambler gave a new zest to her turbid existence. Like most of her female associates, she had free recourse to the bottle; but for such stimulus the life of a smart woman would be physically impossible. And Mrs. Luke enjoyed life, enjoyed it vastly. The goal of her ambition, if all went well in the City, was quite within reasonable hope. She foretasted the day when a vulgar prefix would no longer attach to her name, and when the journals of Society would reflect her rising effulgence.

Widdowson was growing impatient, when his relative at length appeared. She threw herself into a deep chair, crossed her legs, and gazed at him mockingly.

“ Well, it isn't quite so bad as I feared, Edmund.”

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ Oh, she's a decent enough little girl, I can see. But your a silly fellow, for all that. You couldn't have deceived me, you know. If there'd been anything — you understand ?—I should have spotted it at once.”

“ I don't relish this kind of talk,” observed Widdowson acidly. “ In plain English, you supposed I was going to marry some one about whom I couldn't confess the truth.”

“ Of course I did. Now come ; tell me how you got to know her.”

The man moved uneasily, but in the end related the whole story. Mrs. Luke kept nodding, with an amused air.

“ Yes, yes ; she managed it capitally. Clever little witch. Fetching eyes, she has.”

“ If you sent for me to make insulting remarks ”—

“ Bosh !—I’ll come to the wedding, gladly. But you’re a silly fellow. Now why didn’t you come and ask me to find you a wife ? Why, I know two or three girls of really good family who would have jumped, simply jumped, at a man with your money. Pretty girls, too. But you always were so horribly unpractical. Don’t you know, my dear boy, that there are heaps of ladies, real ladies, waiting to marry the first decent man who offers them five or six hundred a year ? Why haven’t you used the opportunities that you knew I could put in your way ? ”

Widdowson rose from his seat, and stood stiffly.

“ I see you don’t understand me in the least. I am going to marry because, for

the first time in my life, I have met the woman whom I can respect and love."

"That's very nice and very proper. But why shouldn't you respect and love a girl who belongs to good society?"

"Miss Madden is a lady," he replied indignantly.

"Oh—yes—to be sure," hummed the other, letting her head loll back. "Well, bring her here some day when we can lunch quietly together.—I see it's no use. You're not a sharp man, Edmund."

"Do you seriously tell me," asked Widdowson, with grave curiosity, "that there are ladies in good society who would have married me just because I have a few hundreds a year?"

"My dear boy, I would get together a round dozen in two or three days. Girls who would make good, faithful wives, in mere gratitude to the man who saved them from—horrors."

“Excuse me if I say that I don’t believe it.”

Mrs. Luke laughed merrily, and the conversation went on in this strain for another ten minutes. At the end, Mrs. Luke made herself very agreeable, praised Monica for her sweet face and gentle manners, and so dismissed the solemn man with a renewed promise to countenance the marriage by her gracious presence.

When Rhoda Nunn returned from her holiday, it wanted but a week to Monica’s wedding, so speedily had everything been determined and arranged. Miss Barfoot, having learnt from Virginia all that was to be known concerning Mr. Widdowson, felt able to hope for the best ; a grave husband, of mature years, and with means more than sufficient, seemed, to the eye of experience, no unsuitable match for a girl such as Monica. This view of the situation caused Rhoda to smile with contemptuous tolerance.

“And yet,” she remarked, “I have heard you speak severely of such marriages.”

“It isn’t the ideal wedlock,” replied Miss Barfoot. “But so much in life is compromise.—After all, she may regard him more affectionately than we imagine”

“No doubt she has weighed advantages. If the prospects you offered her had proved more to her taste, she would have dismissed this elderly admirer. His fate has been decided during the last few weeks. It’s probable that the invitation to your Wednesday evenings gave her a hope of meeting young men.”

“I see no harm if it did,” said Miss Barfoot, smiling. “But Miss Vesper would very soon undeceive her on that point.”

“I hardly thought of her as a girl likely to make chance friendships with men in highways and by-ways.”

“No more did I. And that makes me all the more content with what has come

about. She ran a terrible risk, poor child. —You see, Rhoda, nature is too strong for us.”

Rhoda threw her head back.

“And the delight of her sister! It is really pathetic. The mere fact that Monica is to be married blinds the poor woman to every possibility of misfortune.”

In the course of the same conversation, Rhoda remarked thoughtfully :

“It strikes me that Mr. Widdowson must be of a confiding nature. I don't think men in general, at all events those with money, care to propose marriage to girls they encounter by the way.”

“I suppose he saw that the case was exceptional.”

“How was he to see that?”

“You are severe.—Her shop training accounts for much. The elder sisters could never have found a husband in this way. The revelation must have shocked them at first.”

Rhoda dismissed the subject, lightly, and henceforth showed only the faintest interest in Monica's concerns.

Monica meanwhile rejoiced in her liberation from the work and philosophic severities of Great Portland Street. She saw Widdowson somewhere or other every day, and heard him discourse on the life that was before them, herself for the most part keeping silence. Together they called upon Mrs. Luke, and had luncheon with her; Monica was not displeased with her reception, and began secretly to hope that more than a glimpse of that gorgeous world might some day be vouchsafed to her.

Apart from her future husband, Monica was in a sportive mood, with occasional fits of exhilaration which seemed rather unnatural. She had declared to Mildred her intention of inviting Miss Nunn to the wedding, and her mind was evidently set on carrying out this joke, as she

regarded it. When the desire was intimated by letter, Rhoda replied with a civil refusal: she would be altogether out of place at such a ceremony, but hoped that Monica would accept her heartiest good wishes. Virginia was then despatched to Queen's Road, and appealed so movingly that the prophetess at length yielded. On hearing this, Monica danced with delight, and her companion in Rutland Street could not help sharing her merriment.

The ceremony was performed at a church at Herne Hill. By an odd arrangement,—like everything else in the story of this pair, a result of social and personal embarrassments,—Monica's belongings, including her apparel for the day, were previously despatched to the bridegroom's house, whither, in company with Virginia, the bride went early in the morning. It was one of the quietest of weddings, but all ordinary formalities were complied with,

Widdowson having no independent views on the subject. Present were Virginia, (to give away the bride,) Miss Vesper, (who looked decidedly odd in a pretty dress given her by Monica,) Rhoda Nunn, (who appeared to advantage in a costume of quite unexpected appropriateness,) Mrs. Widdowson, (an imposing figure, evidently feeling that she had got into strange society,) and, as friend of the bridegroom, one Mr. Newdick, a musty and nervous City clerk. Depression was manifest on every countenance, not excepting Widdowson's; the man had such a stern, gloomy look, and held himself with so much awkwardness, that he might have been imagined to stand here on compulsion. For an hour before going to the church, Monica cried and seemed unutterably doleful; she had not slept for two nights; her face was ghastly. Virginia's gladness gave way just before the company assembled, and she too shed many tears.

There was a breakfast, more dismal fooling than even this species of fooling is wont to be. Mr. Newdick, trembling and bloodless, proposed Monica's health; Widowson, stern and dark as ever, gloomily responded; and then, *that* was happily over. By one o'clock the gathering began to disperse. Monica drew Rhoda Nunn aside.

"It was very kind of you to come," she whispered, with half a sob. "It all seems very silly, and I'm sure you have wished yourself away a hundred times. I am really, seriously, grateful to you."

Rhoda put a hand on each side of the girl's face, and kissed her, but without saying a word; and thereupon left the house. Mildred Vesper, after changing her dress in the room used by Monica, as she had done on arriving, went off by train to her duties in Great Portland Street. Virginia alone remained to see the married couple start for their honey-

moon. They were going into Cornwall, and on the return journey would manage to see Miss Madden at her Somerset retreat. For the present, Virginia was to live on at Mrs. Conisbee's, but not in the old way; henceforth she would have proper attendance, and modify her vegetarian diet,—at the express bidding of the doctor, as she explained to her landlady.

Though that very evening Everard Barfoot made a call upon his friends in Chelsea, the first since Rhoda's return from Cheddar, he heard nothing of the event that marked the day. But Miss Nunn appeared to him unlike herself; she was absent, had little to say, and looked, what he had never yet known her, oppressed by low spirits. For some reason or other, Miss Barfoot left the room.

“You are thinking with regret of your old home,” Everard remarked, taking a seat nearer to Miss Nunn.

“No. Why should you fancy that?”

“ Only because you seem rather sad.”

“ One is, sometimes.”

“ I like to see you with that look. —May I remind you that you promised me some flowers from Cheddar? ”

“ Oh, so I did,” exclaimed the other, in a tone of natural recollection. “ I have brought them, scientifically pressed between blotting-paper. I’ll fetch them.”

When she returned, it was together with Miss Barfoot, and the conversation became livelier.

A day or two after this, Everard left town, and was away for three weeks, part of the time in Ireland.

“ I left London for a while,” he wrote from Killarney to his cousin, “ partly because I was afraid I had begun to bore you and Miss Nunn. Don’t you regret giving me permission to call upon you? The fact is, I can’t live without intelligent female society; talking with women, as I talk with you two, is one of my chief

enjoyments. I hope you won't get tired of my visits; in fact, they are all but a necessity to me, as I have discovered since coming away. But it was fair that you should have a rest."

"Don't be afraid," Miss Barfoot replied to this part of his letter. "We are not at all weary of your conversation. The truth is, I like it much better than in the old days. You seem to me to have a healthier mind, and I am quite sure that the society of intelligent women, (we affect no foolish self-depreciation, Miss Nunn and I,) is a good thing for you. Come back to us as soon as you like; I shall welcome you."

It happened that his return to England was almost simultaneous with the arrival from Madeira of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Barfoot. Everard at once went to see his brother, who for the present was staying at Torquay. Ill health dictated this choice of residence; Thomas was still

suffering from the results of his accident; his wife had left him at an hotel, and was visiting relatives in different parts of England. The brothers exhibited much affectionate feeling after their long separation; they spent a week together, and planned for another meeting when Mrs. Thomas should have returned to her husband.

An engagement called Everard back to town. He was to be present at the wedding of his friend Micklethwaite, now actually on the point of taking place. The mathematician had found a suitable house, very small and of very low rental, out at South Tottenham, and thither was transferred the furniture which had been in his bride's possession since the death of her parents; Micklethwaite bought only a few new things. By discreet inquiry, Barfoot had discovered that "Fanny" though musically inclined, would not possess a piano, her old instrument being

quite worn out and not worth the cost of conveyance; thus it came to pass that, a day or two before the wedding, Micklethwaite was astonished by the arrival of an instrument of the Cottage species, mysteriously addressed to a person not yet in existence, Mrs. Micklethwaite.

“You scoundrel!” he cried, when, on the next day, Barfoot presented himself at the house. “This is *your* doing. What the deuce do you mean? A man who complains of poverty!—Well, it’s the greatest kindness I ever received, that’s all. Fanny will be devoted to you. With music in the house, our blind sister will lead quite a different life. Confound it! I want to begin crying. Why, man, I’m not accustomed to receive presents, even as a proxy; I haven’t had one since I was a schoolboy.”

“That’s an audacious statement. When you told me that Miss Wheatley never

allowed your birthday to pass without sending something."

"Oh, Fanny! But I have never thought of Fanny as a separate person. Upon my word, now I think of it, I never have. Fanny and I have been one for ages."

That evening the sisters arrived from their country home. Micklethwaite gave up the house to them, and went to a lodging.

It was with no little curiosity that, on the appointed morning, Barfoot repaired to South Tottenham. He had seen a photograph of Miss Wheatley, but it dated from seventeen years ago. Standing in her presence, he was moved with compassion, and with another feeling more rarely excited in him by a woman's face, that of reverential tenderness. Impossible to recognize in this countenance the features known to him from the portrait. At three-and-twenty she had possessed a

sweet simple comeliness on which any man's eye would have rested with pleasure; at forty she was wrinkled, hollow-cheeked, sallow, indelible weariness stamped upon her brows and lips. She looked much older than Mary Barfoot, though they were just of an age. And all this for want of a little money. The life of a pure, gentle, tender-hearted woman worn away in hopeless longing and in hard struggle for daily bread. As she took his hand and thanked him with an exquisite modesty for the present she had received, Everard felt a lump rise in his throat. He was ashamed to notice that the years had dealt so unkindly with her; fixing his look upon her eyes, he gladdened at the gladness which shone in them, at the soft light which they could still shed forth.

Micklethwaite was probably unconscious of the poor woman's faded appearance. He had seen her from time to time, and always

with the love which idealizes. In his own pathetic phrase, she was simply a part of himself; he no more thought of criticizing her features than of standing before the glass to mark and comment upon his own. It was enough to glance at him as he took his place beside her, the proudest and happiest of men. A miracle had been wrought for him; kind fate, in giving her to his arms, had blotted out those long years of sorrow, and to-day Fanny was the betrothed of his youth, beautiful in his sight as when first he looked upon her.

Her sister, younger by five years, had more regular lineaments, but she too was worn with suffering, and her sightless eyes made it more distressing to contemplate her. She spoke cheerfully, however, and laughed with joy in Fanny's happiness. Barfoot pressed both her hands with the friendliest warmth.

One vehicle conveyed them all to the church, and in half an hour the lady to

whom the piano was addressed had come into being. The simplest of transformations ; no bridal gown, no veil, no wreath ; only the gold ring for symbol of union. And it might have happened nigh a score of years ago ; nigh a score of years lost from the span of human life—all for want of a little money.

“I will say good-bye to you here,” muttered Everard to his friend at the church door.

The married man gripped him by the arm.

“You will do nothing of the kind. Fanny, he wants to be off at once!—You won’t go until you have heard my wife play something on that blessed instrument.”

So all entered the cab again, and drove back to the house. A servant who had come with Fanny from the country, a girl of fifteen, opened the door to them, smiling and curtsying. And all sat together in

happy talk, the blind woman gayest among them; she wished to have the clergyman described to her, and the appearance of the church. Then Mrs. Micklethwaite placed herself at the piano, and played simple, old-fashioned music, neither well nor badly, but to the infinite delight of two of her hearers.

“Mr. Barfoot,” said the sister at length, “I have known your name for a long time, but I little thought to meet you on such a day as this, and to owe you such endless thanks. So long as I can have music, I forget that I can’t see.”

“Barfoot is the finest fellow on earth,” exclaimed Micklethwaite. “At least, he would be if he understood Trilinear Coordinates.”

“Are *you* strong in mathematics, Mrs. Micklethwaite?” asked Everard.

“I? Oh dear, no! I never got much past the Rule of Three. But Tom has forgiven me that long ago.”

“I don't despair of getting you into plane trigonometry, Fanny. We will gossip about sines and co-sines before we die.”

It was said half-seriously, and Everard could not but burst into laughter.

He sat down with them to their plain mid-day meal, and early in the afternoon took his leave. He had no inclination to go home, if the empty flat could be dignified with such a name. After reading the papers at his club, he walked aimlessly about the streets until it was time to return to the same place for dinner. Then he sat with a cigar, dreaming, and at half-past eight went to the Royal Oak Station, and journeyed to Chelsea.

III.

DISCORD OF LEADERS.

A DISAPPOINTMENT awaited him. Miss Barfoot was not well enough to see any one. Had she been suffering long?— he inquired. No; it was only this evening; she had not dined, and was gone to her room. Miss Nunn could not receive him.

He went home, and wrote to his cousin.

The next morning he came upon a passage in the newspaper which seemed to suggest a cause for Miss Barfoot's indisposition. It was the report of an inquest. A girl named Bella Royston had poisoned herself. She was living alone, without occupation, and received visits

only from one lady. This lady, her name Miss Barfoot, had been supplying her with money, and had just found her a situation in a house of business; but the girl appeared to have gone through troubles which had so disturbed her mind that she could not make the effort required of her. She left a few lines addressed to her benefactress, just saying that she chose death rather than the struggle to recover her position.

It was Saturday. He decided to call in the afternoon and see whether Mary had recovered.

Again a disappointment. Miss Barfoot was better, and had been away since breakfast; Miss Nunn was also absent.

Everard sauntered about the neighbourhood, and presently found himself in the gardens of Chelsea Hospital. It was a warm afternoon, and so still that he heard the fall of yellow leaves as he walked hither and thither along the alleys.

His failure to obtain an interview with Miss Nunn annoyed him; but for her presence in the house he would not have got into this habit of going there. As far as ever from harbouring any serious thoughts concerning Rhoda, he felt himself impelled along the way which he had jokingly indicated in talk with Micklethwaite; he was tempted to make love to her as an interesting pastime, to observe how so strong-minded a woman would conduct herself under such circumstances. Had she, or not, a vein of sentiment in her character? Was it impossible to move her as other women are moved?—Meditating thus he looked up, and saw the subject of his thoughts. She was seated a few yards away, and seemingly had not yet become aware of him, for her eyes were on the ground, and troubled reverie appeared in her countenance.

“I have just called at the house, Miss Nunn. How is my cousin to-day?”

She had looked up only a moment before he spoke, and seemed vexed at being thus discovered.

“I believe Miss Barfoot is quite well,” she answered coldly, as they shook hands.

“But yesterday she was not so.”

“A headache, or something of the kind.”

He was astonished. Rhoda spoke with a cold indifference. She had risen, and showed her wish to move from the spot.

“She had to attend an inquest yesterday. Perhaps it rather upset her?”

“Yes, I think it did.”

Unable to adapt himself at once to this singular mood of Rhoda's, but resolved not to let her go before he had tried to learn the cause of it, he walked along by her side. In this part of the Gardens there were only a few nursemaids with children; it would have been a capital place and time for improving his intimacy with the remarkable woman. But possibly she was determined to be rid of him. A

contest between his will and hers would be an amusement decidedly to his taste.

“You also have been disturbed by it, Miss Nunn.”

“By the inquest?” she returned, with barely veiled scorn. “Indeed I have not.”

“Did you know that poor girl?”

“Some time ago.”

“Then it is only natural that her miserable fate should sadden you.”

He spoke as if with respectful sympathy, ignoring what she had said.

“It has no effect whatever upon me,” Rhoda answered, glancing at him with surprise and displeasure.

“Forgive me if I say that I find it difficult to believe that. Perhaps you”—

She interrupted him.

“I don’t easily forgive any one who charges me with falsehood, Mr. Barfoot.”

“Oh, you take it too seriously. I beg your pardon a thousand times.—I was going to say that perhaps you won’t allow

yourself to acknowledge any feeling of compassion in such a case."

"I don't acknowledge what I don't feel.—I will bid you good afternoon."

He smiled at her with all the softness and persuasiveness of which he was capable. She had offered her hand, with cold dignity, and instead of taking it merely for good-bye he retained it.

"You must, you shall forgive me! I shall be too miserable if you dismiss me in this way.—I see that I was altogether wrong. You know all the particulars of the case, and I have only read a brief newspaper account. I am sure the girl didn't deserve your pity."

She was trying to draw her hand away. Everard felt the strength of her muscles, and the sensation was somehow so pleasant that he could not at once release her.

"You do pardon me, Miss Nunn?"

"Please don't be foolish. I will thank you to let my hand go."

Was it possible? Her cheek had coloured, ever so slightly. But with indignation, no doubt, for her eyes flashed sternly at him. Very unwilling, Everard had no choice but to obey the command.

“Will you have the kindness to tell me,” he said more gravely, “whether my cousin was suffering only from that cause?”

“I can’t say,” she added after a pause. “I haven’t spoken with Miss Barfoot for two or three days.”

He looked at her with genuine astonishment.

“You haven’t seen each other?”

“Miss Barfoot is angry with me. I think we shall be obliged to part.”

“To part? What can possibly have happened? Miss Barfoot angry with *you*?”

“If I *must* satisfy your curiosity, Mr. Barfoot, I had better tell you at once that the subject of our difference is the girl

you mentioned. Not very long ago she tried to persuade your cousin to receive her again,—to give her lessons at the place in Great Portland Street, as before she disgraced herself. Miss Barfoot, with too ready good-nature, was willing to do this, but I resisted. It seemed to me that it would be a very weak and wrong thing to do. At the time, she ended by agreeing with me. Now that the girl has killed herself, she throws the blame upon my interference. We had a painful conversation, and I don't think we can continue to live together."

Barfoot listened with gratification. It was much to have compelled Rhoda to explain herself, and on such a subject.

"Nor even to work together?" he asked.

"It is doubtful."

Rhoda still moved forward, but very slowly, and without impatience.

"You will somehow get over this difficulty, I am sure. Such friends as

you and Mary don't quarrel like ordinary unreasonable women. Won't you let me be of use?"

"How?" asked Rhoda, with surprise.

"I shall make my cousin see that she is wrong."

"How do you know that she is wrong?"

"Because I am convinced that *you* must be right. I respect Mary's judgment, but I respect yours still more."

Rhoda raised her head and smiled.

"That compliment," she said, "pleases me less than the one you have uttered without intending it."

"You must explain."

"You said that by making Miss Barfoot see she was wrong you could alter her mind towards me. The world's opinion would hardly support you in that, even in the case of men."

Everard laughed.

"Now this is better. Now we are talking in the old way.—Surely you know

that the world's opinion has no validity for me."

She kept silence.

"But, after all, *is* Mary wrong? I'm not afraid to ask the question now that your face has cleared a little. How angry you were with me! But surely I didn't deserve it. You would have been much more forbearing if you had known what delight I felt when I saw you sitting over there. It is nearly a month since we met, and I couldn't keep away any longer."

Rhoda swept the distance with indifferent eyes.

"Mary was fond of this girl?" he inquired, watching her.

"Yes, she was."

"Then her distress, and even anger, are natural enough. We won't discuss the girl's history; probably I know all that I need to. But whatever her misdoing, you certainly didn't wish to drive her to suicide."

Rhoda deigned no reply.

“All the same,” he continued, in his gentlest tone, “it turns out that you have practically done so. If Mary had taken the girl back, that despair would most likely never have come upon her. Isn’t it natural that Mary should repent of having been guided by you, and perhaps say rather severe things?”

“Natural, no doubt. But it is just as natural for me to resent blame where I have done nothing blameworthy.”

“You are absolutely sure that that is the case?”

“I thought you expressed a conviction that I was in the right?”

There was no smile, but Everard believed that he detected its possibility on the closed lips.

“I have got into the way of always thinking you so,—in questions of this kind. But perhaps you tend to err on the side of severity. Perhaps you make too little allowance for human weakness.”

“ Human weakness is a plea that has been much abused, and generally in an interested spirit.”

This was something like a personal rebuke. Whether she so meant it, Barfoot could not determine. He hoped she did, for the more personal their talk became, the better he would be pleased.

“ I, for one,” he said, “ very seldom urge that plea, whether in my own defence or another’s. But it answers to a spirit we can’t altogether dispense with. Don’t you feel ever so little regret that your severe logic prevailed ?”

“ Not the slightest regret.”

Everard thought this answer magnificent. He had anticipated some evasion. However inappropriately, he was constrained to smile.

“ How I admire your consistency ! We others are poor halting creatures in comparison.”

“ Mr. Barfoot,” said Rhoda suddenly,

“I have had enough of this. If your approval is sincere, I don't ask for it. If you are practising your powers of irony, I had rather you chose some other person. I will go my way, if you please.”

She just bent her head, and left him.

Enough for the present. Having raised his hat and turned on his heels, Barfoot strolled away in a mood of peculiar satisfaction. He laughed to himself. She was certainly a fine creature ;—yes, physically as well. Her out - of - door appearance on the whole pleased him ; she could dress very plainly without disguising the advantages of figure she possessed. He pictured her rambling about the hills, and longed to be her companion on such an expedition ; there would be no consulting with feebleness, as when one sets forth to walk with the every-day woman. What daring topics might come up in the course of a twenty-mile stretch across country ! No Grundyism in Rhoda Nunn ; no simpering,

no mincing of phrases. Why, a man might do worse than secure her for his comrade through the whole journey of life.

Suppose he pushed his joke to the very point of asking her to marry him? Undoubtedly she would refuse; but how enjoyable to watch the proud vigour of her freedom asserting itself!—Yet would not an offer of marriage be too commonplace? Rather propose to her to share his life in a free union, without sanction of forms which neither for her nor him were sanction at all. Was it too bold a thought?

Not if he really meant it. Uttered insincerely, such words would be insult; she would see through his pretence of earnestness, and then farewell to her for ever. But if his intellectual sympathy became tinged with passion—and did he discern no possibility of that? An odd thing were he to fall in love with Rhoda Nunn. Hitherto his ideal had been a widely different type of woman; he had

demanded rare beauty of face, and the charm of a refined voluptuousness. To be sure, it was but an ideal; no woman that approached it had ever come within his sphere. The dream exercised less power over him than a few years ago; perhaps because his youth was behind him. Rhoda might well represent the desire of a mature man, strengthened by modern culture and with his senses fairly subordinate to reason. Heaven forbid that he should ever tie himself to the tame domestic female; and just as little could he seek for a mate among the women of society, the creatures all surface, with empty pates and vitiated blood. No marriage for him, in the common understanding of the word. He wanted neither offspring nor a "home." Rhoda Nunn, if she thought of such things at all, probably desired a union which would permit her to remain an intellectual being; the kitchen, the cradle, and the work-

basket had no power over her imagination. As likely as not, however, she was perfectly content with single life—even regarded it as essential to her purposes. In her face he read chastity ; her eye avoided no scrutiny ; her palm was cold.

One does not break the heart of such a woman. Heart-break is a very old-fashioned disorder, associated with poverty of brain. If Rhoda were what he thought her, she enjoyed this opportunity of studying a modern male, and cared not how far he proceeded in his own investigations, sure that at any moment she could bid him fall back. The amusement was only just beginning. And if for him it became earnest, why, what did he seek but strong experiences ?

Rhoda, in the meantime, had gone home. She shut herself in her bedroom, and remained there until the bell rang for dinner.

Miss Barfoot entered the dining-room

just before her; they sat down in silence, and through the meal exchanged but a few sentences, relative to a topic of the hour which interested neither of them.

The elder woman had a very unhappy countenance; she looked worn out; her eyes never lifted themselves from the table.

Dinner over, Miss Barfoot went to the drawing-room alone. She had sat there about half an hour, brooding, unoccupied, when Rhoda came in and stood before her.

“I have been thinking it over. It isn't right for me to remain here. Such an arrangement was only possible whilst we were on terms of perfect understanding.”

“You must do what you think best, Rhoda,” the other replied gravely, but with no accent of displeasure.

“Yes, I had better take a lodging somewhere. What I wish to know is, whether you can still employ me with any satisfaction?”

“I don't employ you. That is not the word to describe your relations with me. If we must use business language, you are simply my partner.”

“Only your kindness put me into that position. When you no longer regard me as a friend, I am only in your employment.”

“I haven't ceased to regard you as a friend. The estrangement between us is entirely of your making.”

Seeing that Rhoda would not sit down, Miss Barfoot rose and stood by the fireplace.

“I can't bear reproaches,” said the former, “least of all when they are irrational and undeserved.”

“If I reproached you, it was in a tone which should never have given you offence. One would think that I had rated you like a disobedient servant.”

“If *that* had been possible,” answered Rhoda, with a faint smile, “I should never have been here. You said that

you bitterly repented having given way to me on a certain occasion. That was unreasonable ; in giving way, you declared yourself convinced. And the reproach I certainly didn't deserve, for I had behaved conscientiously."

"Isn't it allowed me to disapprove of what your conscience dictates ?"

"Not when you have taken the same view, and acted upon it.—I don't lay claim to many virtues, and I haven't that of meekness. I could never endure anger ; my nature resents it."

"I did wrong to speak angrily, but indeed I hardly knew what I was saying. I had suffered a terrible shock. I loved that poor girl ; I loved her all the more for what I had seen of her since she came to implore my help. Your utter coldness—it seemed to me inhuman—I shrank from you. If your face had shown ever so little compassion—"

"I *felt* no compassion."

“ No. You have hardened your heart with theory. Guard yourself, Rhoda ! To work for women one must keep one’s womanhood. You are becoming—you are wandering as far from the true way— Oh, much further than Bella did ! ”

“ I can’t answer you. When we argued about our differences in a friendly spirit, all was permissible ; now if I spoke my thought, it would be mere harshness and cause of embitterment. I fear all is at an end between us. I should perpetually remind you of this sorrow.”

There was a silence of some length. Rhoda turned away, and stood in reflection.

“ Let us do nothing hastily,” said Miss Barfoot. “ We have more to think of than our own feelings.”

“ I have said that I am quite willing to go on with my work, but it must be on a different footing. The relation between us can no longer be that of equals. I am content to follow your

directions.—But your dislike of me will make this impossible.”

“Dislike? You misunderstand me wretchedly. I think rather it is you who dislike me, as a weak woman with no command of her emotions.”

Again they ceased from speech. Presently Miss Barfoot stepped forward.

“Rhoda, I shall be away all to-morrow; I may not return to London until Monday morning. Will you think quietly over it all?—Believe me, I am not angry with you, and as for disliking you—what nonsense are we talking! But I can’t regret that I let you see how painfully your behaviour impressed me. That hardness is not natural to you. You have encouraged yourself in it, and you are warping a very noble character.”

“I wish only to be honest. Where you felt compassion, I felt indignation.”

“Yes; we have gone through all that. The indignation was a forced, exaggerated

sentiment. You can't see it in that light, perhaps. But try to imagine for a moment that Bella had been your sister—"

"That is confusing the point at issue," Rhoda exclaimed irritably. "Have I ever denied the force of such feelings? My grief would have blinded me to all larger considerations, of course. But she was happily *not* my sister, and I remained free to speak the simple truth about her case. It isn't personal feeling that directs a great movement in civilization. If you were right, I also was right. You should have recognized the inevitable discord of our opinions at that moment."

"It didn't seem to me inevitable."

"I should have despised myself if I could have affected sympathy."

"Affected—yes."

"Or have really felt it. That would have meant that I did not know myself. I should never again have dared to speak on any grave subject."

Miss Barfoot smiled sadly.

“How young you are! Oh, there is far more than ten years between our ages, Rhoda! In spirit you are a young girl, and I an old woman.—No, no; we *will not* quarrel. Your companionship is far too precious to me, and I dare to think that mine is not without value for you. Wait till my grief has had its course; then I shall be more reasonable, and do you more justice.”

Rhoda turned towards the door, lingered but without looking back, and so left the room.

Miss Barfoot was absent as she had announced, returning only in time for her duties in Great Portland Street on Monday morning. She and Rhoda then shook hands, but without a word of personal reference. They went through the day's work as usual.

This was the day of the month on which Miss Barfoot would deliver her four o'clock

address. The subject had been announced a week ago: "Woman as an invader." An hour earlier than usual, work was put aside, and seats were rapidly arranged for the small audience; it numbered only thirteen, the girls already on the premises and a few who came specially. All were aware of the tragedy in which Miss Barfoot had recently been concerned; her air of sadness, so great a contrast to that with which she was wont to address them, they naturally attributed to this cause.

As always, she began in the simplest conversational tone. Not long since, she had received an anonymous letter, written by some clerk out of employment, abusing her roundly for her encouragement of female competition in the clerkly world. The taste of this epistle was as bad as its grammar, but they should hear it; she read it all through. Now, whoever the writer might be, it seemed pretty clear

that he was not the kind of person with whom one could profitably argue ; no use in replying to *him*, even had he given the opportunity. For all that, his uncivil attack had a meaning, and there were plenty of people ready to urge his argument in more respectable terms. "They will tell you that, in entering the commercial world, you not only unsex yourselves, but do a grievous wrong to the numberless men struggling hard for bare sustenance. You reduce salaries, you press into an already over-crowded field, you injure even your own sex by making it impossible for men to marry, who, if they earned enough, would be supporting a wife." To-day, continued Miss Barfoot, it was not her purpose to debate the economic aspects of the question. She would consider it from another point of view, repeating, perhaps, much that she had already said to them on other occasions, but doing so because these thoughts had

just now very strong possession of her mind.

This abusive correspondent, who declared that he was supplanted by a young woman who did his work for smaller payment, doubtless had a grievance. But, in the miserable disorder of our social state, one grievance had to be weighed against another, and Miss Barfoot held, that there was much more to be urged on behalf of women who invaded what had been exclusively the men's sphere, than on behalf of the men who began to complain of this invasion.

“They point to half-a-dozen occupations which are deemed strictly suitable for women. Why don't we confine ourselves to this ground? Why don't I encourage girls to become governesses, hospital nurses, and so on? You think I ought to reply that already there are too many applicants for such places. It would be true, but I don't care to make

use of the argument, which at once involves us in a debate with the out-crowded clerk. No; to put the truth in a few words, I am not chiefly anxious that you should *earn money*, but that women in general shall become *rational and responsible human beings*.

“Follow me carefully. A governess, a nurse, may be the most admirable of women. I will dissuade no one from following those careers who is distinctly fitted for them. But these are only a few out of the vast number of girls who must, if they are not to be despicable persons, somehow find serious work. Because I myself have had an education in clerkship, and have most capacity for such employment, I look about for girls of like mind, and do my best to prepare them for work in offices. And (here I must become emphatic once more) I am *glad* to have entered on this course. I am *glad* that I can show girls the way to a career which my opponents call unwomanly.

“Now see why. Womanly and womanish are two very different words, but the latter, as the world uses it, has become practically synonymous with the former. A womanly occupation means, practically, an occupation that a man disdains. And here is the root of the matter. I repeat that I am not first of all anxious to keep you supplied with daily bread. I am a troublesome, aggressive, revolutionary person. I want to do away with that common confusion of the words womanly and womanish, and I see very clearly that this can only be effected by an armed movement, an invasion by women of the spheres which men have always forbidden us to enter. I am strenuously opposed to that view of us set forth in such charming language by Mr. Ruskin,—for it tells on the side of those men who think and speak of us in a way the reverse of charming. Were we living in an ideal world, I think women would not go to sit all day in

offices. But the fact is that we live in a world as far from ideal as can be conceived. We live in a time of warfare, of revolt. If woman is no longer to be womanish, but a human being of powers and responsibilities, she must become militant, defiant. She must push her claims to the extremity.

“An excellent governess, a perfect hospital nurse, do work which is invaluable ; but for our cause of emancipation they are no good ; nay, they are harmful. Men point to them, and say : Imitate these, keep to your proper world.—Our proper world is the world of intelligence, of honest effort, of moral strength. The old types of womanly perfection are no longer helpful to us. Like the Church Service, which to all but one person in a thousand has become meaningless gabble by dint of repetition, these types have lost their effect. They are no longer educational. We have to ask ourselves : What course of training

will wake women up, make them conscious of their souls, startle them into healthy activity ?

“ It must be something new, something free from the reproach of womanliness. I don't care whether we crowd out the men or not. I don't care *what* results, if only women are made strong and self-reliant and nobly independent ! The world must look to its concerns. Most likely we shall have a revolution in the social order greater than any that yet seems possible. Let it come, and let *us* help its coming. When I think of the contemptible wretchedness of women enslaved by custom, by their weakness, by their desires, I am ready to cry : Let the world perish in tumult rather than things go on in this way ! ”

For a moment her voice failed. There were tears in her eyes. The hearers, most of them, understood what made her so passionate ; they exchanged grave looks.

“ Our abusive correspondent shall do as best he can. He suffers for the folly of men in all ages. We can't help it. It is very far from our wish to cause hardship to any one, but we ourselves are escaping from a hardship that has become intolerable. We are educating ourselves. There must be a new type of woman, active in every sphere of life: a new worker out in the world, a new ruler of the home. Of the old ideal virtues we can retain many, but we have to add to them those which have been thought appropriate only in men. Let a woman be gentle, but at the same time let her be strong; let her be pure of heart, but none the less wise and instructed. Because we have to set an example to the sleepy of our sex, we must carry on an active warfare, must be invaders. Whether woman is the equal of man, I neither know nor care. We are not his equal in size, in weight, in muscle, and, for

all I can say, we may have less power of brain. That has nothing to do with it. Enough for us to know that our natural growth has been stunted. The mass of women have always been paltry creatures, and their paltriness has proved a curse to men.—So, if you like to put it in this way, we are working for the advantage of men as well as for our own. Let the responsibility for disorder rest on those who have made us despise our old selves. At any cost—at any cost—we will free ourselves from the heritage of weakness and contempt !”

The assembly was longer than usual in dispersing. When all were gone, Miss Barfoot listened for a footstep in the other room. As she could detect no sound, she went to see if Rhoda was there or not.

Yes ; Rhoda was sitting in a thoughtful attitude. She looked up, smiled, and came a few paces forward.

“ It was very good.”

“ I thought it would please you.”

Miss Barfoot drew nearer, and added :

“ It was addressed to you. It seemed to me that you had forgotten how I really thought about these things.”

“ I have been ill-tempered,” Rhoda replied. “ Obstinacy is one of my faults.”

“ It is.”

Their eyes met.

“ I believe,” continued Rhoda, “ that I ought to ask your pardon. Right or wrong, I behaved in an unmannerly way.”

“ Yes, I think you did.”

Rhoda smiled, bending her head to the rebuke.

“ And there’s the last of it,” added Miss Barfoot. “ Let us kiss and be friends.”

IV.

MOTIVES MEETING.

WHEN Barfoot made his next evening call, Rhoda did not appear. He sat for some time in pleasant talk with his cousin, no reference whatever being made to Miss Nunn; then at length, beginning to fear that he would not see her, he inquired after her health. Miss Nunn was very well, answered the hostess, smiling.

“Not at home this evening?”

“Busy with some kind of study, I think.”

Plainly, the difference between these women had come to a happy end, as Barfoot foresaw that it would. He thought it better to make no mention of his meeting with Rhoda in the Gardens.

“That was a very unpleasant affair that I saw your name connected with last week,” he said presently.

“It made me very miserable,—ill indeed for a day or two.”

“That was why you couldn’t see me?”

“Yes.”

“But in your reply to my note you made no mention of the circumstances.”

Miss Barfoot kept silence; frowning slightly, she looked at the fire near which they were both sitting, for the weather had become very cold.

“No doubt,” pursued Everard, glancing at her, “you refrained out of delicacy—on my account, I mean.”

“Need we talk of it?”

“For a moment, please.—You are very friendly with me nowadays, but I suppose your estimate of my character remains very much the same as years ago?”

“What is the use of such questions?”

“I ask for a distinct purpose. You can’t regard me with any respect?”

“To tell you the truth, Everard, I know nothing about you. I have no wish to revive disagreeable memories, and I think it quite possible that you may be worthy of respect.”

“So far, so good. Now, in justice, please answer me another question. How have you spoken of me to Miss Nunn?”

“How can it matter?”

“It matters a good deal. Have you told her any scandal about me?”

“Yes, I have.”

Everard looked at her with surprise.

“I spoke to Miss Nunn about you,” she continued, “before I thought of your ever coming here. Frankly, I used you as an illustration of the evils I abominate.”

“You are a courageous and plain-spoken woman, cousin Mary,” said Everard, laughing a little. “Couldn’t you have found some other example?”

There was no reply.

“So,” he proceeded, “Miss Nunn regards me as a proved scoundrel?”

“ I never told her the story. I made known the general grounds of my dissatisfaction with you, that was all.”

“ Come, that’s something. I’m glad you didn’t amuse her with that unedifying bit of fiction.”

“ Fiction ? ”

“ Yes, fiction,” said Everard bluntly. “ I am not going into details ; the thing’s over and done with, and I chose my course at the time. But it’s as well to let you know that my behaviour was grossly misrepresented. In using me to point a moral, you were grievously astray. I shall say no more. If you can believe me, do ; if you can’t, dismiss the matter from your mind.”

There followed a silence of some moments. Then, with a perfectly calm manner, Miss Barfoot began to speak of a new subject. Everard followed her lead. He did not stay much longer, and, on leaving, asked to be remembered to Miss Nunn.

A week later, he again found his cousin alone. He now felt sure that Miss Nunn was keeping out of his way. Her parting from him in the Gardens had been decidedly abrupt, and possibly it signified more serious offence than at the time he attributed to her. It was so difficult to be sure of anything in regard to Miss Nunn. If another woman had acted thus, he would have judged it coquetry. But perhaps Rhoda was quite incapable of anything of that kind. Perhaps she took herself so very seriously that the mere suspicion of banter in his talk had moved her to grave resentment. Or again, she might be half ashamed to meet him after confessing her disagreement with Miss Barfoot; on recovery from ill temper, (unmistakable ill temper it was,) she had seen her behaviour in an embarrassing light. Between these various conjectures he wavered, whilst talking with Mary.

But he did not so much as mention Miss Nunn's name.

Some ten days went by, and he paid a call at the hour sanctioned by society, five in the afternoon ; it being Saturday. One of his reasons for coming at this time was the hope that he might meet other callers, for he felt curious to see what sort of people visited the house. And this wish was gratified. On entering the drawing-room, whither he was led by the servant straightway, after the manner of the world, he found not only his cousin and her friend, but two strangers, ladies. A glance informed him that both of these were young and good-looking, one being a type that particularly pleased him, dark, pale, with very bright eyes.

Miss Barfoot received him as any hostess would have done. She was her cheerful self once more, and in a moment introduced him to the lady with whom she had been talking, the dark one, by

name Mrs. Widdowson. Rhoda Nunn, sitting apart with the second lady, gave him her hand, but at once resumed her conversation.

With Mrs. Widdowson he was soon chatting in his easy and graceful way, Miss Barfoot putting in a word now and then. He saw that she had not long been married; a pleasant diffidence, and the maidenly glance of her bright eyes, indicated this. She was dressed very prettily, and seemed aware of it.

“We went to hear the new opera at the Savoy last night,” she said to Miss Barfoot, with a smile of remembered enjoyment.

“Did you? Miss Nunn and I were there.”

Everard gazed at his cousin with humorous incredulity.

“Is it possible?” he exclaimed. “You were at the Savoy?”

“Where is the impossibility? Why shouldn't Miss Nunn and I go to the theatre?”

“I appeal to Mrs. Widdowson. She also was astonished.”

“Yes, indeed I was, Miss Barfoot!” exclaimed the younger lady, with a merry little laugh. “I hesitated before speaking of such a frivolous entertainment.”

Lowering her voice, and casting a smile in Rhoda’s direction, Miss Barfoot replied :

“I have to make a concession occasionally, on Miss Nunn’s account. It would be unkind never to allow her a little recreation.”

The two at a distance were talking earnestly, with grave countenances. In a few moments they rose, and the visitor came towards Miss Barfoot to take her leave. Thereupon Everard crossed to Miss Nunn.

“Is there anything very good in the new Gilbert and Sullivan opera?” he asked.

“Many good things. You really haven’t been yet?”

“No—I’m ashamed to say.”

“Do go this very evening, if you can get a seat. Which part of the theatre do you prefer?”

His eye rested on hers, but he could detect no irony.

“I’m a poor man, you know. I have to be content with the cheap places.—Which do you like best, the Savoy operas or the burlesques at the Gaiety?”

A few more such questions and answers, of laboured commonplace or strained flippancy, and Everard, after searching his companion’s face, broke off with a laugh.

“There now,” he said, “we have talked in the approved five o’clock way. Precisely the dialogue I heard in a drawing-room yesterday. It goes on day after day, year after year, through the whole of people’s lives.”

“You are on friendly terms with such people?”

“I am on friendly terms with people of every kind.” He added, in an undertone, “I hope I may include you, Miss Nunn?”

But to this she paid no attention. She was looking at Monica and Miss Barfoot, who had just risen from their seats. They approached, and presently Barfoot found himself alone with the familiar pair.

“Another cup of tea, Everard?” asked his cousin.

“Thank you.—Who was the young lady you didn’t introduce me to?”

“Miss Haven,—one of our pupils.”

“Does she think of going into business?”

“She has just got a place in the publishing department of a weekly paper.”

“But really—from the few words of her talk that fell upon my ear I should have thought her a highly educated girl.”

“So she is,” replied Miss Barfoot. “What is your objection?”

“Why doesn’t she aim at some better position?”

Miss Barfoot and Rhoda exchanged smiles.

“But nothing could be better for her. Some day she hopes to start a paper of her own, and to learn all the details of such business is just what she wants.—Oh, you are still very conventional, Everard. You meant she ought to take up something graceful and pretty—something ladylike.”

“No, no. It’s all right. I thoroughly approve. And when Miss Haven starts her paper, Miss Nunn will write for it.”

“I hope so,” assented his cousin.

“You make me feel that I am in touch with the great movements of our time. It’s delightful to know you. But come now, isn’t there any way in which I could help?”

Mary laughed.

“None whatever, I’m afraid.”

“Well,—‘They also serve who only stand and wait.’”

If Everard had pleased himself, he

would have visited the house in Queen's Road every other day. As this might not be, he spent a good deal of his time in other society, not caring to read much or otherwise occupy his solitude. Starting with one or two acquaintances in London, people of means and position, he easily extended his social sphere. Had he cared to marry, he might, notwithstanding his poverty, have wooed with fair chance in a certain wealthy family, where two daughters, the sole children, plain but well-instructed girls, waited for the men of brains who should appreciate them. So rare in society, these men of brains, and alas! so frequently deserted by their wisdom when it comes to choosing a wife. It being his principle to reflect on every possibility, Barfoot of course asked himself whether it would not be reasonable to approach one or other of these young women, the Miss Brissendens. He needed a larger income; he wanted to travel in

a more satisfactory way than during his late absence. Agnes Brissenden struck him as a very calm and sensible girl; not at all likely to marry any one but the man who would be a suitable companion for her, and probably disposed to look on marriage as a permanent friendship, which must not be endangered by feminine follies. She had no beauty, but mental powers above the average,—superior, certainly, to her sister's.

It was worth thinking about, but in the meantime he wanted to see much more of Rhoda Nunn. Rhoda he was beginning to class with women who are attractive both physically and mentally. Strange how her face had altered to his perception since the first meeting. He smiled now when he beheld it, smiled as a man does when his senses are pleasantly affected. He was getting to know it so well, to be prepared for its constant changes, to watch for certain

movements of brows or lips when he had said certain things. That forcible holding of her hand had marked a stage in progressive appreciation ; since then he felt a desire to repeat the experiment.

“ Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
Imprison her soft hand, and let her rave—”

The lines occurred to his memory, and he understood them better than heretofore. It would delight him to enrage Rhoda, and then to detain her by strength, to overcome her senses, to watch her long lashes droop over the eloquent eyes. But this was something very like being in love, and he by no means wished to be seriously in love with Miss Nunn.

It was another three weeks before he had an opportunity of private talk with her. Trying a Sunday afternoon, about four, he found Rhoda alone in the drawing-room ; Miss Barfoot was out of

town. Rhoda's greeting had a frank friendliness which she had not bestowed upon him for a long time ; not, indeed, since they met on her return from Cheddar. She looked very well, readily laughed, and seemed altogether in a coming-on disposition. Barfoot noticed that the piano was open.

“ Do you play ? ” he inquired. “ Strange that I should still have to ask the question.”

“ Oh, only a hymn on Sunday,” she answered, off-hand.

“ A hymn ? ”

“ Why not ? I like some of the old tunes very much. They remind me of the golden age.”

“ In your own life, you mean.”

She nodded.

“ You have once or twice spoken of that time as if you were not quite happy in the present.”

“ Of course I am not quite happy.

What woman is? I mean, what woman above the level of a petted pussy-cat?"

Everard was leaning towards her on the head of the couch where he sat. He gazed into her face fixedly.

"I wish it were in my power to remove some of your discontents. I would, more gladly than I can tell you."

"You abound in good nature, Mr. Barfoot," she replied, laughing. "But unfortunately you can't change the world."

"Not the world at large. But might I not change your views of it—in some respects?"

"Indeed I don't see how you could. I think I had rather have my own view than any you might wish to substitute for it."

In this humour she seemed more than ever a challenge to his manhood. She was armed at all points. She feared nothing that he might say. No flush of apprehension; no nervous tremor; no

weak self-consciousness. Yet he saw her as a woman, and desirable.

“My views are not ignoble,” he murmured.

“I hope not. But they are the views of a man.”

“Man and woman ought to see life with much the same eyes.”

“Ought they? Perhaps so. I am not sure. But they never will in our time.”

“Individuals may. The man and woman who have thrown away prejudice and superstition. You and I, for instance.”

“Oh, those words have such different meanings. In your judgment, I should seem full of idle prejudice.”

She liked this conversation; he read pleasure in her face, saw in her eyes a glint of merry defiance. And his pulses throbbed the quicker for it.

“You have a prejudice against *me*, for instance.”

“Pray, did you go to the Savoy?” inquired Rhoda absently.

“I have no intention of talking about the Savoy, Miss Nunn. It is tea-cup time, but as yet we have the room to ourselves.”

Rhoda went and rang the bell.

“The tea-cups shall come at once.”

He laughed slightly, and looked at her from beneath drooping lids. Rhoda went on with talk of trifles, until the tea was brought and she had given a cup. Having emptied it at two draughts, he resumed his former leaning position.

“Well, you were saying that you had a prejudice against me. Of course my cousin Mary is accountable for that. Mary has used me rather ill. Before ever you saw me, I represented to your mind something very disagreeable indeed. That was too bad of my cousin.”

Rhoda, sipping her tea, had a cold, uninterested expression.

“I didn't know of this,” he proceeded, “when we met that day in the Gardens, and when I made you so angry.”

“I wasn't disposed to jest about what had happened.”

“But neither was I. You quite misunderstood me.—Will you tell me how that unpleasantness came to an end?”

“Oh yes. I admitted that I had been ill-mannered and obstinate.”

“How delightful!—Obstinate? I have a great deal of that in my character. All the active part of my life was one long fit of obstinacy. As a lad, I determined on a certain career, and I stuck to it in spite of conscious unfitness, in spite of a great deal of suffering, out of sheer obstinacy. I wonder whether Mary ever told you that.”

“She mentioned something of the kind, once.”

“You could hardly believe it, I dare say? I am a far more reasonable being

now. I have changed in so many respects that I hardly know my old self when I look back on it. Above all, in my thoughts about women. If I had married during my twenties, I should have chosen, as the average man does, some simpleton—with unpleasant results. If I marry now, it will be a woman of character and brains. Marry in the legal sense I never shall. My companion must be as independent of forms as I am myself.”

Rhoda looked into her tea-cup for a second or two, then said with a smile :

“ You also are a reformer ? ”

“ In that direction.”

He had a difficulty in suppressing signs of nervousness. The bold declaration had come without forethought, and Rhoda’s calm acceptance of it delighted him.

“ Questions of marriage,” she went on to say, “ don’t interest me much ; but this particular reform doesn’t seem very practical. It is trying to bring about an ideal

state of things whilst we are yet struggling with elementary obstacles."

"I don't advocate this liberty for all mankind. Only for those who are worthy of it."

"And what"—she laughed a little—"are the sure signs of worthiness? I think it would be very needful to know them."

Everard kept a grave face.

"True. But a free union presupposes equality of position. No honest man would propose it, for instance, to a woman incapable of understanding all it involved, or incapable of resuming her separate life if that became desirable. I admit all the difficulties. One must consider those of feeling, as well as the material. If my wife should declare that she must be released, I might suffer grievously, but being a man of some intelligence I should admit that the suffering couldn't be helped; the bru-

tality of enforced marriage doesn't seem to me an alternative worth considering. It wouldn't seem so to any woman of the kind I mean."

Would she have the courage to urge one grave difficulty that he left aside?—No. He fancied her about to speak, but she ended by offering him another cup of tea.

"After all, that is *not* your ideal?" he said.

"I haven't to do with the subject at all," Rhoda answered, with perhaps a trace of impatience. "My work and thought are for the women who do not marry—the 'odd women' I call them. They alone interest me. One mustn't undertake too much."

"And you resolutely class yourself with them?"

"Of course I do."

"And therefore you have certain views of life which I should like to change. You are doing good work, but I had

rather see any other woman in the world devote her life to it. I am selfish enough to wish—”

The door opened, and the servant announced :

“ Mr. and Mrs. Widdowson.”

With perfect self-command, Miss Nunn rose and stepped forward. Barfoot, rising more slowly, looked with curiosity at the husband of the pretty, black-browed woman whom he had already met. Widdowson surprised and amused him. How had this stiff, stern fellow with the grizzled beard won such a wife? Not that Mrs. Widdowson seemed a remarkable person, but certainly it was an ill-assorted union.

She came and shook hands. As he spoke a few natural words, Everard chanced to notice that the husband's eye was upon him, and with what a look ! If ever a man declared in his countenance the worst species of jealous temper, Mr.

Widdowson did so. His fixed smile became sardonic.

Presently, Barfoot and he were introduced. They had nothing to say to each other, but Everard maintained a brief conversation just to observe the man. Turning at length, he began to talk with Mrs. Widdowson, and, because he was conscious of the jealous eye, assumed an especial sprightliness, an air of familiar pleasantry, to which the lady responded, but with a nervous hesitation.

The arrival of these people was an intense annoyance to him. Another quarter of an hour, and things would have come to an exciting pass between Rhoda and himself; he would have heard how she received a declaration of love. Rhoda's self-possession notwithstanding, he believed that he was not without power over her. She liked to talk with him, enjoyed the freedom he allowed himself in choice of subject. Perhaps no man before had ever

shown an appreciation of her qualities as woman. But she would not yield, was in no real danger from his love-making. Nay, the danger was to his own peace. He felt that resistance would intensify the ardour of his wooing, and possibly end by making him a victim of genuine passion. Well, let her enjoy that triumph, if she were capable of winning it.

He had made up his mind to outstay the Widdowsons, who clearly would not make a long call. But the fates were against him. Another visitor arrived, a lady named Cosgrove, who settled herself as if for at least an hour. Worse than that, he heard her say to Rhoda :

“ Oh, then do come and dine with us. Do, I beg ! ”

“ I will, with pleasure, ” was Miss Nunn’s reply. “ Can you wait and take me with you ? ”

Useless to stay longer. As soon as the Widdowsons had departed he went up to

Rhoda and silently offered his hand. She scarcely looked at him, and did not in the least return his pressure.

Rhoda dined at Mrs. Cosgrove's, and was home again at eleven o'clock. When the house was locked up, and the servants had gone to bed, she sat in the library, turning over a book that she had brought from her friend's house. It was a volume of essays, one of which dealt with the relations between the sexes in a very modern spirit, treating the subject as a perfectly open one, and arriving at unorthodox conclusions. Mrs. Cosgrove had spoken of this dissertation with lively interest. Rhoda perused it very carefully, pausing now and then to reflect.

In his reading of her mind, Barfoot came near the truth.

No man had ever made love to her ; no man, to her knowledge, had ever been tempted to do so. In certain moods she derived satisfaction from this thought,

using it to strengthen her life's purpose ; having passed her thirtieth year, she might take it as a settled thing that she would never be sought in marriage, and so could shut the doors on every instinct tending to trouble her intellectual decisions. But these instincts sometimes refused to be thus treated. As Miss Barfoot told her, she was very young for her years, young in physique, young in emotion. As a girl she had dreamt passionately, and the fires of her nature, though hidden beneath aggregations of moral and mental attainment, were not yet smothered. An hour of lassitude filled her with despondency, none the less real because she was ashamed of it. If only she had once been loved, like other women—if she had listened to an offer of devotion, and rejected it—her heart would be more securely at peace. So she thought. Secretly she deemed it a hard thing never to have known that common

triumph of her sex. And, moreover, it took away from the merit of her position as a leader and encourager of women living independently. There might be some who said, or thought, that she made a virtue of necessity.

Everard Barfoot's advances surprised her not a little. Judging him as a man wholly without principle, she supposed at first that this was merely his way with all women, and resented it as impertinence. But even then she did not dislike the show of homage; what her mind regarded with disdain, her heart was all but willing to feed upon, after its long hunger. Barfoot interested her, and not the less because of his evil reputation. Here was one of the men for whom women—doubtless more than one—had sacrificed themselves; she could not but regard him with sexual curiosity. And her interest grew, her curiosity was more haunting, as their acquaintance became a sort of

friendship; she found that her moral disapprobation wavered, or was altogether forgotten. Perhaps it was to compensate for this that she went the length of outraging Miss Barfoot's feelings on the death of Bella Royston.

Certainly she thought with much frequency of Barfoot, and looked forward to his coming. Never had she wished so much to see him again as after their encounter in Chelsea Gardens, and on that account she forced herself to hold aloof when he came. It was not love, nor the beginning of love; she judged it something less possible to avow. The man's presence affected her with a perturbation which she had no difficulty in concealing at the time, though afterwards it distressed and shamed her. She took refuge in the undeniable fact that the quality of his mind made an impression upon her, that his talk was sympathetic. Miss Barfoot submitted to this influence; she confessed that her

cousin's talk had always had a charm for her.

Could it be that this man reciprocated, and more than reciprocated, her complex feeling? To-day, only accident had prevented him from making an avowal of love—unless she strangely mistook him. All the evening she had dwelt on this thought; it grew more and more astonishing. Was he worse than she had imagined? Under cover of independent thought, of serious moral theories, did he conceal mere profligacy and heartlessness? It was an extraordinary thing to have to ask such questions in relation to herself. It made her feel as if she had to learn herself anew, to form a fresh conception of her personality. She the object of a man's passion!

And the thought was exultant. Even thus late, then, the satisfaction of vanity had been granted her—nay, not of vanity alone

He must be sincere. What motive could he possibly have for playing a part? Might it not be true that he was a changed man in certain respects, and that a genuine emotion at length had control of him? If so, she had only to wait for his next speech with her in private; she could not misjudge a lover's pleading.

The interest would only be that of comedy. She did not love Everard Barfoot, and saw no likelihood of ever doing so; on the whole, a subject for thankfulness. Nor could he seriously anticipate an assent to his proposal for a free union; in declaring that legal marriage was out of the question for him, he had removed his love-making to the region of mere ideal sentiment. But if he loved her, these theories would sooner or later be swept aside; he would plead with her to become his legal wife.

To that point she desired to bring him. Offer what he might, she would not accept

it; but the secret chagrin that was upon her would be removed. Love would no longer be the privilege of other women. To reject a lover in so many respects desirable, whom so many women might envy her, would fortify her self-esteem, and enable her to go forward in the chosen path with firmer tread.

It was one o'clock; the fire had died out and she began to shiver with cold. But a trembling of joy at the same time went through her limbs; again she had the sense of exultation, of triumph.—She would not dismiss him peremptorily. He should prove the quality of his love, if love it were. Coming so late, the experience must yield her all it had to yield of delight and contentment.

V.

THE JOYS OF HOME.

MONICA and her husband, on leaving the house in Queen's Road, walked slowly in the eastward direction. Though night had fallen, the air was not unpleasant; they had no object before them, and for five minutes they occupied themselves with their thoughts. Then Widdowson stopped.

"Shall we go home again?" he asked, just glancing at Monica, then letting his eyes stray vaguely in the gloom.

"I should like to see Milly, but I'm afraid I can hardly take you there to call with me."

"Why not?"

“It’s a very poor little sitting-room, you know, and she might have some friend.—Isn’t there anywhere you could go, and meet me afterwards?”

Frowning, Widdowson looked at his watch.

“Nearly six o’clock. There isn’t much time.”

“Edmund,—suppose you go home, and let me come back by myself? You wouldn’t mind, for once? I should like so much to have a talk with Milly. If I got back about nine or half-past, I could have a little supper, and that’s all I should want.”

He answered abruptly.

“Oh, but I can’t have you going about alone at night.”

“Why not?” answered Monica, with a just perceptible note of irritation. “Are you afraid I shall be robbed or murdered?”

“Nonsense. But you mustn’t be alone.”

“Didn’t I always use to be alone?”

He made an angry gesture.

“I have begged you not to speak of that. Why do you say what you know is disagreeable to me? You used to do all sorts of things that you never ought to have been obliged to do, and it’s very painful to remember it.”

Monica, seeing that people were approaching, walked on, and neither spoke until they had nearly reached the end of the road.

“I think we had better go home,” Widdowson at length remarked.

“If you wish it,—but I really don’t see why I shouldn’t call on Milly, now that we are here.”

“Why didn’t you speak of it before we left home? You ought to be more methodical, Monica. Each morning I always plan how my day is to be spent, and it would be much better if you would do the same. Then you wouldn’t be so restless and uncertain.”

“If I go to Rutland Street,” said Monica, without heeding this admonition, “couldn’t you leave me there for an hour?”

“What in the world am I to do?”

“I should have thought you might walk about.—It’s a pity you don’t know more people, Edmund. It would make things so much pleasanter for you.”

In the end, he consented to see her safely as far as Rutland Street, occupy himself for an hour, and come back for her. They went by cab, which was dismissed in Hampstead Road. Widdowson did not turn away until he had ocular proof of his wife’s admittance to the house where Miss Vesper lived, and even then he walked no farther than the neighbouring streets, returning about every ten minutes to watch the house from a short distance, as though he feared Monica might have some project of escape. His look was very bilious; trudging mechanically hither and

thither where fewest people were to be met, he kept his eyes on the ground, and clumped to a dismal rhythm with the end of his walking-stick. In the three or four months since his marriage, he seemed to have grown older; he no longer held himself so upright.

At the very moment agreed upon, he was waiting close by the house. Five minutes passed; twice he had looked at his watch, and he grew excessively impatient, stamping as if it were necessary to keep himself warm. Another five minutes, and he uttered a nervous ejaculation. He had all but made up his mind to go and knock at the door, when Monica came forth.

“ You haven’t been waiting here long, I hope ? ” she said cheerfully.

“ Ten minutes. But it doesn’t matter.”

“ I’m very sorry. We were talking on — ”

“ Yes, but one must always be punctual. I wish I could impress that upon you.

Life without punctuality is quite impossible."

"I'm very sorry, Edmund. I will be more careful. Please don't lecture me, dear.—How shall we go home?"

"We had better take a cab to Victoria. No knowing how long we may have to wait for a train when we get there."

"Now don't be so grumpy. Where have you been all the time?"

"Oh, walking about. What else was I to do?"

On the drive they held no conversation. At Victoria they were delayed about half an hour before a train started for Herne Hill; Monica sat in a waiting-room, and her husband trudged about the platform, still clumping rhythmically with his stick.

Their Sunday custom was to dine at one o'clock, and at six to have tea. Widdowson hated the slightest interference with domestic routine, and

he had reluctantly indulged Monica's desire to go to Chelsea this afternoon. Hunger was now added to his causes of discontent.

“Let us have something to eat at once,” he said on entering the house. “This disorder really won't do: we must manage better somehow.”

Without replying, Monica rang the dining-room bell, and gave orders.

Little change had been made in the interior of the house since its master's marriage. The dressing-room adjoining the principal bed-chamber was adapted to Monica's use, and a few ornaments were added to the drawing-room. Unlike his deceased brother, Widdowson had the elements of artistic taste; in furnishing his abode, he took counsel with approved decorators, and at moderate cost had made himself a home which presented no original features, but gave no offence to a cultivated eye. The first sight of the rooms pleased

Monica greatly. She declared that all was perfect, nothing need be altered. In those days, if she had bidden him spend a hundred pounds on reconstruction, the lover would have obeyed, delighted to hear her express a wish.

Though competence had come to him only after a lifetime of narrow means, Widdowson felt no temptation to parsimony. Secure in his all-sufficing income, he grudged no expenditure that could bring himself or his wife satisfaction. On the wedding tour in Cornwall, Devon, and Somerset,—it lasted about seven weeks,—Monica learnt, among other things less agreeable, that her husband was generous with money.

He was anxious she should dress well, though only, as Monica soon discovered, for his own gratification. Soon after they had settled down at home, she equipped herself for the cold season, and Widdowson cared little about the price so long as

the effect of her new costumes was pleasing to him.

“You are making a butterfly of me,” said Monica merrily, when he expressed strong approval of a bright morning dress that had just come home.

“A beautiful woman,” he replied, with the nervous gravity which still possessed him when complimenting her, or saying tender things, “a beautiful woman ought to be beautifully clad.”

At the same time, he endeavoured to impress her with the gravest sense of a married woman's obligations. His raptures, genuine enough, were sometimes interrupted in the oddest way if Monica chanced to utter a careless remark of which he could not strictly approve, and such interruptions frequently became the opportunity for a long and solemn review of the wifely status. Without much trouble he had brought her into a daily routine which satisfied him. During the whole

of the morning, she was to be absorbed in household cares. In the afternoon he would take her to walk or drive, and the evening he wished her to spend either in drawing-room or library, occupied with a book. Monica soon found that his idea of wedded happiness was that they should always be together. Most reluctantly he consented to her going any distance alone, for whatever purpose. Public entertainments he regarded with no great favour, but when he saw how Monica enjoyed herself at concert or theatre, he made no objection to indulging her at intervals of a fortnight or so; his own fondness for music made this compliance easier. He was jealous of her forming new acquaintances; indifferent to society himself, he thought his wife should be satisfied with her present friends, and could not understand why she wished to see them so often.

The girl was docile, and for a time he

imagined that there would never be conflict between his will and hers. Whilst enjoying their holiday they naturally went everywhere together, and were scarce an hour out of each other's presence, day or night. In quiet spots by the sea-shore, when they sat in solitude, Widdowson's tongue was loosened, and he poured forth his philosophy of life with the happy assurance that Monica would listen passively. His devotion to her proved itself in a thousand ways ; week after week he grew, if anything, more kind, more tender ; yet in his view of their relations he was unconsciously the most complete despot, a monument of male autocracy. Never had it occurred to Widdowson that a wife remains an individual, with rights and obligations independent of her wifely condition. Everything he said presupposed his own supremacy ; he took for granted that it was his to direct, hers to be guided. A display of energy, purpose, ambition,

on Monica's part, which had no reference to domestic pursuits, would have gravely troubled him; at once he would have set himself to subdue, with all gentleness, impulses so inimical to his idea of the married state. It rejoiced him that she spoke with so little sympathy of the principles supported by Miss Barfoot and Miss Nunn; these persons seemed to him well-meaning, but grievously mistaken; Miss Nunn he judged "unwomanly," and hoped in secret that Monica would not long remain on terms of friendship with her. Of course his wife's former pursuits were an abomination to him; he could not bear to hear them referred to.

"Woman's sphere is the home, Monica. Unfortunately, girls are often obliged to go out and earn their living, but this is unnatural, a necessity which advanced civilization will altogether abolish. You shall read John Ruskin; every word he says about women is good and precious.

If a woman can neither have a home of her own, nor find occupation in any one else's, she is deeply to be pitied; her life is bound to be unhappy. I sincerely believe that an educated woman had better become a domestic servant than try to imitate the life of a man."

Monica seemed to listen attentively, but before long she accustomed herself to wear this look whilst in truth she was thinking her own thoughts. And as often as not they were of a nature little suspected by her prosing companion.

He believed himself the happiest of men. He had taken a daring step, but fortune smiled upon him. Monica was all he had imagined in his love-fever; knowledge of her had as yet brought to light no single untruth, no trait of character that he could condemn. That she returned his love he would not and could not doubt. And something she said to him one day, early in their

honeymoon, filled up the measure of his bliss.

“What a change you have made in my life, Edmund! How much I have to thank you for!”

That was what he had hoped to hear. He had thought it, himself; had wondered whether Monica saw her position in this light. And when the words actually fell from her lips, he glowed with joy. This, to his mind, was the perfect relation of wife to husband. She must look up to him as her benefactor, her providence. It would have pleased him still better if she had not possessed a penny of her own, but happily Monica seemed never to give a thought to the sum at her disposal.

Surely he was the easiest of men to live with. When he first became aware that Monica suffered an occasional discontent, it caused him troublous surprise. As soon as he understood that she desired more freedom of movement, he became anxious,

suspicious, irritable. Nothing like a quarrel had yet taken place between them, but Widdowson began to perceive that he must exert authority in a way he had imagined would never be necessary. All his fears, after all, were not groundless. Monica's undomestic life, and perhaps the association with those Chelsea people, had left results upon her mind. By way of mild discipline, he first of all suggested a closer attention to the affairs of the house. Would it not be well if she spent an hour a day in sewing or fancy work? Monica so far obeyed as to provide herself with some plain needlework, but Widdowson, watching with keen eye, soon remarked that her use of the needle was only a feint. He lay awake o' nights, pondering darkly.

On the present evening he was more decidedly out of temper than ever hitherto. He satisfied his hunger hurriedly and in silence. Then, observing that Monica ate

only a few morsels, he took offence at this.

“I’m afraid you are not well, dear. You have had no appetite for several days.”

“As much as usual, I think,” she replied absently.

They went into the library, commonly their resort of an evening. Widdowson possessed several hundred volumes of English literature, most of them the works which are supposed to be indispensable to a well-informed man, though very few men even make a pretence of reading them. Self-educated, Widdowson deemed it his duty to make acquaintance with the great, the solid authors. Nor was his study of them affectation. For the poets he had little taste; the novelists he considered only profitable in intervals of graver reading; but history, political economy, even metaphysics, genuinely appealed to him. He had always two or

three solid books on hand, each with its marker ; he studied them at stated hours, and always sitting at a table, a note-book open beside him. A little work once well-known, Todd's "Student's Manual," had formed his method and inspired him with zeal.

To-night, it being Sunday, he took down a volume of Barrow's Sermons. Though not strictly orthodox in religious faith, he conformed to the practices of the Church of England, and since his marriage had been more scrupulous on this point than before ; he abhorred unorthodoxy in a woman, and would not on any account have suffered Monica to surmise that he had his doubts concerning any article of the Christian faith. Like most men of his kind, he viewed religion as a precious and powerful instrument for directing the female conscience. Frequently he read aloud to his wife, but this evening he showed no intention of doing so. Monica,

however, sat unoccupied. After glancing at her once or twice, he said reprovingly :

“ Have you finished your Sunday book ? ”

“ Not quite. But I don't care to read just now.”

The silence that followed was broken by Monica herself.

“ Have you accepted Mrs. Luke's invitation to dinner ? ” she asked.

“ I have declined it,” was the reply, carelessly given.

Monica bit her lip.

“ But why ? ”

“ Surely we needn't discuss that over again, Monica.”

His eyes were still on the book, and he stirred impatiently.

“ But,” urged his wife, “ do you mean to break with her altogether ? If so, I think it's very unwise, Edmund. What an opinion you must have of me, if you think I can't see people's faults ! I know it's very true, all you say about her. But

she wishes to be kind to us, I'm sure,—and I like to see something of a life so different from our own."

Widdowson drummed on the floor with his foot. In a few moments, ignoring Monica's remarks, he stroked his beard, and asked, with a show of casual interest :

"How was it you knew that Mr. Barfoot?"

"I had met him before,—when I went there on the Saturday."

Widdowson's eyes fell; his brow was wrinkled.

"He's often there, then?"

"I don't know. Perhaps he is. He's Miss Barfoot's cousin, you know."

"You haven't met him more than once before?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, it was only that he seemed to speak as if you were old acquaintances."

"That's his way, I suppose."

Monica had already learnt that the

jealousy which Widdowson so often betrayed before their marriage still lurked in his mind. Perceiving why he put these questions, she could not look entirely unconcerned, and the sense of his eye being upon her caused her some annoyance.

“You talked to him, didn’t you?” she said, changing her position in the deep chair.

“Oh, the kind of talk that is possible with a perfect stranger. I suppose he is in some profession?”

“I really don’t know.—Why, Edmund? Does he interest you?”

“Only that one likes to know something about the people that are introduced to one’s wife,” Widdowson answered rather acridly.

Their bedtime was half-past ten. Precisely at that moment, Widdowson closed his book,—glad to be relieved from the pretence of reading,—and walked over the

lower part of the house to see that all was right. He had a passion for routine ; every night, before going upstairs, he did a number of little things in unvarying sequence : changed the calendar for next day, made perfect order on his writing-table, wound up his watch, and so on. That Monica could not direct her habits with like exactitude was frequently a distress to him ; if she chanced to forget any most trivial detail of daily custom, he looked very solemn, and begged her to be more vigilant.

Next morning, after breakfast, as Monica stood by the dining-room window and looked rather cheerlessly at a leaden sky, her husband came towards her as if he had something to say. She turned, and saw that his face no longer wore the austere expression which had made her miserable last night, and even during the meal this morning.

“ Are we friends ? ” he said, with the

attempt at playfulness which always made him look particularly awkward.

“Of course we are,” Monica answered, smiling, but not regarding him.

“Didn’t he behave gruffly last night to his little girl?”

“Just a little.”

“And what can the old bear do to show that he’s sorry?”

“Never be gruff again.”

“The old bear is sometimes an old goose as well, and torments himself in the silliest way. Tell him so, if ever he begins to behave badly.—Isn’t it account-book morning?”

“Yes. I’ll come to you at eleven.”

“And if we have a nice, quiet, comfortable week, I’ll take you to the Crystal Palace concert next Saturday.”

Monica nodded cheerfully, and went off to look after her housekeeping.

The week was in all respects what Widdowson desired. Not a soul came

to the house ; Monica went to see no one. Save on two days it rained, sleeted, drizzled, fogged ; on those two afternoons, they had an hour's walk. Saturday brought no improvement of the atmosphere, but Widdowson was in his happiest mood ; he cheerfully kept his promise about the concert. As they sat together at night, his contentment overflowed in tenderness like that of the first days of marriage.

“ Now why can't we always live like this ? What have we to do with other people ? Let us be everything to each other, and forget that any one else exists.”

“ I can't help thinking that's a mistake,” Monica ventured to reply. “ For one thing, if we saw more people, we should have so much more to talk about when we are alone.”

“ It's better to talk about ourselves. I shouldn't care if I never again saw any living creature but you.—You see, the old

bear loves his little girl better than she loves him."

Monica was silent.

"Isn't it true? You don't feel that my company would be enough for you?"

"Would it be right if I ceased to care for every one else? There are my sisters. I ought to have asked Virginia to come to-morrow; I'm sure she thinks I neglect her, and it must be dreadful living all alone like she does."

"Haven't they made up their mind yet about the school? I'm sure it's the right thing for them to do. If the venture were to fail, and they lost money, we would see that they never came to want."

"They're so timid about it. And it wouldn't be nice, you know, to feel they were going to be dependent upon us for the rest of our lives.—I had better go and see Virgie to-morrow morning, and bring her back for dinner."

"If you like," Widdowson assented

slowly. "But why not send a message, and ask her to come here?"

"I had rather go. It makes a change for me."

This was a word Widdowson detested. Change, on Monica's lips, always seemed to mean a release from his society. But he swallowed his dissatisfaction, and finally consented to the arrangement.

Virginia came to dinner, and stayed until nightfall. Thanks to her sister's kindness, she was better clad than in former days, but her face signified no improvement of health. The enthusiasm with which Rhoda Nunn had inspired her appeared only in fitful affectations of interest when Monica pressed her concerning the projected undertaking down in Somerset. In general she had a dreamy reticent look, and became uncomfortable when any one gazed at her inquiringly. Her talk was of the most insignificant things; this afternoon she spent nearly half an hour in

describing a kitten which Mrs. Conisbee had given her; care of the little animal appeared to have absorbed her whole attention for many days past.

Another visitor to-day was Mr. Newdick, the City clerk who had been present at Monica's wedding. He and Mrs. Luke Widdowson were the sole friends of her husband that Monica had seen. Mr. Newdick enjoyed coming to Herne Hill; always lugubrious to begin with, he gradually cheered up, and by the time for departure was loquacious. But he had the oddest ideas of talk suitable to a drawing-room; had he been permitted, he would have held forth to Monica by the hour on the history of the business firm which he had served for a quarter of a century. This subject alone could animate him. His anecdotes were as often as not quite unintelligible, save to people of City experience. For all that, Monica did not dislike the man; he was

a good, simple, unselfish fellow, and to her he behaved with exaggeration of respect.

A few days later, Monica had a sudden fit of illness. Her marriage, and the long open-air holiday, had given her a much healthier appearance than when she was at the shop; but this present disorder resembled the attack she had suffered in Rutland Street. Widdowson hoped that it signified a condition for which he was anxiously waiting; that, however, did not seem to be the case. The medical man who was called in asked questions about the patient's mode of life. Did she take enough exercise? Had she wholesome variety of occupation? At these inquiries Widdowson inwardly raged. He was tormented with a suspicion that they resulted from something Monica had said to the doctor.

She kept her bed for three or four days, and on rising could only sit by the fireside,

silent, melancholy. Widdowson indulged his hope, though Monica herself laughed it aside, and even showed annoyance if he returned to the subject. Her temper was strangely uncertain ; some chance word in a conversation would irritate her beyond endurance, and after an outburst of petulant displeasure she became obstinately mute. At other times she behaved with such exquisite docility and sweetness that Widdowson was beside himself with rapture.

After a week of convalescence, she said one morning :

“ Couldn't we go away somewhere ? I don't think I shall ever be quite well, staying here.”

“ It's wretched weather,” replied her husband.

“ Oh, but there are places where it wouldn't be like this.—You don't mind the expense, do you, Edmund ?”

“ Expense ? Not I, indeed ! But—were you thinking of abroad ?”

She looked at him with eyes that had suddenly brightened.

“Oh! would it be possible?—People do go out of England in the winter.”

Widdowson plucked at his grizzled beard, and fingered his watch-chain. It was a temptation. Why not take her away to some place where only foreigners and strangers would be about them? Yet the enterprise alarmed him.

“I have never been out of England,” he said, with misgiving.

“All the more reason why we should go. I think Miss Barfoot could advise us about it. She has been abroad, I know, and she has so many friends.”

“I don’t see any need to consult Miss Barfoot,” he replied stiffly. “I am not such a helpless man, Monica.”

Yet a feeling of inability to grapple with such an undertaking as this grew on him the more he thought of it. Naturally, his mind busied itself with such

vague knowledge as he had gathered of those places in the South of France, where rich English people go to escape their own climate: Nice, Cannes. He could not imagine himself setting forth to these regions. Doubtless it was possible to travel thither, and live there when one arrived, without a knowledge of French; but he pictured all sorts of humiliating situations resulting from his ignorance. Above everything he dreaded humiliation in Monica's sight; it would be intolerable to have her comparing him with men who spoke foreign languages, and were at home on the Continent.

Nevertheless, he wrote to his friend Newdick, and invited him to dine, solely for the purpose of talking over this question with him in private. After dinner he broached the subject. To his surprise, Newdick had ideas concerning Nice and Cannes and such places. He had heard about them from the junior

partner of his firm, a young gentleman who talked largely of his experiences abroad.

“An immoral lot there,” he said, smiling and shaking his head. “Queer goings on.”

“Oh, but that’s among the foreigners, isn’t it?”

Thereupon Mr. Newdick revealed his acquaintance with English literature.

“Did you ever read any of Ouida’s novels?”

“No, I never did.”

“I advise you to, before you think of taking your wife over there. She writes a great deal about those parts. People get mixed up so, it seems. You couldn’t live by yourself. You have to eat at public tables, and you’d have all sorts of people trying to make acquaintance with Mrs. Widdowson. They’re a queer lot, I believe.”

He abandoned the thought, at once and utterly. When Monica learnt this,—he

gave only vague and unsatisfactory reasons,—she fell back into her despondent mood. For a whole day she scarcely uttered a word.

On the next day, in the dreary afternoon, they were surprised by a call from Mrs. Luke. The widow—less than ever a widow in externals—came in with a burst of exuberant spirits, and began to scold the moping couple like an affectionate parent.

“When are you silly young people coming to an end of your honeymoon? Do you sit here day after day, and call each other pretty names? Really it’s very charming in its way. I never knew such an obstinate case.—Monica, my black-eyed beauty, change your frock, and come with me to look up the Hodgson Bulls. They’re quite too awful; I can’t face them alone; but I’m bound to keep in with them.—Be off, and let me pitch into your young man for daring to refuse my dinner.

Don't you know, sir, that my invitations are like those of Royalty—polite commands?"

Widdowson kept silence, waiting to see what his wife would do. He could not with decency object to her accompanying Mrs. Luke, yet hated the thought of such a step. A grim smile on his face, he sat stiffly, staring at the wall. To his inexpressible delight, Monica, after a short hesitation, excused herself; she was not well; she did not feel able—

"Oh!" laughed the visitor. "I see, I see! Do just as you like, of course. But if Edmund has any *nous*"—this phrase she had learnt from a young gentleman, late of Oxford, now of Tattersall's and elsewhere—"he won't let you sit here in the dumps. You *are* in the dumps, I can see."

The vivacious lady did not stay long. When she had rustled forth again to her carriage, Widdowson broke into a paean of

amorous gratitude. What could he do to show how he appreciated Monica's self-denial on his behalf? For a day or two he was absent rather mysteriously, and in the meantime made up his mind, after consultation with Newdick, to take his wife for a holiday in Guernsey.

Monica, when she heard of this project, was at first moderately grateful, but in a day or two showed by reviving strength and spirits that she looked forward eagerly to the departure. Her husband advertised for lodgings in St. Peter Port; he would not face the disagreeable chances of an hotel. In a fortnight's time all their preparations were made. During their absence, which might extend over a month, Virginia was to live at Herne Hill, in supervision of the two servants.

On the last Sunday, Monica went to see her friends in Queen's Road. Widdowson was ashamed to offer an objection; he

much disliked her going there alone, but disliked almost equally the thought of accompanying her, for at Miss Barfoot's he could not pretend to sit, stand, or converse with ease.

It happened that Mrs. Cosgrove was again calling. On the first occasion of meeting with Monica, this lady paid her no particular attention ; to-day she addressed her in a friendly manner, and their conversation led to the discovery that both of them were about to spend the ensuing month in the same place. Mrs. Cosgrove hoped they might occasionally see each other.

Of this coincidence Monica thought better to say nothing on her return home. She could not be sure that her husband might not, at the last moment, decide to stay at Herne Hill rather than incur the risk of her meeting an acquaintance in Guernsey. On this point he could not be trusted to exercise common sense. For

the first time, Monica had a secret she desired to keep from him, and the necessity was one which could not but have an unfavourable effect on her manner of regarding Widdowson. They were to start on Monday evening; through the day her mind was divided between joy in the thought of seeing a new part of the world and a sense of weary dislike for her home; she had not understood till now how terrible would be the prospect of living here for a long time with no companionship but her husband's. On the return that prospect would lie before her. But no; their way of life must somehow be modified; on that she was resolved.

VI.

HEALTH FROM THE SEA.

FROM Herne Hill to St. Peter Port was a change which made of Monica a new creature. The weather could not have been more propitious; day after day of still air and magnificent sky, with temperature which made a brisk walk at any hour thoroughly enjoyable, yet allowed one to sit at ease in the midday sunshine. Their lodgings were in the best part of the town, high up, looking forth over blue sea to the cliffs of Sark. Widdowson congratulated himself on having taken this step; it was like a revival of his honeymoon; never since their settling down at home had Monica been so grateful, so affectionate.

Why, his wife was what he had thought her from the first, perfect in every wifely attribute. How lovely she looked as she sat down to the breakfast table, after breathing sea air at the open windows, in her charming dress, her black hair arranged in some new fashion just to please him ! Or when she walked with him about the quays, obviously admired by men who passed them. Or when she seated herself in the open carriage for a drive which would warm her cheeks and make her lips redder and sweeter.

“ Edmund,” she said to him one evening, as they talked by the fireside, “ don’t you think you take life rather too gravely ? ”

He laughed.

“ Gravely ? Don’t I seem to enjoy myself ? ”

“ Oh yes ; just now. But—still in a rather serious way. One would think you always had cares on your mind, and were struggling to get rid of them.”

“I haven’t a care in the world. I am the most blessed of mortals.”

“So you ought to think yourself. But when we get back again, how will it be? You won’t be angry with me? I really don’t think I can live again as we were doing.”

“Not live as”—

His brow darkened; he looked at her in astonishment.

“We ought to have more enjoyment,” she pursued courageously. “Think of the numbers of people who live a dull, monotonous life just because they can’t help it; how they would envy us, with so much money to spend, and free to do just what we like! Doesn’t it seem a pity to sit there day after day alone”—

“Don’t, my darling!” he implored. “Don’t! That makes me think you don’t really love me.”

“Nonsense! I want you to see what I mean. I am not one of the silly people

who care for nothing but amusement, but I do think we might enjoy our lives more when we are in London. We sha'n't live for ever, you know ; is it right to spend day after day sitting there in the house"—

“ But come, come ; we have our occupations. Surely it ought to be a pleasure to you to see that the house is kept in order. There are duties ”—

“ Yes, I know. But these duties I could perform in an hour or two.”

“ Not thoroughly.”

“ Quite thoroughly enough.”

“ In my opinion, Monica, a woman ought never to be so happy as when she is looking after her home.”

It was the old pedantic tone. His figure, in sympathy with it, abandoned an easy attitude and became awkward. But Monica would not allow herself to be alarmed. During the past week she had conducted herself so as to smooth the way for this very discussion. Unsuspecting husband !

“ I wish to do my duty,” she said, in a firm tone, “ but I don’t think it’s right to make dull work for oneself, when one might be living. I don’t think it *is* living to go on week after week like that. If we were poor, and I had a lot of children to look after as well as all the housework to do, I believe I shouldn’t grumble—at least, I hope I shouldn’t. I should know that I ought to do what there was no one else to do, and make the best of it. But ”—

“ Make the best of it !” he interrupted indignantly. “ What an expression to use ! It would not only be your duty, dear, but your privilege !”

“ Wait a moment, Edmund. If you were a shopman earning fifteen shillings a week, and working from early morning to late at night, should you think it not only your duty but your privilege ?”

He made a wrathful gesture.

“ What comparison is there ? I should be earning a hard livelihood by slaving for

other people. But a married woman who works in her own home, for her husband and children"—

"Work is work, and when a woman is overburdened with it, she must find it difficult not to weary of home and husband and children all together.—But of course I don't mean to say that my work is too hard. All I mean is, that I don't see why any one should *make* work, and why life shouldn't be as full of enjoyment as possible."

"Monica, you have got these ideas from those people at Chelsea. That is exactly why I don't care for you to see much of them. I utterly disapprove of"—

"But you are mistaken. Miss Barfoot and Miss Nunn are all for work. They take life as seriously as you do."

"Work? What kind of work? They want to make women unwomanly, to make them unfit for the only duties women ought to perform. You know very well my opinions about that kind of thing."

He was trembling with the endeavour to control himself, to speak indulgently.

“ I don't think, Edmund, there's much real difference between men and women. That is, there wouldn't be, if women had fair treatment.”

“ Not much difference ? Oh, come ; you are talking nonsense. There's as much difference between their minds as between their bodies. They are made for entirely different duties.”

Monica sighed.

“ Oh, that word Duty ! ”

Pained unutterably, Widdowson bent forward and took her hand. He spoke in a tone of the gravest but softest rebuke. She was giving entertainment to thoughts that would lead her who knew whither, that would undermine her happiness, would end by making both of them miserable. He besought her to put all such monstrous speculations out of her mind.

“ Dear, good little wife ! Do be guided

by your husband. He is older than you, darling, and has seen so much more of the world."

"I haven't said anything very dreadful, dear. My thoughts don't come from other people; they rise naturally in my own head."

"Now what do you really want? You say you can't live as we were doing. What change would you make?"

"I should like to make more friends, and to see them often. I want to hear people talk, and know what is going on round about me. And to read a different kind of books; books that would really amuse me, and give me something I could think about with pleasure. Life will be a burden to me before long, if I don't have more freedom."

"Freedom?"

"Yes, I don't think there's any harm in saying that."

"Freedom?" He glared at her. "I

shall begin to think that you wish you had never married me."

"I should only wish that, if I were made to feel that you shut me up in a house and couldn't trust me to go where I chose. Suppose the thought took you that you would go and walk about the City some afternoon, and you wished to go alone, just to be more at ease, should I have a right to forbid you, or grumble at you? And yet you are very dissatisfied if I wish to go anywhere alone."

"But here's the old confusion. I am a man; you are a woman."

"I can't see that that makes any difference. A woman ought to go about just as freely as a man. I don't think it's just. When I have done my work at home, I think I ought to be every bit as free as you are—every bit as free. And I'm very sure, Edmund, that love needs freedom if it is to remain love in truth."

He looked at her keenly.

“That’s a dreadful thing for you to say. So, if I disapprove of your becoming the kind of woman that acknowledges no law, you will cease to love me?”

“What law do you mean?”

“Why, the natural law that points out a woman’s place, and”—he added, with shaken voice—“commands her to follow her husband’s guidance.”

“Now you are angry. We mustn’t talk about it any more, just now.”

She rose and poured out a glass of water. Her hand trembled as she drank. Widdowson fell into gloomy abstraction. Later, as they lay side by side, he wished to renew the theme, but Monica would not talk; she declared herself too sleepy, turned her back to him, and soon slept indeed.

That night the weather became stormy; a roaring wind swept the Channel, and when day broke nothing could be seen but cloud and rain. Widdowson, who had

rested little, was in a heavy, taciturn mood; Monica, on the other hand, talked gaily, seeming not to observe her companion's irresponsiveness. She was glad of the wild sky; now they would see another aspect of island life, the fierce and perilous surges beating about these granite shores.

They had brought with them a few books, and Widdowson, after breakfast, sat down by the fire to read. Monica first of all wrote a letter to her sister; then, as it was still impossible to go out, she took up one of the volumes that lay on a side-table in their sitting-room, novels left by former lodgers. Her choice was something or other with yellow back. Widdowson, watching all her movements furtively, became aware of the pictured cover.

"I don't think you'll get much good out of that," he remarked, after one or two efforts to speak.

"No harm, at all events," she replied good-humouredly.

“I’m not so sure. Why should you waste your time? Take ‘Guy Mannering,’ if you want a novel.”

“I’ll see how I like this first.”

He felt himself powerless, and suffered acutely from the thought that Monica was in rebellion against him. He could not understand what had brought about this sudden change. Fear of losing his wife’s love restrained him from practical despotism, yet he was very near to uttering a definite command.

In the afternoon it no longer rained, and the wind had less violence. They went out to look at the sea. Many people were gathered about the harbour, whence was a fine view of the great waves that broke into leaping foam and spray against the crags of Sark. As they stood thus occupied, Monica heard her name spoken in a friendly voice,—that of Mrs. Cosgrove.

“I have been expecting to see you,” said the lady. “We arrived three days ago.”

Widdowson, starting with surprise, turned to examine the speaker. He saw a woman of something less than middle age, unfashionably attired, good-looking, with an air of high spirits; only when she offered her hand to him did he remember having met her at Miss Barfoot's. To be graceful in a high wind is difficult for any man; the ungainliness with which he returned Mrs. Cosgrove's greeting could not have been surpassed, and probably would have been much the same even had he not, of necessity, stood clutching at his felt hat.

The three talked for a few minutes. With Mrs. Cosgrove were two persons, a younger woman and a man of about thirty, —the latter a comely and vivacious fellow, with rather long hair of the orange-tawny hue. These looked at Monica, but Mrs. Cosgrove made no introduction.

“Come and see me, will you?” she said, mentioning her address. “One can't get

out much in the evenings ; I shall be nearly always at home after dinner, and we have music—of a kind.”

Monica boldly accepted the invitation, said she would be glad to come. Then Mrs. Cosgrove took leave of them, and walked landwards with her companions.

Widdowson stood gazing at the sea. There was no misreading his countenance ; when Monica had remarked it, she pressed her lips together, and waited for what he would say or do. He said nothing, but presently turned his back upon the waves and began to walk on. Neither spoke until they were in the shelter of the streets ; then Widdowson asked suddenly :

“ Who *is* that person ? ”

“ I only know her name, and that she goes to Miss Barfoot’s.”

“ It’s a most extraordinary thing,” he exclaimed, in high irritation. “ There’s no getting out of the way of those people.”

Monica also was angry; her cheeks, reddened by the wind, grew hotter.

“It’s still more extraordinary that you should object so to them.”

“Whether or no—I *do* object, and I had rather you didn’t go to see that woman.”

“You are unreasonable,” Monica answered sharply. “Certainly I shall go and see her.”

“I forbid you to do so! If you go, it will be in defiance of my wish.”

“Then I am obliged to defy your wish. I shall certainly go.”

His face was frightfully distorted. Had they been in a lonely spot, Monica would have felt afraid of him. She moved hurriedly away in the direction of their lodgings, and for a few paces he followed; then he checked himself, turned round about, took an opposite way.

With strides of rage he went along by the quay, past the hotels and the smaller

houses that follow, on to St. Sampson. The wind, again preparing for a tempestuous night, beat and shook and at moments all but stopped him; he set his teeth like a madman, and raged on. Past the granite quarries at Bordeaux Harbour, then towards the wild north extremity of the island, the sandy waste of L'Ancrese. When darkness began to fall, no human being was in his range of sight. He stood on one spot for nearly a quarter of an hour, watching, or appearing to watch, the black, low-flying scud.

Their time for dining was seven. Shortly before this, Widdowson entered the house, and went to the sitting-room; Monica was not there. He found her in the bed-chamber, before the looking-glass. At the sight of his reflected face, she turned instantly.

“Monica!” He put his hands on her shoulders, whispering hoarsely, “Monica! don't you love me?”

She looked away, not replying.

“Monica!”

And of a sudden he fell on his knees before her, clasped her about the waist, burst into choking sobs.

“Have you no love for me?—My darling! My dear, beautiful wife!—Have you begun to hate me?”

Tears came to her eyes. She implored him to rise and command himself.

“I was so violent, so brutal with you. I spoke without thinking”—

“But *why* should you speak like that? Why are you so unreasonable? If you forbid me to do simple things, with not the least harm in them, you can't expect me to take it like a child. I shall resist; I can't help it.”

He had risen and was crushing her in his arms, his hot breath on her neck, when he began to whisper:

“I want to keep you all to myself. I don't like these people—they think so

differently—they put such hateful ideas into your mind—they are not the right kind of friends for you”—

“You misunderstand them, and you don’t in the least understand me.—Oh, you hurt me, Edmund!”

He released her body, and took her head between his hands.

“I had rather you were dead than that you should cease to love me! You shall go to see her; I won’t say a word against it. But, Monica, be faithful, be faithful to me!”

“Faithful to you?” she echoed, in astonishment. “What *have* I said or done to put you in such a state? Because I wish to make a few friends as all women do”—

“It’s because I have lived so much alone. I have never had more than one or two friends, and I am absurdly jealous when you want to get away from me and amuse yourself with strangers. I can’t

talk to such people. I am not suited for society. If I hadn't met you in that strange way, by miracle, I should never have been able to marry.—If I allow you to have these friends” —

“I don't like to hear that word. Why should you say *allow*? Do you think of me as your servant, Edmund?”

“You know how I think of you. It is I who am your servant, your slave.”

“Oh, I can't believe that!” She pressed her handkerchief to her cheeks, and laughed unnaturally. “Such words don't mean anything. It is you who forbid, and allow, and command, and” —

“I will never again use such words. Only convince me that you love me as much as ever.”

“It is so miserable to begin quarrelling” —

“Never again!—Say you love me! Put your arms round my neck—press closer to me” —

She kissed his cheek, but did not utter a word.

“You can't say that you love me?”

“I think I am always showing it. Do get ready for dinner now ; it's past seven.—Oh, how foolish you have been !”

Of course their talk lasted half through the night. Monica held with remarkable firmness to the position she had taken ; a much older woman might have envied her steadfast yet quite rational assertion of the right to live a life of her own apart from that imposed upon her by the duties of wedlock. A great deal of this spirit and the utterance it found was traceable to her association with the women whom Widowson so deeply suspected ; prior to her sojourn in Rutland Street she could not even have made clear to herself the demands which she now very clearly formulated. Believing that she had learnt nothing from them, and till of late instinctively opposing the doctrines held by Mrs.

Barfoot and Rhoda Nunn, Monica in truth owed the sole bit of real education she had ever received to those few weeks of attendance in Great Portland Street. Circumstances were now proving how apt a pupil she had been, even against her will. Marriage, as is always the case with women capable of development, made for her a new heaven and a new earth ; perhaps on no single subject did she now think as on the morning of her wedding-day.

“ You must either trust me completely,” she said, “ or not at all. If you can’t and won’t trust me, how can I possibly love you ? ”

“ Am I never to advise ? ” asked her husband, baffled, and even awed, by this extraordinary revelation of a woman he had supposed himself to know thoroughly.

“ Oh, that’s a very different thing from forbidding and commanding ! ” she laughed. “ There was that novel this morning. Of course I know as well as you do that ‘ Guy

Mannering' is better; but that doesn't say I am not to form my opinion of other books. You mustn't be afraid to leave me the same freedom you have yourself."

The result of it all was that Widdowson felt his passionate love glow with new fire. For a moment he thought himself capable of accepting this change in their relations. The marvellous thought of equality between man and wife, that gospel which in far-off days will re-fashion the world, for an instant smote his imagination and exalted him above his native level.

Monica paid for the energy she had put forth by a day of suffering. Her head ached intolerably; she had feverish symptoms, and could hardly raise herself from the bed. It passed, and she was once more eager to go forth under the blue sky that followed the tempest.

"Will you go with me to Mrs. Cosgrove's this evening?" she asked of her husband.

He consented, and after dinner they sought the hotel where their acquaintance was staying. Widdowson was in extreme discomfort, partly due to the fact that he had no dress clothes to put on; for far from anticipating or desiring any such intercourse in Guernsey, he had never thought of packing an evening suit. Had he known Mrs. Cosgrove, this uneasiness would have been spared him. That lady was in revolt against far graver institutions than the swallow-tail; she cared not a button in what garb her visitors came to her. On their arrival, they found, to Widdowson's horror, a room full of women. With the hostess was that younger lady they had seen on the quay, Mrs. Cosgrove's unmarried sister; Miss Knott's health had demanded this retreat from the London winter. The guests were four, a Mrs. Bevis and her three daughters, all invalidish persons, the mother somewhat

lackadaisical, the girls with a look of unwilling spinsterhood.

Monica, noteworthy among the gathering for her sweet, bright prettiness, and the finish of her dress, soon made herself at home ; she chatted gaily with the girls,—wondering indeed at her own air of maturity, which came to her for the first time. Mrs. Cosgrove, an easy woman of the world when circumstances required it, did her best to get something out of Widdowson, who presently thawed a little.

Then Miss Knott sat down to the piano, and played more than tolerably well ; and the youngest Miss Bevis sang a song of Schubert, with passable voice but in very distressing German—the sole person distressed by it being the hostess.

Meanwhile Monica had been captured by Mrs. Bevis, who discoursed to her on a subject painfully familiar to all the old lady's friends.

“ Do you know my son, Mrs. Widdow-

son?—Oh, I thought you had perhaps met him. You will do so this evening I hope. He is over here on a fortnight's holiday."

"Do you live in Guernsey?" Monica inquired.

"I, practically, live here, and one of my daughters is always with me. The other two live with their brother, in a flat in Bayswater.—Do you care for flats, Mrs. Widdowson?"

Monica could only say that she had no experience of that institution.

"I do think them such a boon," pursued Mrs. Bevis. "They are expensive, but the advantages and comforts are so many. My son wouldn't on any consideration give up his flat. As I was saying, he always has two of his sisters to keep house for him. He is quite a young man, not yet thirty, but—would you believe it?—we are all dependent upon him! My son has supported the *whole* of the family for the last six or seven years, and that by

his own work. It sounds incredible, doesn't it? But for him, we should be quite unable to live. The dear girls have very delicate health; simply impossible for them to exert themselves in any way. My son has made extraordinary sacrifices on our account. His desire was to be a professional musician, and every one thinks he would have become eminent; myself, I am convinced of it—perhaps that is only natural. But when our circumstances began to grow very doubtful, and we really didn't know what was before us, my son consented to follow a business career—that of wine-merchant, with which his father was connected. And he exerted himself so nobly, and gave proof of such ability, that very soon all our fears were at an end; and now, before he is thirty, his position is quite assured. We have no longer a care. I live here very economically—really sweet lodgings on the road to St. Martin's; I *do* hope you will come and

see me. And the girls go backwards and forwards. You see we are *all* here at present. When my son returns to London, he will take the eldest and the youngest with him. The middle girl, dear Grace—she is thought very clever in water-colours, and I am quite sure, if it were necessary, she could pursue the arts in a professional spirit.”

Mr. Bevis entered the room, and Monica recognized the sprightly young man whom she had seen on the quay. The hostess presented him to her new friends, and he got into talk with Widdowson. Requested to make music for the company, he sang a gay little piece, which, to Monica at all events, seemed one of the most delightful things she had ever heard.

“His own composition,” whispered Miss Grace Bevis, then sitting by Mrs. Widdowson.

That increased her delight. Foolish as Mrs. Bevis undoubtedly was, she perchance

had not praised her son beyond his merits. He looked the best of good fellows ; so kind and merry and spirited ; such a capable man, too. It struck Monica as a very hard fate that he should have this family on his hands. What they must cost him ! Probably he could not think of marrying, just on their account.

Mr. Bevis came and took a place by her side.

“ Thank you so very much,” she said, “ for that charming song. Is it published ? ”

“ Oh dear no ! ” He laughed and shook his thick hair about. “ It’s one of two or three that I somehow struck out when I was studying in Germany, ages ago.—You play, I hope ? ”

Monica gave a sad negative.

“ Oh, what does it matter ? There are hosts of people who will always be overjoyed to play when you ask them.—It would be a capital thing if only those

children were allowed to learn an instrument who showed genuine talent for music."

"In that case," said Monica, "there certainly wouldn't be hosts of people ready to play for me."

"No." His merry laugh was repeated. "You mustn't mind when I contradict myself; it's one of my habits.—Are you here for the whole winter?"

"Only a few weeks, unfortunately."

"And do you dread the voyage back?"

"To tell the truth, I do. I had a very unpleasant time, coming."

"As for myself, how I ever undertake the thing, I really don't know. One of these times, I shall die; there's not a shadow of doubt of that. The girls always have to carry me ashore, one holding me by the hair and one by the boots. Happily, I am so emaciated that my weight doesn't distress them. I pick up flesh in a day or two, and then my health

is stupendous. As at present. You see how marvellously *fit* I look."

"Yes, you look very well," replied Monica, glancing at the fair, comely face.

"It's deceptive. All our family have wretched constitutions. If I go to work regularly for a couple of months without a holiday, I sink into absolute decrepitude. An office chair has been specially made for me, to hold me up at the desk.—I beg your pardon for this clowning, Mrs. Widdowson," he suddenly added in another voice. "The air puts me in such spirits. What air it is! Speaking quite seriously, my mother was saved by coming to live here. We believed her to be dying, and now I have hopes that she will live ever so many years longer."

He spoke of his mother with evident affection, glancing kindly towards her with his blue eyes.

Only once or twice had Monica ventured to exchange a glance with her husband.

It satisfied her that he managed to converse ; what his mood really was could not be determined until afterwards. When they were about to leave, she saw him, to her surprise, speaking quite pleasantly with Mr. Bevis. A carriage was procured to convey them home, and as soon as they had started, Monica asked her husband, with a merry look, how he had enjoyed himself.

“There is not much harm in it,” he replied drily.

“Harm? How like you, Edmund, to put in that way! Now confess you will be glad to go again.”

“I shall go if you wish.”

“Unsatisfactory man! You can't bring yourself to admit that it was pleasant to be among new people. I believe, in your very heart, you think all enjoyment is wrong. The music was nice, wasn't it?”

“I didn't think much of the girl's singing, but that fellow Bevis wasn't bad.”

Monica examined him as he spoke, and seemed to suppress a laugh

“No, he wasn't at all bad. I saw you talking with Mrs. Bevis. Did she tell you anything about her wonderful son?”

“Nothing particular.”

“Oh, then I must tell you the whole story.”

And she did so, in a tone half of jest, half of serious approval.

“I don't see that he has done anything more than his duty,” remarked Widdowson, at the end. “But he isn't a bad fellow.”

For private reasons, Monica contrasted this attitude towards Bevis with the disfavour her husband had shown to Mr. Barfoot, and was secretly much amused.

Two or three days after, they went to spend the morning at Petit Bot Bay, and there encountered with Bevis and his three sisters. The result was an invitation to go back and have lunch at Mrs. Bevis's lodgings; they accepted it, and remained

with their acquaintances till dusk. The young man's holiday was at an end; next morning he would face the voyage which he had depicted so grotesquely.

"And alone!" he lamented to Monica. "Only think of it. The girls are all rather below par just now; they had better stay here for the present."

"And in London you will be alone, too?"

"Yes. It's very sad. I must bear up under it. The worst of it is, I am naturally subject to depression. In solitude, I sink, sink.—But the subject is too painful. Don't let us darken the last hours with such reflections."

Widdowson retained his indulgent opinion of the facetious young wine-merchant. He even laughed now and then in recalling some phrase or other that Bevis had used to him.

Subsequently, Monica had several long conversations with the old lady. Impelled

to gossipy frankness about all her affairs, Mrs. Bevis allowed it to be understood that the chief reason for two of the girls always being with their brother was the possibility thus afforded of their "meeting people,"—that is to say, of their having a chance of marriage. Mrs. Cosgrove, and one or two other ladies, did them social service.

"They never *will* marry!" said Monica to her husband, rather thoughtfully than with commiseration.

"Why not? They are nice enough girls."

"Yes, but they have no money; and"—she smiled—"people see that they want to find husbands."

"I don't see that the first matters; and the second is only natural."

Monica attempted no rejoinder, but said presently:

"Now they are just the kind of women who ought to find something to do."

"Something to do? Why, they attend

to their mother and their brother. What could be more proper?"

"Very proper, perhaps. But they are miserable, and always will be."

"Then they have no *right* to be miserable. They are doing their duty, and that ought to keep them cheerful."

Monica could have said many things, but she overcame the desire, and laughed the subject aside.

VII.

THE TRIUMPH.

NOT till mid-winter did Barfoot again see his friends the Micklethwaites. By invitation he went to South Tottenham on New Year's Eve, and dined with them at seven o'clock. He was the first guest that had entered the house since their marriage.

From the very door-step Everard became conscious of a domestic atmosphere that told soothingly upon his nerves. The little servant who opened to him exhibited a gentle, noiseless demeanour which was no doubt the result of careful discipline. Micklethwaite himself, who at once came out into the passage, gave proof of a like influence; his hearty greeting was spoken

in soft tones ; a placid happiness beamed from his face. In the sitting-room (Micklethwaite's study, used for reception because the other had to serve as dining-room), tempered lamplight and the glow of a hospitable fire showed the hostess and her blind sister standing in expectation ; to Everard's eyes both of them looked far better in health than a few months ago. Mrs. Micklethwaite was no longer so distressingly old ; an expression that resembled girlish pleasure lit up her countenance as she stepped forward ; nay, if he mistook not, there came a gentle warmth to her cheek, and the momentary downward glance was as graceful and modest as in a youthful bride. Never had Barfoot approached a woman with more finished courtesy, the sincere expression of his feeling. The blind sister he regarded in like spirit ; his voice touched its softest note as he held her hand for a moment and replied to her pleasant words.

No undue indication of poverty disturbed him. He saw that the house had been improved in many ways since Mrs. Micklethwaite had taken possession of it ; pictures, ornaments, pieces of furniture were added, all in simple taste, but serving to heighten the effect of refined comfort. Where the average woman would have displayed pretentious emptiness, Mrs. Micklethwaite had made a home which in its way was beautiful. The dinner, which she herself had cooked, and which she assisted in serving, aimed at being no more than a simple, decorous meal, but the guest unfeignedly enjoyed it ; even the vegetables and the bread seemed to him to have a daintier flavour than at many a rich table. He could not help noticing and admiring the skill with which Miss Wheatley ate without seeing what was before her ; had he not known her misfortune, he would hardly have become aware of it by any peculiarity as she sat opposite to him.

The mathematician had learnt to sit upon a chair like ordinary mortals. For the first week or two it must have cost him severe restraint; now he betrayed no temptation to roll and jerk and twist himself. When the ladies retired, he reached from the sideboard a box which Barfoot viewed with uneasiness.

“Do you smoke here—in this room?”

“Oh, why not?”

Everard glanced at the pretty curtains before the windows.

“No, my boy, you do *not* smoke here. And, in fact, I like your claret; I won't spoil the flavour of it.”

“As you please; but I think Fanny will be distressed.”

“You shall say that I have abandoned the weed.”

Emotions were at conflict in Micklethwaite's mind, but finally he beamed with gratitude.

“Barfoot,”—he bent forward and touched

his friend's arm,—“there are angels walking the earth in this our day. Science hasn't abolished them, my dear fellow, and I don't think it ever will.”

“It falls to the lot of but few men to encounter them, and of fewer still to entertain them permanently in a cottage at South Tottenham.”

“You are right.” Micklethwaite laughed in a new way, with scarcely any sound; a change Everard had already noticed. “These two sisters—but I had better not speak about them. In my old age I have become a worshipper, a mystic, a man of dream and vision.”

“How about worship in a parochial sense?” inquired Barfoot, smiling. “Any difficulty on that point?”

“I conform, in moderation. Nothing would be asked of me. There is no fanaticism, no intolerance. It would be brutal if I declined to go to church on a Sunday morning. You see, my strictly scientific

attitude helps in avoiding offence. Fanny can't understand it, but my lack of dogmatism vastly relieves her. I have been trying to explain to her that the scientific mind can have nothing to do with materialism. The new order of ideas is of course very difficult for her to grasp; but in time, in time."

"For heaven's sake, don't attempt conversion!"

"On no account whatever. But I *should* like her to see what is meant by perception and conception, by the relativity of time and space,—and a few simple things of that kind."

Barfoot laughed heartily.

"By-the-bye," he said, shifting to safer ground, "my brother Tom is in London, and in wretched health. *His* angel is from the wrong quarter, from the nethermost pit. I seriously believe that she has a plan for killing her husband. You remember my mentioning in a letter his horse-

accident? He has never recovered from that, and as likely as not never will. His wife brought him away from Madeira just when he ought to have stopped there to get well. He settled himself at Torquay, whilst that woman ran about to pay visits. It was understood that she should go back to him at Torquay, but this she at length refused to do. The place was too dull; it didn't suit her extremely delicate health; she must live in London, her pure, native air. If Tom had taken my advice, he would have let her live just where she pleased, thanking heaven that she was at a distance from him. But the poor fellow can't be away from her. He has come up, and here, I feel convinced, he will die. It's a very monstrous thing, but uncommonly like women in general who have got a man into their power."

Micklethwaite shook his head.

"You are too hard upon them. You

have been unlucky.—You know my view of your duty.”

“I begin to think that marriage isn’t impossible for me,” said Barfoot, with a grave smile.

“Ha! Capital!”

“But as likely as not it will be marriage without forms,—simply a free union.”

The mathematician was downcast.

“I’m sorry to hear that. It won’t do. We must conform. Besides, in that case the person decidedly isn’t suitable to you. You, of all men, must marry a lady.”

“I should never think of any one that wasn’t a lady.”

“Is emancipation getting as far as that? Do ladies enter into that kind of union?”

“I don’t know of any example. That’s just why the idea tempts me.”

Barfoot would go no further in explanation.

“How about your new algebra?”

“Alas!—My dear boy, the temptation is so frightful—when I get back home. Remember that I have never known what it was to sit and talk through the evening with ordinary friends, let alone— It’s too much for me just yet. And, you know, I don’t venture to work on Sundays. That will come; all in good time. I must grant myself half a year of luxury after such a life as mine as been.”

“Of course you must. Let algebra wait.”

“I think it over, of course, at odd moments. Church on Sunday morning is a good opportunity.”

Barfoot could not stay to see the old year out, but good wishes were none the less heartily exchanged before he went. Micklethwaite walked with him to the railway station; at a few paces’ distance from his house, he stood and pointed back to it.

“ That little place, Barfoot, is one of the sacred spots of the earth. Strange to think that the house has been waiting for me there through all the years of my hopelessness. I feel that a mysterious light ought to shine about it. It oughtn't to look just like common houses.”

On his way home, Everard thought over what he had seen and heard, smiling good-naturedly. Well, that was one ideal of marriage. Not *his* ideal ; but very beautiful amid the vulgarities and vileness of ordinary experience. It was the old fashion in its purest presentment ; the consecrated form of domestic happiness, removed beyond reach of satire, only to be touched, if touched at all, with the very gentlest irony.

A life by no means for him. If he tried it, even with a woman so perfect, he would perish of *ennui*. For him, marriage must not mean repose, inevitably tending to drowsiness ; but the mutual incitement

of vigorous minds. Passion—yes, there must be passion, at all events to begin with ; passion not impossible of revival in days subsequent to its first indulgence. Beauty in the academic sense he no longer demanded ; enough that the face spoke eloquently, that the limbs were vigorous. Let beauty perish, if it cannot ally itself with mind ; be a woman what else she may, let her have brains and the power of using them ! In that demand the maturity of his manhood expressed itself. For casual amour the odalisque could still prevail with him ; but for the life of wedlock, the durable companionship of man and woman, intellect was his first requirement.

A woman with man's capability of understanding and reasoning ; free from superstition, religious or social ; far above the ignoble weaknesses which men have been base enough to idealize in her sex. A woman who would scorn the vulgarity of jealousy, and yet know what

it is to love. This was asking much of nature and civilization; did he grossly deceive himself in thinking he had found the paragon?

For thus far had he advanced in his thoughts of Rhoda Nunn. If the phrase had any meaning, he was in love with her; yet, strange complex of emotions, he was still only half serious in his desire to take her for a wife, wishing, rather, to amuse and flatter himself by merely inspiring her with passion. Therefore he refused to entertain a thought of formal marriage. To obtain her consent to marriage would mean nothing at all; it would afford him no satisfaction. But so to play upon her emotions that the proud, intellectual, earnest woman was willing to defy society for his sake—ah! that would be an end worth achieving.

Ever since the dialogue in which he frankly explained his position, and all but declared love, he had not once seen Rhoda

in private. She shunned him purposely beyond a doubt, and did not that denote a fear of him justified by her inclination? The postponement of what must necessarily come to pass between them began to try his patience, as assuredly it inflamed his ardour. If no other resource offered, he would be obliged to make his cousin an accomplice by requesting her, beforehand, to leave him alone with Rhoda some evening when he had called upon them.

But it was time that chance favoured him, and his interview with Miss Nunn came about in a way he could not have foreseen.

At the end of the first week of January he was invited to dine at Miss Barfoot's. The afternoon had been foggy, and when he set forth there seemed to be some likelihood of a plague of choking darkness such as would obstruct traffic. As usual he went by train to Sloane Square, purposing (for it was dry under foot, and he could

not disregard small economies) to walk the short distance from there to Queen's Road. On coming out from the station, he found the fog so dense that it was doubtful whether he could reach his journey's end. Cabs were not to be had; he must either explore the gloom, with risk of getting nowhere at all, or give it up and take a train back. But he longed too ardently for the sight of Rhoda to abandon his evening without an effort. Having with difficulty made his way into King's Road, he found progress easier on account of the shop illuminations; the fog, however, was growing every moment more fearsome, and when he had to turn out of the highway, his case appeared desperate. Literally he groped along, feeling the fronts of the houses. As under ordinary circumstances he would have had only just time enough to reach his cousin's punctually, he must be very late: perhaps they would conclude that he had not

ventured out on such a night, and were already dining without him. No matter ; as well go one way as another, now. After abandoning hope several times, and all but asphyxiated, he found by inquiry of a man with whom he collided that he was actually within a few doors of his destination. Another effort, and he rang a joyous peal at the bell.

A mistake. It was the wrong house, and he had to go two doors farther on.

This time he procured admittance to the familiar little hall. The servant smiled at him, but said nothing. He was led to the drawing-room, and there found Rhoda Nunn alone. This fact did not so much surprise him as Rhoda's appearance. For the first time since he had known her, her dress was not uniform black ; she wore a red silk blouse with a black skirt, and so admirable was the effect of this costume that he scarcely refrained from a delighted exclamation.

Some concern was visible in her face.

“I am sorry to say,” were her first words, “that Miss Barfoot will not be here in time for dinner. She went to Faversham this morning, and ought to have been back about half-past seven. But a telegram came some time ago. A thick fog caused her to miss the train, and the next doesn’t reach Victoria till ten minutes past ten.”

It was now half-past eight; dinner had been appointed for the hour. Barfoot explained his lateness in arriving.

“Is it so bad as that? I didn’t know.”

The situation embarrassed both of them. Barfoot suspected a hope on Miss Nunn’s part that he would relieve her of his company, but, even had there been no external hindrance, he could not have relinquished the happy occasion. To use frankness was best.

“Out of the question for me to leave the house,” he said, meeting her eyes and

smiling. "You won't be hard upon a starving man?"

At once Rhoda made a pretence of having felt no hesitation.

"Oh, of course we will dine immediately." She rang the bell. "Miss Barfoot took it for granted that I would represent her.—Look, the fog is penetrating even to our fireside."

"Cheerful, very. What is Mary doing at Faversham?"

"Some one she has been corresponding with for some time begged her to go down and give an address to a number of ladies on—a certain subject."

"Ah! Mary is on the way to become a celebrity."

"Quite against her will, as you know."

They went to dinner, and Barfoot, thoroughly enjoying the abnormal state of things, continued to talk of his cousin.

"It seems to me that she can't logically

refuse to put herself forward. Work of her kind can't be done in a corner. It isn't a case of 'Oh teach the orphan girl to sew.'"

"I have used the same argument to her," said Rhoda.

Her place at the head of the table had its full effect upon Everard's imagination. Why should he hold by a resolve of which he did not absolutely approve the motive? Why not ask her simply to be his wife, and so remove one element of difficulty from his pursuit? True, he was wretchedly poor. Marrying on such an income, he would at once find his freedom restricted in every direction.—But then, more likely than not Rhoda had determined against marriage, and of him, especially, never thought for a moment as a possible husband. Well, that was what he wanted to ascertain.

They conversed naturally enough, till the meal was over. Then their embarrass-

ment revived, but this time it was Rhoda who took the initiative:

“ Shall I leave you to your meditations ? ” she asked, moving a few inches from the table.

“ I should much prefer your society, if you will grant it me for a little longer. ”

Without speaking, she rose and led the way to the drawing-room. There, sitting at a formal distance from each other, they talked—of the fog. Would Miss Barfoot be able to get back at all ?

“ *A propos*, ” said Everard, “ did you ever read ‘ The City of Dreadful Night ’ ? ”

“ Yes, I have read it. ”

“ Without sympathy, of course ? ”

“ Why ‘ of course ’ ? Do I seem to you a shallow optimist ? ”

“ No. A vigorous and rational optimist—such as I myself aim at being. ”

“ Do you ? But optimism of that kind must be proved by some effort on behalf of society. ”

“Precisely the effort I am making. If a man works at developing and fortifying the best things in his own character, he is surely doing society a service.”

She smiled sceptically.

“Yes, no doubt. But how do you develop and fortify yourself?”

She was meeting him half way, thought Everard. Foreseeing the inevitable, she wished to have it over and done with. Or else—

“I live very quietly,” was his reply, “thinking of grave problems most of my time. You know, I am a great deal alone.”

“Naturally.”

“No ; anything but naturally.”

Rhoda said nothing. He waited a moment, then moved to a seat much nearer hers. Her face hardened, and he saw her fingers lock together.

“Where a man is in love, solitude seems to him the most unnatural of conditions.”

“ Please don’t make me your confidante, Mr. Barfoot,” Rhoda replied, with well-assumed pleasantry. “ I have no taste for that kind of thing.”

“ But I can’t help doing so. It is you that I am in love with.”

“ I am very sorry to hear it. Happily, the sentiment will not long trouble you.”

He read in her eyes and on her lips a profound agitation. She glanced about the room, and, before he could again speak, had risen to ring the bell.

“ You always take coffee, I think ? ”

Without troubling to give any assent, he moved apart and turned over some books on the table. For full five minutes there was silence. The coffee was brought ; he tasted it and put his cup down. Seeing that Rhoda had, as it were, intrenched herself behind the beverage, and would continue to sip at it as long as might be necessary, he went and stood in front of her.

“ Miss Nunn, I am more serious than you will give me credit for being. The sentiment, as you call it, has troubled me for some time, and will last.”

Her refuge failed her. The cup she was holding began to shake a little.

“ Please let me put it aside for you.”

Rhoda allowed him to do so, and then locked her fingers.

“ I am so much in love with you that I can't keep away from this house more than a few days at a time. Of course you have known it; I haven't tried to disguise why I came here so often. It's so seldom that I see you alone, and now that fortune is kind to me I must speak as best I can. I won't make myself ridiculous in your eyes—if I can help it. You despise the love-making of ball-rooms and garden parties; so do I, most heartily. Let me speak like a man who has few illusions to overcome. I want you for the companion of my life; I don't see very well how I am to do with-

out you. You know, I think, that I have only a moderate competence ; it's enough to live upon without miseries, that's all one can say. Probably I shall never be richer, for I can't promise to exert myself to earn money ; I wish to live for other things. You can picture the kind of life I want you to share. You know me well enough to understand that my wife—if we use the old word—would be as free to live in her own way as I to live in mine. All the same, it is love that I am asking for. Think how you may about man and woman, you know that there *is* such a thing as love between them, and that the love of a man and a woman who can think intelligently may be the best thing life has to offer them."

He could not see her eyes, but she was smiling in a forced way, with her lips close set.

"As you insisted on speaking," she said at length, "I had no choice but to listen.

It is usual, I think,—if one may trust the novels,—for a woman to return thanks when an offer of this kind has been made to her. So—thank you very much, Mr. Barfoot.”

Everard seized a little chair that was close by, planted it beside Rhoda's, there seated himself and took possession of one of her hands. It was done so rapidly and vehemently, that Rhoda started back, her expression changing from sportive mockery to all but alarm.

“I will have no such thanks,” he uttered in a low voice, much moved, a smile making him look strangely stern. “You shall understand what it means when a man says that he loves you.—I have come to think your face so beautiful that I am in torment with the desire to press my lips upon yours. Don't be afraid that I shall be brutal enough to do it without your consent ; my respect for you is stronger even than my passion. When I first saw

you, I thought you interesting because of your evident intelligence—nothing more; indeed you were not a woman to me. Now you are the one woman in the world; no other can draw my eyes from you. Touch me with your fingers, and I shall tremble,—that is what my love means.”

She was colourless; her lips, just parted, quivered as the breath panted between them. She did not try to withdraw her hand.

“Can you love me in return?” Everard went on, his face still nearer. “Am I anything like this to *you*? Have the courage you boast of. Speak to me as one human being to another, plain, honest words.”

“I don’t love you in the least. And if I did, I would never share your life.”

The voice was very unlike her familiar tones. It seemed to hurt her to speak.

“The reason.—Because you have no faith in me?”

“I can’t say whether I have or not. I

know absolutely nothing of your life. But I have my work, and no one shall ever persuade me to abandon it."

"Your work?—How do you understand it? What is its importance for you?"

"Oh, and you pretend to know me so well that you wish me to be your companion at every moment!"

She laughed mockingly, and tried to draw away her hand, for it was burnt by the heat of his. Barfoot held her firmly.

"What *is* your work? Copying with a type-machine, and teaching others to do the same—isn't that it?"

"The work by which I earn money, yes. But if it were no more than that"—

"Explain, then."

Passion was overmastering him as he watched the fine scorn in her eyes. He raised her hand to his lips.

"No!" Rhoda exclaimed, with sudden wrath. "Your respect—Oh, I appreciate your respect!"

She wrenched herself from his grasp, and went apart. Barfoot rose, gazing at her with admiration.

“It is better I should be at a distance from you,” he said. “I want to know your mind, and not to be made insensate.”

“Wouldn’t it be better still if you left me?” Rhoda suggested, mistress of herself again.

“If you really wish it.” He remembered the circumstances, and spoke submissively. “Yet the fog gives me such a good excuse for begging your indulgence. The chances are I should only lose myself in an inferno.”

“Doesn’t it strike you that you take an advantage of me, as you did once before? I make no pretence of equalling you in muscular strength, yet you try to hold me by force.”

He divined in her a pleasure akin to his own, the delight of conflict. Otherwise, she would never have spoken thus.

“Yes, it is true. Love revives the barbarian;—it wouldn’t mean much, if it didn’t. In this one respect, I suppose no man, however civilized, would wish the woman he loves to be his equal. Marriage by capture can’t quite be done away with. You say you have not the least love for me; if you had, should I like you to confess it instantly? A man must plead and woo; but there are different ways. I can’t kneel before you and exclaim about my miserable unworthiness—for I am not unworthy of you. I shall never call you queen and goddess—unless in delirium, and I think I should soon weary of the woman who put her head under my foot. Just because I am stronger than you, and have stronger passions, I take that advantage,—try to overcome, as I may, the womanly resistance which is one of your charms.”

“How useless, then, for us to talk. If you are determined to remind me again

and again that your strength puts me at your mercy"—

“Oh, not that! I will come no nearer to you. Sit down, and tell me what I asked.”

Rhoda hesitated, but at length took the chair by which she was standing.

“You are resolved never to marry?”

“I never shall,” Rhoda replied firmly.

“But suppose marriage in no way interfered with your work?”

“It would interfere hopelessly with the best part of my life. I thought you understood this. What would become of the encouragement I am able to offer our girls?”

“Encouragement to refuse marriage?”

“To scorn the old idea that a woman’s life is wasted if she does not marry. My work is to help those women who, by sheer necessity, must live alone,—women whom vulgar opinion ridicules. How can I help them so effectually as by living among

them, one of them, and showing that my life is anything but weariness and lamentation? I am fitted for this. It gives me a sense of power and usefulness which I enjoy. Your cousin is doing the same work, admirably. If I deserted, I should despise myself."

"Magnificent! If I could bear the thought of living without you, I should bid you persevere and be great."

"I need no such bidding to persevere."

"And for that very reason, because you are capable of such high things, I love you only the more."

There was triumph in her look, though she endeavoured to disguise it.

"Then, for your own peace," she said, "I must hope that you will avoid me. It is so easily done. We have nothing in common, Mr. Barfoot."

"I can't agree with that. For one thing, there are perhaps not half-a-dozen women living with whom I could talk as I

have talked with you. It isn't likely that I shall ever meet one. Am I to make my bow, and abandon in resignation the one chance of perfecting my life?"

"You don't know me. We differ profoundly on a thousand essential points."

"You think so because you have a very wrong idea of me."

Rhoda glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece.

"Mr. Barfoot," she said, in a changed voice, "you will forgive me if I remind you that it is past ten o'clock."

He sighed and rose.

"The fog certainly cannot be so thick now. Shall I ask them to try and get you a cab?"

"I shall walk to the station."

"Only one more word." She assumed a quiet dignity which he could not disregard. "We have spoken in this way for the last time. You will not oblige me to take all sorts of trouble merely to avoid useless and painful conversations?"

“I love you, and I can't abandon hope.”

“Then I *must* take that trouble.” Her face darkened, and she stood in expectation of his departure.

“I mustn't offer to shake hands,” said Everard, drawing a step nearer.

“I hope you can remember that I had no choice but to be your hostess.”

The face and tone affected him with a brief shame. Bending his head, he approached her, and held her offered hand, without pressure, only for an instant. Then he left the room.

There was a little improvement in the night; he could make his way along the pavement without actual groping, and no unpleasant adventure checked him before he reached the station. Rhoda's face and figure went before him. He was not down-cast; for all that she had said, this woman, soon or late, would yield herself; he had a strange, unreasoning assurance of it. Perhaps the obstinacy of his temper

supplied him with that confident expectation. He no longer cared on what terms he obtained her ; legal marriage or free union—it was indifferent to him. But her life should be linked with his, if fierce energy of will meant anything.

Miss Barfoot arrived at half-past eleven, after many delays on her journey. She was pierced with cold, choked with the poisonous air, and had derived very little satisfaction from her visit to Faversham.

“ What happened ? ” was her first question, as Rhoda came out into the hall with sympathy and solicitude. “ Did the fog keep our guest away ? ”

“ No ; he dined here.”

“ It was just as well. You haven’t been lonely.”

They spoke no more on the subject until Miss Barfoot recovered from her discomfort, and was enjoying a much needed supper.

“ Did he offer to go away ? ”

“It was really impossible. It took him more than half an hour to get here from Sloane Square.”

“Foolish fellow! Why didn't he take a train back at once?”

There was a peculiar brightness in Rhoda's countenance, and Miss Barfoot had observed it from the first.

“Did you quarrel much?”

“Not more than was to be expected.”

“He didn't think of staying for my return?”

“He left about ten o'clock.”

“Of course. Quite late enough, under the circumstances.—It was very unfortunate, but I don't suppose Everard cared much. He would enjoy the opportunity of teasing you.”

A glance told her that Everard was not alone in his enjoyment of the evening. Rhoda led the talk into other channels, but Miss Barfoot continued to reflect on what she had perceived.

A few evenings after, when Miss Barfoot had been sitting alone for an hour or two, Rhoda came to the library and took a place near her. The elder woman glanced up from her book, and saw that her friend had something special to say.

“What is it, dear?”

“I am going to tax your good-nature, to ask you about unpleasant things.”

Miss Barfoot knew immediately what this meant. She professed readiness to answer, but had an uneasy look.

“Will you tell me, in plain terms, what it was that your cousin did, when he disgraced himself?”

“Must you really know?”

“I wish to know.”

There was a pause. Miss Barfoot kept her eyes on the page open before her.

“Then I shall take the liberty of an old friend, Rhoda. Why do you wish to know?”

“Mr. Barfoot,” answered the other drily, “has been good enough to say that he is in love with me.”

Their eyes met.

“I suspected it. I felt sure it was coming.—He asked you to marry him?”

“No, he didn’t,” replied Rhoda in purposely ambiguous phrase.

“You wouldn’t allow him to?”

“At all events, it didn’t come to that.—I should be glad if you would let me know what I asked.”

Miss Barfoot deliberated, but finally told the story of Amy Drake. Her hands supporting one knee, her head bent, Rhoda listened without comment, and, to judge from her features, without any emotion of any kind.

“That,” said her friend at the close, “is the story as it was understood at the time, —disgraceful to him in every particular. He knew what was said of him, and offered not a word of contradiction. But

not very long ago, he asked me one evening if you had been informed of this scandal. I told him that you knew he had done something which I thought very base. Everard was hurt, and thereupon he declared that neither I nor any other of his acquaintances knew the truth—that he had been maligned. He refused to say more, and what am I to believe?”

Rhoda was listening with livelier attention.

“He declared that he wasn’t to blame?”

“I suppose he meant that. But it is difficult to see”—

“Of course the truth can never be known,” said Rhoda, with sudden indifference. “And it doesn’t matter. Thank you for satisfying my curiosity.”

Miss Barfoot waited a moment, then laughed.

“Some day, Rhoda, you shall satisfy mine.”

“ Yes—if we live long enough.”

What degree of blame might have attached to Barfoot, Rhoda did not care to ask herself; she thought no more of the story. Of course there must have been other such incidents in his career; morally he was neither better nor worse than men in general. She viewed with contempt the women who furnished such opportunities; in her judgment of the male offenders she was more lenient, more philosophical, than formerly.

She had gained her wish, had enjoyed her triumph. A raising of the finger, and Everard Barfoot would marry her. Assured of that, she felt a new contentment in life; at times when she was occupied with things as far as possible from this experience, a rush of joy would suddenly fill her heart, and make her cheek glow. She moved among people with a conscious dignity quite unlike that which had only satisfied her need of

distinction. She spoke more softly, exercised more patience, smiled where she had been wont to scoff. Miss Nunn was altogether a more amiable person.

Yet, she convinced herself, essentially quite unchanged. She pursued the aim of her life with less bitterness, in a larger spirit, that was all. But pursued it, and without fear of being diverted from the generous path.

VIII.

A REINFORCEMENT.

THROUGHOUT January, Barfoot was endeavouring to persuade his brother Tom to leave London, where the invalid's health perceptibly grew worse. Doctors were urgent to the same end, but ineffectually; for Mrs. Thomas, though she professed to be amazed at her husband's folly in remaining where he could not hope for recovery, herself refused to accompany him any whither. This pair had no children. The lady always spoke of herself as a sad sufferer from mysterious infirmities, and had, in fact, a tendency to hysteria, which confused itself inextricably with the results of evil nurture and the

impulses of a disposition originally base ; nevertheless she made a figure in a certain sphere of vulgar wealth, and even gave opportunity to scandalous tongues. Her husband, whatever his secret thought, would hear nothing against her ; his temper, like Everard's, was marked with stubbornness, and after a good deal of wrangling he forbade his brother to address him again on the subject of their disagreement.

“Tom is dying,” wrote Everard, early in February, to his cousin in Queen's Road. “Dr. Swain assures me that, unless he be removed, he cannot last more than a month or two. This morning I saw the woman,”—it was thus he always referred to his sister-in-law,—“and talked to her in what was probably the plainest language she ever had the privilege of hearing. It was a tremendous scene, brought to a close only by her flinging herself on the sofa with shrieks which

terrified the whole household. My idea is that we must carry the poor fellow away by force. His infatuation makes me rage and curse, but I am bent on trying to save his life. Will you come and give your help?"

A week later, they succeeded in carrying the invalid back to Torquay. Mrs. Barfoot had abandoned him to his doctors, nurses, and angry relatives; she declared herself driven out of the house, and went to live at a fashionable hotel. Everard remained in Devon for more than a month, devoting himself with affection, which the trial of his temper seemed only to increase, to his brother's welfare. Thomas improved a little; once more there was hope. Then, on a sudden frantic impulse, after writing fifty letters which elicited no reply, he travelled in pursuit of his wife; and three days after his arrival in London he was dead.

By a will executed at Torquay, he

bequeathed to Everard about a quarter of his wealth. All the rest went to Mrs. Barfoot, who had declared herself too ill to attend the funeral, but in a fortnight was sufficiently recovered to visit one of her friends in the country.

Everard could now count upon an income of not much less than fifteen hundred a year. That his brother's death would enrich him he had always foreseen, but no man could have exerted himself with more ardent energy to postpone that advantage. The widow charged him, wherever she happened to be, with deliberate fratricide; she vilified his reputation, by word of mouth or by letter, to all who knew him, and protested that his furious wrath at not having profited more largely by the will put her in fear of her life. This last remarkable statement was made in a long and violent epistle to Miss Barfoot, which the recipient showed to her cousin on the first opportunity.

Everard had called one Sunday morning,—it was the end of March,—to say good-bye on his departure for a few weeks' travel. Having read the letter, he laughed with a peculiar fierceness.

“This kind of thing,” said Miss Barfoot, “may necessitate your prosecuting her. There is a limit, you know, even to a woman's licence.”

“I am far more likely,” he replied, “to purchase a very nice little cane, and give her an exemplary thrashing.”

“Oh! oh!”

“Upon my word, I see no reason against it! That's how I should deal with a man who talked about me in this way, and none the less if he were a puny creature quite unable to protect himself. In that furious scene before we got Tom away, I felt most terribly tempted to beat her. There's a great deal to be said for woman-beating. I am quite sure that many a labouring man who pommels his

wife is doing exactly the right thing ; no other measure would have the least result. You see what comes of impunity. If this woman saw the possibility that I should give her a public caning, she would be far more careful how she behaved herself.— Let us ask Miss Nunn's opinion."

Rhoda had that moment entered the room. She offered her hand frankly, and asked what the subject was.

" Glance over this letter," said Barfoot. " Oh, you have seen it. I propose to get a light, supple, dandyish cane, and to give Mrs. Thomas Barfoot half-a-dozen smart cuts across the back in her own drawing-room, some afternoon when people are present. What have you to say to it ? "

He spoke with such show of angry seriousness that Rhoda paused before replying.

" I sympathize with you," she said at length, " but I don't think I would go to that extremity."

Everard repeated the argument he had used to his cousin.

“You are quite right,” Rhoda assented. “I think many women deserve to be beaten, and ought to be beaten. But public opinion would be so much against you.”

“What do I care? So is public opinion against *you*.”

“Very well. Do as you like. Miss Barfoot and I will come to the police court and give strong evidence in your favour.”

“Now there’s a woman!” exclaimed Everard, not all in jest, for Rhoda’s appearance had made his nerves thrill and his pulse beat. “Look at her, Mary. Do you wonder that I would walk the diameter of the globe to win her love?”

Rhoda flushed scarlet, and Miss Barfoot was much embarrassed. Neither could have anticipated such an utterance as this. “That’s the simple truth,” went on

Everard recklessly, "and she knows it, and yet won't listen to me. Well, good-bye to you both! Now that I have so grossly misbehaved myself, she has a good excuse for refusing even to enter the room when I am here. But do speak a word for me whilst I am away, Mary."

He shook hands with them, scarcely looking at their faces, and abruptly departed.

The women stood for a few moments at a distance from each other. Then Miss Barfoot glanced at her friend and laughed.

"Really my poor cousin is not very discreet."

"Anything but," Rhoda answered, resting on the back of a chair, her eyes cast down. "Do you think he will really cane his sister-in-law?"

"How can you ask such a question?"

"It would be amusing.—I should think better of him for it."

"Well, make it a condition. We know

the story of the lady and her glove. I can see you sympathize with her."

Rhoda laughed, and went away, leaving Miss Barfoot with the impression that she had revealed a genuine impulse. It seemed not impossible that Rhoda might wish to say to her lover: "Face this monstrous scandal, and I am yours."

A week passed, and there arrived a letter, with a foreign stamp, addressed to Miss Nunn. Happening to receive it before Miss Barfoot had come down to breakfast, she put it away in a drawer till evening leisure, and made no mention of its arrival. Exhilaration appeared in her behaviour through the day. After dinner she disappeared, shutting herself up to read the letter.

"DEAR MISS NUNN,—I am sitting at a little marble table outside a café on the Cannebière. Does that name convey anything to you? The Cannebière

is the principal street of Marseilles, a street of gorgeous cafés and restaurants, just now blazing with electric light. You, no doubt, are shivering by the fireside; here it is like an evening of summer. I have dined luxuriously, and I am taking my coffee whilst I write. At a table near to me sit two girls, engaged in the liveliest possible conversation, of which I catch a few words now and then, pretty French phrases that caress the ear. One of them is so strikingly beautiful that I cannot take my eyes from her when they have been tempted to that quarter. She speaks with indescribable grace and animation, has the sweetest eyes and lips—

“And all the time I am thinking of some one else. Ah, if *you* were here! How we would enjoy ourselves among these southern scenes! Alone, it is delightful; but with you for a companion, with you to talk about everything in your splendidly frank way! This French girl’s

talk is of course only silly chatter ; it makes me long to hear a few words from your lips,—strong, brave, intelligent.

“ I dream of the ideal possibility. Suppose I were to look up, and see you standing just in front of me, there on the pavement. You have come in a few hours straight from London. Your eyes glow with delight. To-morrow we shall travel on to Genoa, you and I, more than friends, and infinitely more than the common husband and wife ! We have bidden the world go round for *our* amusement ; henceforth it is our occupation to observe and discuss and make merry.

“ Is it all in vain ? Rhoda, if you never love me, my life will be poor to what it might have been ; and you, you also, will lose something. In imagination, I kiss your hands and your lips.

“ EVERARD BARFOOT.”

There was an address at the head of this

letter, but certainly Barfoot expected no reply, and Rhoda had no thought of sending one. Every night, however, she unfolded the sheet of thin foreign paper, and read, more than once, what was written upon it. Read it with external calm, with a brow of meditation, and afterwards sat for some time in absent mood.

Would he write again?—Her daily question was answered in rather more than a fortnight. This time the letter came from Italy; it was lying on the hall table when Rhoda returned from Great Portland Street, and Miss Barfoot was the first to read the address. They exchanged no remark. On breaking the envelope,—she did so at once,—Rhoda found a little bunch of violets, crushed but fragrant.

“These in return for your Cheddar pinks,” began the informal note accompanying the flowers. “I had them an hour ago from a very pretty girl in the streets of Parma. I didn’t care to buy, and walked

on, but the pretty girl ran by me, and with gentle force fixed the flowers in my button-hole, so that I had no choice but to stroke her velvety cheek and give her a lira.—How hungry I am for a sight of your face! Think of me sometimes, dear friend.”

She laughed, and laid the letter, and its violets, away with the other.

“I must depend on you, it seems, for news of Everard,” said Miss Barfoot, after dinner.

“I can only tell you,” Rhoda answered lightly, “that he has travelled from the south of France to the north of Italy, with much observation of female countenances.”

“He informs you of that?”

“Very naturally. It is his chief interest. One likes people to tell the truth.”

Barfoot was away until the end of April, but after that note from Parma he did not write. One bright afternoon in May, a

Saturday, he presented himself at his cousin's house, and found two or three callers in the drawing-room, ladies as usual; one of them was Miss Winifred Haven, another was Mrs. Widdowson. Mary received him without effusiveness, and after a few minutes' talk with her he took a place by Mrs. Widdowson, who, it struck him, looked by no means in such good spirits as during the early days of her marriage. As soon as she began to converse, his impression of a change in her was confirmed; the girliness so pleasantly noticeable when first he knew her had disappeared, and the gravity substituted for it was suggestive of disillusion, of trouble.

She asked him if he knew some people named Bevis, who occupied a flat just above his own.

“Bevis?—I have seen the name on the index at the foot of the stairs; but I don't know them personally.”

“That was how I came to know that *you* lived there,” said Monica. “My husband took me to call upon the Bevises, and there we saw your name. At least, we supposed it was you, and Miss Barfoot tells me we were right.”

“Oh yes; I live there all alone, a gloomy bachelor. How delightful if you knocked at my door some day, when you and Mr. Widdowson are again calling on your friends.”

Monica smiled, and her eyes wandered restlessly.

“You have been away — out of England?” she next said.

“Yes; in Italy.”

“I envy you.”

“You have never been there?”

“No—not yet”

He talked a little of the agreeables and disagreeables of life in that country. But Mrs. Widdowson had become irresponsive; he doubted at length whether she was

listening to him, so, as Miss Haven stepped this way, he took an opportunity of a word aside with his cousin.

“Miss Nunn not at home?”

“No. Won’t be till dinner-time.”

“Quite well?”

“Never was better.—Would you care to come back and dine with us, at half-past seven?”

“Of course I should.”

With this pleasant prospect, he took his leave. The afternoon being sunny, instead of walking straight to the station, to return home, he went out on to the Embankment, and sauntered round by Chelsea Bridge Road. As he entered Sloane Square, he saw Mrs. Widdowson, who was coming towards the railway; she walked rather wearily, with her eyes on the ground, and did not become aware of him until he addressed her.

“Are we travelling the same way?” he asked. “Westward?”

“ Yes. I am going all the way round to Portland Road.”

They entered the station, Barfoot chatting humorously. And so intent was he on the expression of his companion's downcast face, that he allowed an acquaintance to pass close by him unobserved. It was Rhoda Nunn, returning sooner than Miss Barfoot had expected. She saw the pair, regarded them with a moment's keen attentiveness, and went on, out into the street.

In the first class carriage which they entered there was no other passenger as far as Barfoot's station. He could not resist the temptation to use rather an intimate tone, though one that was quite conventional, in the hope that he might discover something of Mrs. Widdowson's mind. He began by asking whether she thought it a good Academy this year. She had not yet visited it, but hoped to do so on Monday. Did she herself do any kind

of artistic work? Oh, nothing whatever; she was a very useless and idle person. He believed she had been a pupil of Miss Barfoot's at one time? Yes, for a very short time indeed, just before her marriage. Was she not an intimate friend of Miss Nunn? Hardly intimate. They knew each other a few years ago, but Miss Nunn did not care much about her now.

"Probably because I married," she added, with a smile.

"Is Miss Nunn really such a determined enemy of marriage?"

"She thinks it pardonable in very weak people.—In my case she was indulgent enough to come to the wedding."

This piece of news surprised Barfoot.

"She came to your wedding? And wore a wedding-garment?"

"Oh yes. And looked very nice."

"Do describe it to me. Can you remember?"

Seeing that no woman ever forgot the

details of another's dress, on however trivial an occasion, and at whatever distance of time, Monica was of course able to satisfy the inquirer. Her curiosity excited, she ventured, in turn, upon one or two insidious questions.

“You couldn't imagine Miss Nunn in such a costume?”

“I should very much like to have seen her.”

“She has a very striking face—don't you think so?”

“Indeed I do. A wonderful face.”

Their eyes met. Barfoot bent forward from his place opposite Monica.

“To me the most interesting of all faces,” he said softly.

His companion blushed with surprise and pleasure.

“Does it seem strange to you, Mrs. Widdowson?”

“Oh—why?—Not at all.”

All at once she had brightened

astonishingly. This subject was not pursued, but for the rest of the time they talked with a new appearance of mutual confidence and interest, Monica retaining her pretty, half-bashful smile. And when Barfoot alighted at Bayswater, they shook hands with an especial friendliness, both seeming to suggest a wish that they might soon meet again.

They did so, no later than the following Monday. Remembering what Mrs. Widdowson had said of her intention to visit Burlington House, Barfoot went there in the afternoon. If he chanced to encounter the pretty little woman, it would not be disagreeable. Perhaps her husband might be with her, and in that case he could judge of the terms on which they stood. A surly fellow, Widdowson; very likely to play the tyrant, he thought. If he were not mistaken, she had wearied of him and regretted her bondage—the old story. Thinking thus, and strolling through the

rooms with casual glances at a picture, he discovered his acquaintance, catalogue in hand, alone for the present. Her pensive face again answered to his smile. They drew back from the pictures, and sat down.

“I dined with our friends at Chelsea on Saturday evening,” said Barfoot.

“On Saturday? You didn’t tell me you were going back again.”

“I wasn’t thinking of it just at the time.”

Monica hinted an amused surprise.

“You see,” he went on, “I expected nothing, and happy for me that it was so. Miss Nunn was in her severest mood; I think she didn’t smile once through the evening.—I will confess to you that I wrote her a letter whilst I was abroad, and it offended her, I suppose.”

“I don’t think you can always judge of her thoughts by her face.”

“Perhaps not. But I have studied her face so often and so closely.—For all that,

she is more a mystery to me than any woman I have ever known. That, of course, is partly the reason of her power over me. I feel that if ever—if ever she should disclose herself to me, it would be the strangest revelation. Every woman wears a mask, except to one man; but Rhoda's—Miss Nunn's—is, I fancy, a far completer disguise than I ever tried to pierce."

Monica had a sense of something perilous in this conversation. It arose from a secret trouble in her own heart, which she might, involuntarily, be led to betray. She had never talked thus confidentially with any man; not, in truth, with her husband. There was no fear whatever of her conceiving an undue interest in Barfoot; certain reasons assured her of that; but talk that was at all sentimental gravely threatened her peace—what little remained to her. It would have been better to discourage this

man's confidences; yet they flattered her so pleasantly, and afforded such a fruitful subject for speculation, that she could not obey the prompting of prudence.

"Do you mean," she said, "that Miss Nunn seems to disguise her feelings?"

"It is supposed to be wrong—isn't it?—for a man to ask one woman her opinion of another."

"I can't be treacherous, if I wished," Monica replied. "I don't feel that I understand her."

Barfoot wondered how much intelligence he might attribute to Mrs. Widdowson. Obviously her level was much below that of Rhoda. Yet she seemed to possess delicate sensibilities, and a refinement of thought not often met with in women of her position. Seriously desiring her aid, he looked at her with a grave smile, and asked:

"Do you believe her capable of falling in love?"

Monica showed a painful confusion. She overcame it, however, and soon answered.

“She would perhaps try not—not to acknowledge it to herself.”

“When, in fact, it had happened?”

“She thinks it so much nobler to disregard such feelings.”

“I know. She is to be an inspiring example to the women who cannot hope to marry.” He laughed silently. “And I suppose it is quite possible that mere shame would withhold her from taking the opposite course.”

“I think she is very strong. But”—

“But?”

He looked eagerly into her face.

“I can’t tell. I don’t really know her.—A woman may be as much a mystery to another woman as she is to a man.”

“On the whole, I am glad to hear you say that. I believe it. It is only the vulgar that hold a different opinion.”

“Shall we look at the pictures, Mr. Barfoot?”

“Oh, I am so sorry. I have been wasting your time”—

Nervously disclaiming any such thought, Monica rose and drew near to the canvases. They walked on together for some ten minutes, until Barfoot, who had turned to look at a passing figure, said in his ordinary voice :

“I think that is Mr. Widdowson on the other side of the room.”

Monica looked quickly round, and saw her husband, as if occupied with the pictures, glancing in her direction.

IX.

THE CLANK OF THE CHAINS.

SINCE Saturday evening, Monica and her husband had not been on speaking terms. A visit she paid to Mildred Vesper, after her call at Miss Barfoot's, prolonged itself so that she did not reach home until the dinner-hour was long past. On arriving, she was met with an outburst of tremendous wrath, to which she opposed a resolute and haughty silence ; and since then, the two had kept as much apart as possible.

Widdowson knew that Monica was going to the Academy. He allowed her to set forth alone, and even tried to persuade himself that he was indifferent as to the hour of her return ; but she had not been

long gone before he followed. Insufferable misery possessed him. His married life threatened to terminate in utter wreck, and he had the anguish of recognizing that to a great extent this catastrophe would be his own fault. Resolve as he might, he found it impossible to repress the impulses of jealousy which, as soon as peace had been declared between them, brought about a new misunderstanding. Terrible thoughts smouldered in his mind; he felt himself to be one of those men who are driven by passion into crime. Deliberately he had brooded over a tragic close to the wretchedness of his existence; he would kill himself, and Monica should perish with him. But an hour of contentment sufficed to banish such visions, as sheer frenzy. He saw once more how harmless, how natural, were Monica's demands, and how peacefully he might live with her but for the curse of suspicion from which he could not free himself. Any other man would deem her

a model of wifely virtue. Her care of the house was all that reason could desire. In her behaviour he had never detected the slightest impropriety. He believed her chaste as any woman living. She asked only to be trusted, and that, in spite of all, was beyond his power.

In no woman on earth could he have put perfect confidence. He regarded them as born to perpetual pupilage. Not that their inclinations were necessarily wanton; they were simply incapable of attaining maturity, remained throughout their life imperfect beings, at the mercy of craft, ever liable to be misled by childish misconceptions. Of course he was right; he himself represented the guardian male, the wife-proprietor, who from the dawn of civilization has taken abundant care that woman shall not outgrow her nonage. The bitterness of his situation lay in the fact that he had wedded a woman who irresistibly proved to him her claims

as a human being. Reason and tradition contended in him, to his ceaseless torment.

And again, he feared that Monica did not love him. Had she ever loved him? There was too much ground for suspecting that she had only yielded to the persistence of his entreaties, with just liking enough to permit a semblance of tenderness, and glad to exchange her prospect of distasteful work for a comfortable married life. Her liking he might have fostered; during those first happy weeks, assuredly he had done so, for no woman could be insensible to the passionate worship manifest in his every look, his every word. Later, he took the wrong path, seeking to oppose her instincts, to reform her mind, eventually to become her lord and master. Could he not even now retrace his steps? Supposing her incapable of bowing before him, of kissing his feet, could he not be content to make

of her a loyal friend, a delightful companion?

In that mood he hastened towards Burlington House. Seeking Monica through the galleries, he saw her at length—sitting side by side with that man Barfoot. They were in closest colloquy. Barfoot bent towards her as if speaking in an undertone, a smile on his face. Monica looked at once pleased and troubled.

The blood boiled in his veins. His first impulse was to walk straight up to Monica and bid her follow him. But the ecstasy of jealous suffering kept him an observer. He watched the pair until he was des-cried.

There was no help for it. Though his brain whirled, and his flesh was stabbed, he had no choice but to take the hand Barfoot offered him. Smile he could not, nor speak a word.

“So you have come after all?” Monica was saying to him.

He nodded. On her countenance there was obvious embarrassment, but this needed no explanation save the history of the last day or two. Looking into her eyes, he knew not whether consciousness of wrong might be read there. How to get at the secrets of this woman's heart?

Barfoot was talking, pointing at this picture and that, doing his best to smooth what he saw was an awkward situation. The gloomy husband, more like a tyrant than ever, muttered incoherent phrases. In a minute or two, Everard freed himself, and moved out of sight.

Monica turned from her husband, and affected interest in the pictures. They reached the end of the room before Widdowson spoke.

“How long do you want to stay here?”

“I will go whenever you like,” she answered, without looking at him.

“I have no wish to spoil your pleasure.”

“Really, I have very little pleasure in

anything.—Did you come only to keep me in sight?”

“I think we will go home now, and you can come another day.”

Monica assented by closing her catalogue and walking on.

Without a word, they made the journey back to Herne Hill. Widdowson shut himself in the library, and did not appear till dinner-time. The meal was a pretence for both of them, and as soon as they could rise from the table, they again parted.

About ten o'clock Monica was joined by her husband in the drawing-room.

“I have almost made up my mind,” he said, standing near her, “to take a serious step. As you have always spoken with pleasure of your old home, Clevedon, suppose we give up this house, and go and live there?”

“It is for you to decide.”

“I want to know whether you would have any objection.”

“I shall do just as you wish.”

“No, that isn't enough.—The plan I have in mind is this. I should take a good large house,—no doubt rents are low in the neighbourhood,—and ask your sisters to come and live with us. I think it would be a good thing both for them and for you.”

“You can't be sure that they would agree to it. You see that Virginia prefers her lodgings to living here.”

Oddly enough, this was the case. On their return from Guernsey they had invited Virginia to make a permanent home with them, and she refused. Her reasons Monica could not understand; those which she alleged—vague arguments as to its being better for a wife's relatives not to burden the husband—hardly seemed genuine. It was possible that Virginia had a distaste for Widdowson's society.

“I think they both would be glad to live at Clevedon,” he urged, “judging from

your sisters' talk. It's plain that they have quite given up the idea of the school, and Alice, you tell me, is getting dissatisfied with her work at Yatton.—But I must know whether you will enter seriously into this scheme.”

Monica kept silence.

“ Please answer me.”

“ Why have you thought of it ? ”

“ I don't think I need explain. We have had too many unpleasant conversations, and I wish to act for the best without saying things you would misunderstand.”

“ There is no fear of my misunderstanding. You have no confidence in me, and you want to get me away into a quiet country place where I shall be under your eyes every moment. It's much better to say that plainly.”

“ That means, you would consider it going to prison.”

“ How could I help ? What other motive have you ? ”

He was prompted to make brutal declaration of authority, and so cut the knot. Monica's unanswerable argument merely angered him. But he made an effort over himself.

"Don't you think it best that we should take some step before our happiness is irretrievably ruined?"

"I see no need for its ruin. As I have told you before, in talking like that you degrade yourself and insult me."

"I have my faults; I know them only too well. One of them is that I cannot bear you to make friends with people who are not of my kind. I shall never be able to endure that."

"Of course you are speaking of Mr. Barfoot."

"Yes," he avowed sullenly. "It was a very unfortunate thing that I happened to come up just as he was in your company."

"You are so very unreasonable," exclaimed Monica tartly. "What pos-

sible harm is there in Mr. Barfoot, when he meets me by chance in a public place, having a conversation with me? I wish I knew twenty such men. Such conversation gives me a new interest in life. I have every reason to think well of Mr. Barfoot."

Widdowson was in anguish.

"And I," he replied, in a voice shaken with angry feeling, "feel that I have every reason to dislike and suspect him. He is not an honest man; his face tells me that. I know his life wouldn't bear inspection. You can't possibly be as good a judge as I am in such a case.—Contrast him with Bevis. Now Bevis is a man one can trust; one talk with him produces a lasting favourable impression."

Monica, silent for a brief space, looked fixedly before her, her features all but expressionless.

"Yet even with Mr. Bevis," she said at length, "you don't make friends. That is the fault in you which causes all this

trouble. You haven't a sociable spirit. Your dislike of Mr. Barfoot only means that you don't know him, and don't wish to. And you are completely wrong in your judgment of him. I have every reason for being sure that you are wrong."

"Of course you think so. In your ignorance of the world"—

"Which you think very proper in a woman," she interposed caustically.

"Yes, I do! That kind of knowledge is harmful to a woman."

"Then, please, how is she to judge her acquaintances?"

"A married woman must accept her husband's opinion, at all events about men." He plunged on into the ancient quagmire. "A man may know with impunity what is injurious if it enters a woman's mind."

"I don't believe that. I can't and won't believe it."

He made a gesture of despair.

“We differ hopelessly. It was all very well to discuss these things when you could do so in a friendly spirit. Now you say whatever you know will irritate me, and you say it on purpose to irritate me.”

“No; indeed I do not. But you are quite right that I find it hard to be friendly with you. Most earnestly I wish to be your friend—your true and faithful friend. But you won't let me.”

“Friend!” he cried scornfully. “The woman who has become my wife ought to be something more than a friend, I should think. You have lost all love for me—there's the misery.”

Monica could not reply. That word “love” had grown a weariness to her upon his lips. She did not love him; could not pretend to love him. Every day the distance between them widened, and when he took her in his arms she had to struggle

with a sense of shrinking, of disgust. Their union was unnatural; she felt herself constrained by a hateful force when he called upon her for the show of wifely tenderness. Yet how was she to utter this? The moment such a truth had passed her lips, she must leave him. To declare that no trace of love remained in her heart, and still to live with him—that was impossible! The dark foresight of a necessity of parting from him corresponded in her to those lurid visions which at times shook Widowson with a horrible temptation.

“You don’t love me,” he continued, in harsh, choking tones. “You wish to be my *friend*. That’s how you try to compensate me for the loss of your love.”

He laughed with bitterness.

“When you say that,” Monica answered, “do you ever ask yourself whether you try to make me love you? Scenes like this are ruining my health. I have come to dread your talk. I have almost forgotten

the sound of your voice when it isn't either angry or complaining."

Widdowson walked about the room, and a deep moan escaped him.

"That is why I have asked you to go away from here, Monica. We must have a new home if our life is to begin anew."

"I have no faith in mere change of place. You would be the same man. If you cannot command your senseless jealousy here, you never would anywhere else."

He made an effort to say something; seemed to abandon it; again tried, and spoke in a thick, unnatural voice.

"Can you honestly repeat to me what Barfoot was saying to-day, when you were on the seat together?"

Monica's eyes flashed.

"I could; every word. But I shall not try to do so."

"Not if I beseech you to, Monica? To put my mind at rest"—

“No. When I tell you that you might have heard every syllable, I have said all that I shall.”

It mortified him profoundly that he should have been driven to make so humiliating a request. He threw himself into a chair, and hid his face, sitting thus for a long time in the hope that Monica would be moved to compassion. But when she rose it was only to retire for the night. And with wretchedness in her heart, because she must needs go to the same chamber in which her husband would sleep. She wished so to be alone. The poorest bed in a servant's garret would have been thrice welcome to her; liberty to lie awake, to think without a disturbing presence, to shed tears if need be—that seemed to her a precious boon. She thought with envy of the shop girls in Walworth Road; wished herself back there. What unspeakable folly she had committed! And how true was everything

she had heard from Rhoda Nunn on the subject of marriage !

The next day, Widdowson resorted to an expedient which he had once before tried in like circumstances. He wrote his wife a long letter, eight close pages, reviewing the cause of their troubles, confessing his own errors, insisting gently on those chargeable to her, and finally imploring her to co-operate with him in a sincere endeavour to restore their happiness. This he laid on the table after lunch, and then left Monica alone that she might read it. Knowing beforehand all that the letter contained, Monica glanced over it carelessly. An answer was expected, and she wrote one as briefly as possible.

“Your behaviour seems to me very weak, very unmanly. You make us both miserable, and quite without cause. I can only say as I have said before, that things will never be better until you come to think of me as your free companion, not as

your bondwoman. If you can't do this, you will make me wish that I had never met you, and in the end I am sure it won't be possible for us to go on living together."

She left this note, in a blank envelope, on the hall table, and went out to walk for an hour.

It was the end of one more acute stage in their progressive discord. By keeping at home for a fortnight, Monica soothed her husband and obtained some repose for her own nerves. But she could no longer affect a cordial reconciliation ; caresses left her cold, and Widdowson saw that his company was never so agreeable to her as solitude. When they sat together, both were reading. Monica found more attraction in books as her life grew more unhappy. Though with reluctance, Widdowson had consented to a subscription at Mudie's, and from the new catalogues she either chose for herself, necessarily at random, or by the advice of better-read people, such

as she met at Mrs. Cosgrove's. What modern teaching was to be got from these volumes, her mind readily absorbed. She sought for opinions and arguments which were congenial to her mood of discontent, all but of revolt.

Sometimes the perusal of a love-story embittered her lot to the last point of endurance. Before marriage, her love-ideal had been very vague, elusive ; it found scarcely more than negative expression, as a shrinking from the vulgar or gross desires of her companions in the shop. Now that she had a clearer understanding of her own nature, the type of man correspondent to her natural sympathies also became clear. In every particular he was unlike her husband. She found a suggestion of him in books ; and in actual life, already, perhaps something more than a suggestion. Widdowson's jealousy, in so far as it directed itself against her longing for freedom, was fully justified ; this con-

sciousness often made her sullen when she desired to express a nobler indignation ; but his special prejudice led him altogether astray, and in free resistance on this point she found the relief which enabled her to bear a secret self-reproach. Her refusal to repeat the substance of Barfoot's conversation was, in some degree, prompted by a wish for the continuance of his groundless fears. By persevering in suspicion of Barfoot, he afforded her a firm foothold in their ever renewed quarrels.

A husband's misdirected jealousy excites in the wife derision and a sense of superiority ; more often than not, it fosters an unsuspected attachment, prompts to a perverse pleasure in misleading. Monica became aware of this ; in her hours of misery she now and then gave a harsh laugh, the result of thoughts not seriously entertained, but tempting the fancy to recklessness. What, she asked herself again, would be the end of it all ? Ten

years hence, would she have subdued her soul to a life of weary insignificance, if not of dishonour? For it was dishonour to live with a man she could not love, whether her heart cherished another image or was merely vacant. A dishonour to which innumerable women submitted, a dishonour glorified by social precept, enforced under dread penalties.

But she was so young, and life abounds in unexpected changes.

X.

THE FIRST LIE.

MRS. COSGROVE was a childless widow, with sufficient means and a very mixed multitude of acquaintances. In the general belief her marriage had been a happy one; when she spoke of her deceased husband, it was with respect, and not seldom with affection. Yet her views on the matrimonial relation were known to be of singular audacity. She revealed them only to a small circle of intimates; most of the people who frequented her house had no startling theories to maintain, and regarded their hostess as a good-natured, rather eccentric woman, who loved society and understood how to amuse her guests.

Wealth and position were rarely represented in her drawing-room; nor, on the other hand, was Bohemianism. Mrs. Cosgrove belonged by birth and marriage to the staid middle class, and it seemed as if she made it her object to provide with social entertainment the kind of persons who, in an ordinary way, would enjoy very little of it. Lonely and impecunious girls or women were frequently about her; she tried to keep them in good spirits, tried to marry them if marriage seemed possible, and, it was whispered, used a good deal of her income for the practical benefit of those who needed assistance. A sprinkling of maidens who were neither lonely nor impecunious served to attract young men, generally strugglers in some profession or other, on the look-out for a wife. Intercourse went on with a minimum of formalities. Chaperonage—save for that represented by the hostess herself—was as often as not dispensed with.

“We want to get rid of a lot of sham propriety,”—so she urged to her closer friends. “Girls must learn to trust themselves, and look out for dangers. If a girl can only be kept straight by incessant watchfulness, why, let her go where she will, and learn by experience. In fact, I want to see experience substituted for precept.”

Between this lady and Miss Barfoot there were considerable divergences of opinion, yet they agreed on a sufficient number of points to like each other very well. Occasionally, one of Mrs. Cosgrove's *protégées* passed into Miss Barfoot's hands, abandoning the thought of matrimony for study in Great Portland Street. Rhoda Nunn, also, had a liking for Mrs. Cosgrove, though she made no secret of her opinion that Mrs. Cosgrove's influence was on the whole decidedly harmful.

“That house,” she once said to Miss

Barfoot, "is nothing more than a matrimonial agency."

"But so is every house where many people are entertained."

"Not in the same way. Mrs. Cosgrove was speaking to me of some girl who has just accepted an offer of marriage. 'I don't think they'll suit each other,' she said, 'but there's no harm in trying.'"

Miss Barfoot could not restrain a laugh.

"Who knows? Perhaps she is right in that view of things.—After all, you know, it's only putting into plain words what everybody thinks on all but every such occasion."

"The first part of her remark—yes," said Rhoda caustically. "But as for the 'no harm in trying,' well, let us ask the wife's opinion in a year's time."

Midway in the London season, on Sunday afternoon, about a score of visitors

were assembled in Mrs. Cosgrove's drawing-rooms,—there were two of them, with a landing between. As usual, some one sat at the piano, but a hum of talk went on as undercurrent to the music. Downstairs, in the library, half-a-dozen people found the quietness they preferred, and among these was Mrs. Widdowson. She had an album of portraits on her lap; whilst turning them over, she listened to a chat going on between the sprightly Mr. Bevis and a young married woman who laughed ceaselessly at his jokes. It was only a few minutes since she had come down from the drawing-room. Presently her eyes encountered a glance from Bevis, and at once he stepped over to a seat beside her.

“Your sisters are not here to-day?” she said.

“No. They have guests of their own. And when are you coming to see them again?”

“Before long, I hope.”

Bevis looked away and seemed to reflect.

“Do come next Saturday—could you?”

“I had better not promise.”

“Do try, and”—he lowered his voice—
“come alone. Forgive me for saying that. The girls are rather afraid of Mr. Widdowson, that’s the truth. They would so like a free gossip with you. Let me tell them to expect you about half-past three or four. They will rise up and call me blessed.”

Laughing, Monica at length agreed to come if circumstances were favourable. Her talk with Bevis continued for a long time, until people had begun to leave. Some other acquaintance then claimed her, but she was now dull and monosyllabic, as if conversation had exhausted her energies. At six o’clock she stole away unobserved, and went home.

Widdowson had resigned himself, in appearance at all events, to these absences. It was several weeks since he had accom-

panied his wife to call upon any one ; a sluggishness was creeping over him, strengthening his disinclination for society. The futile endeavour to act with decision, to carry Monica away into Somerset, resulted, as futile efforts of that kind are wont to do, in increased feebleness of the will ; he was less capable than ever of exerting the authority which he still believed himself to keep for the last resort. Occasionally, some days went by without his leaving the house. Instead of the one daily newspaper he had been used to take, he now received three ; after breakfast he sometimes spent a couple of hours over the *Times*, and the evening papers often occupied him from dinner to bedtime. Monica noticed, with a painful conflict of emotions, that his hair had begun to lose its uniform colour, and to show streaks that matched with his grizzled beard. Was *she* responsible for this ?

On the Saturday when she was to visit

the Bevises, she feared lest he should propose to go with her. She wished even to avoid the necessity of telling him where she was going. As she rose from luncheon Widdowson glanced at her.

“I’ve ordered the trap, Monica. Will you come for a drive?”

“I have promised to go into the town.—I’m very sorry.”

“It doesn’t matter”

This was his latest mode of appealing to her,—with an air of pained resignation.

“For a day or two I haven’t felt at all well,” he continued gloomily. “I thought a drive might do me good.”

“Certainly. I hope it will. When would you like to have dinner?”

“I never care to alter the hours. Of course I shall be back at the usual time. Shall *you* be?”

“Oh, yes—long before dinner.”

So she got away without any explana-

tion. At a quarter to four she reached the block of flats in which the Bevises (and Everard Barfoot) resided. With a fluttering of the heart, she went very quietly upstairs, as if anxious that her footsteps should not be heard ; her knock at the door was timid.

Bevis in person opened to her.

“ Delighted ! I thought it *might* be ”—

She entered, and walked into the first room, where she had been once before. But to her surprise it was vacant. She looked round and saw Bevis's countenance gleaming with satisfaction.

“ My sisters will be here in a few minutes,” he said. “ A few minutes at most. Will you take this chair, Mrs. Widdowson ? How delighted I am that you were able to come ! ”

So perfectly natural was his manner, that Monica, after the first moment of consternation, tried to forget that there

was anything irregular in her presence here under these circumstances. As regards social propriety, a flat differs in many respects from a house. In an ordinary drawing-room, it could scarcely have mattered if Bevis entertained her for a short space until his sisters' arrival ; but in this little set of rooms it was doubtfully permissible for her to sit *tête-à-tête* with a young man, under any excuse. And the fact of his opening the front door himself seemed to suggest that not even a servant was in the flat. A tremor grew upon her as she talked, due in part to the consciousness that she was glad to be thus alone with Bevis.

“ A place like this must seem to you to be very unhomelike,” he was saying, as he lounged on a low chair not very far from her. “ The girls didn't like it at all at first. I suppose it's a retrograde step in civilization. Servants are decidedly of that opinion ; we have a great difficulty in

getting them to stay here. The reason seems to be that they miss the congenial gossip of the area door. At this moment we are without a domestic. I found she compensated herself for disadvantages by stealing my tobacco and cigars. She went to work with such lack of discretion—abstracting half a pound of honeydew at a time—that I couldn't find any sympathy for her. Moreover, when charged with the delinquency, she became abusive, so very abusive that we were obliged to insist upon her immediate departure."

"Do you think she smoked?" asked Monica laughingly.

"We have debated that point with much interest. She was a person of advanced ideas, as you see; practically a communist. But I doubt whether honeydew had any charms for her personally. It seems more probable that some milkman, or baker's assistant, or even metropolitan policeman, benefited by her communism."

Indifferent to the progress of time, Bevis talked on with his usual jocoseness, now and then shaking his tawny hair in a fit of laughter the most contagious.

“But I have something to tell you,” he said at length more seriously. “I am going to leave England. They want me to live at Bordeaux for a time, two or three years perhaps. It’s a great bore, but I shall have to go. I am not my own master.”

“Then your sisters will go to Guernsey?”

“Yes. I dare say I shall leave about the end of July.”

He became silent, looking at Monica with humorous sadness.

“Do you think your sisters will soon be here, Mr. Bevis?” Monica asked, with a glance round the room.

“I think so.—Do you know, I did a very silly thing. I wanted your visit (if you came) to be a surprise for them, and so—in fact, I said nothing about it. When I

got here from business, a little before three, they were just going out. I asked them if they were sure they would be back in less than an hour. Oh, they were quite sure—not a doubt of it. I do hope they haven't altered their mind, and gone to call somewhere. But, Mrs. Widdowson, I am going to make you a cup of tea,—with my own fair hands, as the novelists say.”

Monica begged that he would not trouble. Under the circumstances, she had better not stay. She would come again, very soon.

“No, I can't, I can't let you go!” Bevis exclaimed, softening his gay tone as he stood before her. “How shall I entreat you? If you know what an unforgettable delight it will be to me to make you a cup of tea! I shall think of it at Bordeaux every Saturday.”

She had risen, but exhibited no immutable resolve.

“I really must go, Mr. Bevis”—

“Don’t drive me to despair. I am capable of turning my poor sisters out of house and home,—flat and home, I mean,—in anger at their delay. On their account, in pity for their youth, do stay, Mrs. Widdowson!—Besides, I have a new song that I want you to hear,—words and music my own. One little quarter of an hour! And I know the girls will be here directly.”

His will, and her inclination, prevailed. Monica sat down again, and Bevis disappeared to make the tea. Water must have been already boiling, for in less than five minutes the young man returned with a tray, on which all the necessaries were neatly arranged. With merry homage, he waited upon his guest. Monica’s cheeks were warm. After the vain attempt to release herself from what was now distinctly a compromising situation, she had sat down in an easier attitude than before, as though resolved to enjoy her liberty

whilst she might. There was a suspicion in her mind that Bevis had arranged this interview; she doubted the truth of his explanation. And indeed she hoped that his sisters would not return until after her departure; it would be very embarrassing to meet them.

Whilst talking and listening, she silently defended herself against the charge of impropriety. What wrong was she committing? What matter that they were alone? Their talk was precisely what it might have been in other people's presence. And Bevis, such a frank, good-hearted fellow, could not by any possibility fail in respect to her. The objections were all cant, and cant of the worst kind. She would not be a slave of such ignoble prejudices.

“You haven't made Mr. Barfoot's acquaintance yet?” she asked.

“No, I haven't. There seems to have been no opportunity. Did you seriously wish me to know him?”

“ Oh, I had no wish in the matter at all.”

“ You like Mr. Barfoot ? ”

“ I think him very pleasant.”

“ How delightful to be praised by you, Mrs. Widdowson ! Now if any one speaks to you about *me*, when I have left England, will you find some nice word ?—Don't think me foolish. I do so desire the good opinion of my friends. To know that you spoke of me as you did of Mr. Barfoot would give me a whole day of happiness.”

“ How enviable ! To be so easily made happy.”

“ Now let me sing you this song of mine. It isn't very good ; I haven't composed for years. But ”—

He sat down and rattled over the keys. Monica was expecting a lively air and spirited words, as in the songs she had heard at Guernsey ; but this composition told of sadness and longing and the burden of a lonely heart. She thought it very

beautiful, very touching. Bevis looked round to see the effect it produced upon her, and she could not meet his eyes.

“Quite a new sort of thing for me, Mrs. Widdowson. Does it strike you as so very bad?”

“No—not at all.”

“But you can’t honestly praise it?” He sighed, in dejection. “I meant to give you a copy. I made this one specially for you, and—if you will forgive me—I have taken the liberty of dedicating it to you. Song-writers do that, you know. Of course it is altogether unworthy of your acceptance”—

“No—no—indeed I am very grateful to you, Mr. Bevis. Do give it me—as you meant to.”

“You will have it?” he cried delightedly. “Now for a triumphal march!”

Whilst he played, with look corresponding to the exultant strain, Monica rose

from her chair. She stood with eyes downcast and lips pressed together. When the last chord had sounded :

“ Now I must say good-bye, Mr. Bevis.—I am so sorry your sisters haven't come.”

“ So am I—and yet I am not. I have enjoyed the happiest half hour of my life.”

“ Will you give me the piece of music ? ”

“ Let me roll it up.—There ; it won't be very awkward to carry.—But of course I shall see you again before the end of July ? You will come some other afternoon ? ”

“ If Miss Bevis will let me know when she is quite sure ”—

“ Yes, she shall. Do you know, I don't think I shall say a word about what has happened this afternoon. Will you allow me to keep silence about your call, Mrs. Widdowson ? They would be so annoyed

—and really it was a silly thing not to tell them —”

Monica made no verbal reply. She looked towards the door. Bevis stepped forward, and held it open.

“ Good-bye, then.—You know what I told you about my tendency to low spirits. I’m going to have a terrible turn—down, down, down !”

She laughed, and offered her hand. He held it very lightly, looking at her with his blue eyes, which indeed expressed a profound melancholy.

“ Thank you,” he murmured. “ Thank you for your great kindness.”

And thereupon he opened the front door for her. Without another look, Monica went quickly down the stairs; she appreciated his motive for not accompanying her to the exit.

Before entering the house, she had managed to conceal the sheet of music which

she was carrying. But, happily, Widdowson was still absent. Half an hour passed—half an hour of brooding and reverie—before she heard his footstep ascending the stairs. On the landing she met him with a pleasant smile.

“Have you enjoyed your drive?”

“Pretty well.”

“And do you feel better?”

“Not much, dear. But it isn't worth talking about.”

Later, he inquired where she had been.

“I had an appointment with Milly Vesper.”

The first falsehood she had ever told him, and yet uttered with such perfect assumption of sincerity as would have deceived the acutest observer. He nodded, discontented as usual, but entertaining no doubt.

And from that moment she hated him. If he had plied her with interrogations, if he had seemed to suspect anything, the

burden of untruth would have been more endurable. His simple acceptance of her word was the sternest rebuke she could have received. She despised herself, and hated him for the degradation which resulted from his lordship over her.

XI.

TOWARDS THE DECISIVE.

MARY BARFOOT had never suffered from lack of interest in life. Many a vivid moment dwelt in her memory ; joys and sorrows, personal or of larger scope, affected her the more deeply because of that ruling intelligence which enabled her to transmute them into principles. No longer anticipating or desiring any great change in her own environment, in the modes and motives of her activity, she found it a sufficient happiness to watch, and when possible to direct, the tendency of younger lives. So kindly had nature tempered her disposition, that already she had been able to outlive those fervours of instinct which

often make the middle life of an unwedded woman one long repining; but her womanly sympathies remained. And at present there was going forward under her own roof, within her daily observation, a comedy, a drama, which had power to excite all her disinterested emotions. It had been in progress for twelve months, and now, unless she was strangely mistaken, the *dénoûment* drew very near.

For all her self-study, her unflinching recognition of physical and psychical facts which the average woman blinks over, Mary deceived herself as to the date of that final triumph which permitted her to observe Rhoda Nunn with perfect equanimity. Her outbreak of angry feeling on the occasion of Bella Royston's death meant something more than she would acknowledge before the inquisition of her own mind. It was just then that she had become aware of Rhoda's changing attitude towards Everard Barfoot; trifles such as

only a woman would detect had convinced her that Everard's interest in Rhoda was awakening a serious response; and this discovery, though it could not surprise her, caused an obscure pang which she attributed to impersonal regret, to mere natural misgiving. For some days she thought of Rhoda in an ironic, half-mocking spirit. Then came Bella's suicide, and the conversation in which Rhoda exhibited a seeming heartlessness, the result, undoubtedly, of grave emotional disturbance. To her own astonishment, Mary was overcome with an impulse of wrathful hostility, and spoke words which she regretted as soon as they had passed her lips.

Poor Bella had very little to do with this moment of discord between two women who sincerely liked and admired each other. She only offered the occasion for an outburst of secret feeling which probably could not have been avoided.

Mary Barfoot had loved her cousin Everard; it began when he was one-and-twenty; she, so much older, had never allowed Everard or any one else to suspect her passion, which made her for two or three years more unhappy than she had ever been, or was ever to be when once her strong reason had prevailed. The scandal of Amy Drake, happening long after, revived her misery, which now took the form of truly feminine intolerance; she tried to believe that Everard was henceforth of less than no account to her, that she detested him for his vices. Amy Drake, however, she detested much more.

When her friendship with Rhoda Nunn had progressed to intimacy, she could not refrain from speaking of her cousin Everard, absent at the ends of the earth, and perchance lost to her sight for ever. Her mention of him was severe, yet of a severity so obviously blended with other feeling, that Rhoda could not but surmise

the truth. Sentimental confession never entered Miss Barfoot's mind; she had conquered her desires, and was by no means inclined to make herself ridiculous; Rhoda Nunn, of all women, seemed the least likely to make remarks, or put questions, such as would endanger a betrayal of the buried past. Yet, at a later time, when pressing the inquiry whether Rhoda had ever been in love, Mary did not scruple to suggest that her own knowledge in that direction was complete. She did it in lightness of heart, secure under the protection of her forty years. Rhoda, of course, understood her as referring to Everard.

So the quarrel was one of jealousy. But no sooner had it taken place than Mary Barfoot experienced a shame, a distress, which in truth signified the completion of self-conquest. She thought herself ashamed of being angry where anger was uncalled for; in reality, she

chastised herself for the last revival of a conflict practically over and done with so many years ago. And on this very account, precisely because she was deceiving herself as to her state of mind, she prolonged the painful situation. She said to herself that Rhoda had behaved so wrongly that displeasure was justified, that to make up the quarrel at once would be unwise, for Miss Nunn needed a little discipline. This insistence upon the side issue helped her to disregard the main one, and when at length she offered Rhoda the kiss of reconciliation, that also signified something other than was professed. It meant a hope that Rhoda might know the happiness which to her friend had been denied.

Everard's announcement of his passion for Miss Nunn seemed to Mary a well-calculated piece of boldness. If he seriously sought Rhoda for his wife, this frank avowal of the desire before a third

person might remove some of the peculiar difficulties of the case. Whether willing or not to be wooed, Rhoda, in mere consistency with her pronounced opinions, must needs maintain a scornful silence on the subject of Everard's love-making; by assailing this proud reserve, this dignity which perchance had begun to burden its supporter, Everard made possible, if not inevitable, a discussion of his suit between the two women. She who talks of her lover will be led to think of him.

Miss Barfoot knew not whether to hope for the marriage of this strange pair. She was distrustful of her cousin, found it hard to imagine him a loyal husband, and could not be sure whether Rhoda's qualities were such as would ultimately retain or repel him. She inclined to think his wooing a mere caprice. But Rhoda gave ear to him, of that there could be little doubt; and since his inheritance of ample means the affair began to have a new

aspect. That Everard persevered, though the world of women was now open to him,—for, on a moderate computation, any man with Barfoot's personal advantages, and armed with fifteen hundred a year, may choose among fifty possible maidens,—seemed to argue that he was really in love. But what it would cost Rhoda to appear before her friends in the character of a bride ! What a humbling of her glory !

Was she capable of the love which defies all humiliation ? Or, loving ardently, would she renounce a desired happiness from dread of female smiles and whispers ? Or would it be her sufficient satisfaction to reject a wealthy suitor, and thus pose more grandly than ever before the circle who saw in her an example of woman's independence ? Powerful was the incitement to curiosity in a situation which, however it ended, would afford such matter for emotional hypothesis.

They did not talk of Everard. Whether

Rhoda replied to his letters from abroad Miss Barfoot had no means of ascertaining. But after his return, he had a very cold reception,—due, perhaps, to some audacity he had allowed himself in his correspondence. Rhoda again avoided meeting with him, and, as Miss Barfoot noticed, threw herself with increased energy into all her old pursuits.

“What about your holiday this year?” Mary asked one evening in June. “Shall you go first, or shall I?”

“Please make whatever arrangements you like.”

Miss Barfoot had a reason for wishing to postpone her holiday until late in August. She said so, and proposed that Rhoda should take any three weeks she liked prior to that.

“Miss Vesper,” she added, “can manage your room very well. We shall be much more at ease in that respect than last year.”

“Yes. Miss Vesper is getting to be very useful and trustworthy.”

Rhoda mused when she had made this remark.

“Do you know,” she asked presently, “whether she sees much of Mrs. Widdowson?”

“I have no idea.”

They decided that Rhoda should go away at the close of July. Where was her holiday to be spent? Miss Barfoot suggested the lake country.

“I was thinking of it myself,” said Rhoda. “I should like to have some sea-bathing, though. A week by the shore, and then the rest of the time spent in vagabondage among the mountains, would suit me very well. Mrs. Cosgrove is at home in Cumberland; I must ask her advice.”

This was done, and there resulted a scheme which seemed to excite Rhoda with joyous anticipation. On the coast of

Cumberland, a few miles south of St. Bees, is a little place called Seascale, unknown to the ordinary tourist, but with a good hotel and a few scattered houses where lodgings can be obtained. Not far away rise the mountain-barriers of lake-land, Wastdale clearly discernible. At Seascale, then, Rhoda would spend her first week, the quiet shore with its fine stretch of sand affording her just the retreat that she desired.

“There are one or two bathing-machines, Mrs. Cosgrove says, but I hope to avoid such abominations. How delicious it was in one’s childhood, when one ran into the sea naked! I will enjoy that sensation once more, if I have to get up at three in the morning.”

About this time, Barfoot made one of his evening calls. He had no hope of seeing Rhoda, and was agreeably surprised by her presence in the drawing-room. Just as happened a year ago, the subject

of Miss Nunn's holiday was brought into the conversation, Barfoot making a direct inquiry. With lively interest, Mary waited for the reply, and was careful not to smile when Rhoda made known her intentions.

“Have you planned a route after your stay at Seascale?” Barfoot asked.

“No. I shall do that when I am there.”

Whether or not he intended a contrast to these homely projects, Barfoot presently began to talk of travel on a grander scale. When he next left England, he should go by the Orient Express, right away to Constantinople. His cousin asked questions about the Orient Express, and he supplied her with details very exciting to the imagination of any one who longs to see the kingdoms of the earth—as undoubtedly Rhoda did. The very name, Orient Express, has a certain sublimity, such as attaches, more or less, to all the

familiar nomenclature of world-transits. He talked himself into fervour, and kept a watch on Rhoda's countenance. As also did Miss Barfoot. Rhoda tried to appear unaffected, but her coldness betrayed its insincerity.

The next day, when work at Great Portland Street was just finished, she fell into conversation with Mildred Vesper. Miss Barfoot had an engagement to dine out that evening, and Rhoda ended by inviting Milly to come home with her to Chelsea. To Milly this was a great honour; she hesitated because of her very plain dress, but easily allowed herself to be persuaded when she saw that Miss Nunn really desired her company.

Before dinner they had a walk in Battersea Park. Rhoda had never been so frank and friendly; she induced the quiet, unpretending girl to talk of her early days, her schools, her family. Remarkable was Milly's quiet contented-

ness; not long ago she had received an increase of payment from Miss Barfoot, and one would have judged that scarcely a wish now troubled her, unless it were that she might see her scattered brothers and sisters, all of whom, happily, were doing pretty well in the struggle for existence.

“You must feel rather lonely in your lodgings sometimes?” said Rhoda.

“Very rarely. In future, I shall have music in the evening. Our best room has been let to a young man who has a violin, and he plays ‘The Blue Bells of Scotland’—not badly.”

Rhoda did not miss the humorous intention, veiled, as usual, under a manner of extreme sedateness.

“Does Mrs. Widdowson come to see you?”

“Not often. She came a few days ago.”

“You go to her house sometimes?”

“I haven’t been there for several

months. At first I used to go rather frequently, but—it's a long way."

To this subject Rhoda returned after dinner, when they were cosily settled in the drawing-room.

"Mrs. Widdowson comes here now and then, and we are always very glad to see her. But I can't help thinking she looks rather unhappy."

"I'm afraid she does," assented the other gravely.

"You and I were both at her wedding. It wasn't very cheerful, was it? I had a disagreeable sense of bad omens all the time.—Do you think she is sorry?"

"I'm really afraid she is."

Rhoda observed the look that accompanied this admission.

"Foolish girl! Why couldn't she stay with us, and keep her liberty?—She doesn't seem to have made any new friends. Has she spoken to you of any?"

"Only of people she has met here."

Rhoda yielded—or seemed to yield—to an impulse of frankness; bending slightly forward, with an anxious expression, she said in confidential tones :

“Can you help to put my mind at rest about Monica? You saw her a week ago. Did she say anything, or give any sign, that might make one really uneasy on her account?”

There was a struggle in Milly before she answered. Rhoda added :

“Perhaps you had rather not”—

“Yes, I had rather tell you. She said a good many strange things, and I *have* been uneasy about her. I wished I could speak to some one”—

“How strange that I should feel urged to ask you about this,” said Rhoda, her eyes, peculiarly bright and keen, fixed on the girl’s face. “The poor thing is very miserable, I am sure. Her husband seems to leave her entirely to herself.”

Milly looked surprised.

“ Monica made quite the opposite complaint to me. She said that she was a prisoner.”

“ That’s very odd. She certainly goes about a good deal, and alone.”

“ I didn’t know that,” said Milly. “ She has very often talked to me about a woman’s right to the same freedom as a man, and I always understood that Mr. Widdowson objected to her going anywhere without him, except just to call here or at my lodgings.”

“ Do you think she has any acquaintance that he dislikes ? ”

The direct answer was delayed, but it came at length.

“ There is some one. She hasn’t told me who it is.”

“ In plain words, Mr. Widdowson thinks he has cause for jealousy ? ”

“ Yes, I understood Monica to mean that.”

Rhoda’s face had grown very dark. She moved her hands nervously.

“But—you don’t think she could deceive him?”

“Oh, I can’t think that!” replied Miss Vesper, with much earnestness. “But what I couldn’t help fearing, after I saw her last, was that she might almost be tempted to leave her husband. She spoke so much of freedom—and of a woman’s right to release herself if she found her marriage was a mistake.”

“I am so grateful to you for telling me all this. We must try to help her. Of course I will make no mention of you, Miss Vesper.—Then you are really under the impression that there’s some one she—prefers to her husband?”

“I can’t help thinking there is,” admitted the other very solemnly. “I was so sorry for her, and felt so powerless. She cried a little. All I could do was to entreat her not to behave rashly. I thought her sister ought to know”—

“Oh, Miss Madden is useless. Monica

cannot look to her for advice or support."

After this conversation, Rhoda passed a very unquiet night, and gloom appeared in her countenance for the next few days.

She wished to have a private interview with Monica, but doubted whether it would in any degree serve her purpose, that of discovering whether certain suspicions she entertained had actual ground. Confidence between her and Mrs. Widdowson had never existed, and in the present state of things she could not hope to probe Monica's secret feelings. Whilst she still brooded over the difficulty there came a letter for her from Everard Barfoot. He wrote formally; it had occurred to him that he might be of some slight service, in view of her approaching holiday, if he looked through the guide-books, and jotted down the outline of such a walking-tour as she had in mind. This he had done, and the results were written out on an enclosed

sheet of paper.—Rhoda allowed a day to intervene, then sent a reply. She thanked Mr. Barfoot sincerely for the trouble he had so kindly taken. “I see you limit me to ten miles a day. In such scenery of course one doesn’t hurry on, but I can’t help informing you that twenty miles wouldn’t alarm me. I think it very likely that I shall follow your itinerary, after my week of bathing and idling. I leave on Monday week.”

Barfoot did not again call. Every evening she sat in expectation of his coming. Twice Miss Barfoot was away until a late hour, and on those occasions, after dinner, Rhoda sat in complete idleness, her face declaring the troubled nature of her thoughts. On the Sunday before her departure, she took a sudden resolve, and went to call upon Monica at Herne Hill.

Mrs. Widdowson, she learnt from the servant, had left home about an hour since.

“Is Mr. Widdowson at home?”

Yes, he was. And Rhoda waited for

some time in the drawing-room until he made his appearance. Of late, Widdowson had grown so careless in the matter of toilet, that an unexpected visit obliged him to hurry through a change of apparel before he could present himself. Looking upon him for the first time for several months, Rhoda saw that misery was undermining the man's health. Words could not have declared his trouble more plainly than the haggard features, and stiff, depressed, self-conscious manner. He fixed his sunken eyes upon the visitor, and smiled, as was plain, only for civility's sake. Rhoda did her best to seem at ease; she explained (standing, for he forgot to ask her to be seated) that she was going away on the morrow, and had hoped to see Mrs. Widdowson, who, she was told, had not been very well of late.

“No, she is not in very good health,” said Widdowson vaguely. “She has gone this afternoon to Mrs. Cosgrove's—I think you know her.”

Less encouragement to remain could not have been offered, but Rhoda conceived a hope of hearing something significant if she persevered in conversation. The awkwardness of doing so was indifferent to her.

“Shall you be leaving town shortly, Mr. Widdowson?”

“We are not quite sure— But pray sit down, Miss Nunn. You haven’t seen my wife lately?”

He took a chair, and rested his hands upon his knees, gazing at the visitor’s skirt.

“Mrs. Widdowson hasn’t been to see us for more than a month—if I remember rightly.”

His look expressed both surprise and doubt.

“A month? But I thought—I had an idea—that she went only a few days ago.”

“In the day time?”

“To Great Portland Street, I mean—

to hear a lecture, or something of that kind, by Miss Barfoot."

Rhoda kept silence for a moment. Then she replied hastily :

"Oh yes—very likely—I wasn't there that afternoon."

"I see. That would explain"—

He seemed relieved, but only for the instant ; then his eyes glanced hither and thither, with painful restlessness. Rhoda observed him closely. After fidgeting with his feet, he suddenly took a stiff position, and said in a louder voice :

"We are going to leave London altogether.—I have decided to take a house at my wife's native place, Clevedon. Her sisters will come and live with us."

"That is a recent decision, Mr. Widdowson ?"

"I have thought about it for some time. London doesn't suit Monica's health ; I'm sure it doesn't. She will be much better in the country."

“ Yes, I think that very likely.”

“ As you say that you have noticed her changed looks, I shall lose no time in getting away.” He made a great show of determined energy. “ A few weeks— We will go down to Clevedon at once, and find a house. Yes, we will go to-morrow, or the day after. Miss Madden, also, is very far from well. I wish I hadn't delayed so long.”

“ You are doing very wisely, I think. I had meant to suggest something of this kind to Mrs. Widdowson. Perhaps, if I went at once to Mrs. Cosgrove's, I might be fortunate enough to find her still there ?”

“ You might.—Did I understand you to say that you go away to-morrow ?—For three weeks.—Ah, then we may be getting ready to remove when you come back.”

The change that had come over him was remarkable. He could not keep his seat,

and began to pace the end of the room. Seeing no possibility of prolonging the talk for her own purposes, Rhoda accepted this dismissal, and with the briefest leave-taking went her way to Mrs. Cosgrove's.

She was deeply agitated. Monica had not attended that lecture of Miss Barfoot's, and so, it was evident, had purposely deceived her husband. To what end? Where were those hours spent? Mildred Vesper's report supplied grounds for sombre conjecture, and the incident at Sloane Square Station, the recollection of Monica and Barfoot absorbed in talk, seemed to have a possible significance which fired Rhoda with resentment.

Her arrival at Mrs. Cosgrove's was too late. Monica had been there, said the hostess, but had left nearly half an hour ago.

Rhoda's instant desire was to go on to Bayswater, and somehow keep watch near the flats where Barfoot lived. Monica

might be there. Her coming forth from the building might be detected.

But the difficulty of the undertaking, and, still more, a dread of being seen hovering about that quarter, checked her purpose as soon as it was formed. She returned home, and for an hour or two kept in solitude.

“What has happened?” asked Miss Barfoot, when they at length met.

“Happened? Nothing that I know of.”

“You look very strange.”

“Your imagination.—I have been packing; perhaps it’s from stooping over the trunk.”

This by no means satisfied Mary, who felt that things mysterious were going on about her. But she could only wait, repeating to herself that the grand *dénoûment* decidedly was not far off.

At nine o’clock sounded the visitor’s bell. If, as she thought likely, the caller was Everard, Miss Barfoot decided that

she would disregard everything but the dramatic pressure of the moment, and leave those two alone together for half an hour. Everard it was; he entered the drawing-room with an unusual air of gaiety.

“I have been in the country all day,” were his first words; and he went on to talk of trivial things—the doings of a Cockney excursion party that had come under his notice.

In a few minutes, Mary made an excuse for absenting herself. When she was gone, Rhoda looked steadily at Barfoot, and asked:

“Have you really been out of town?”

“Why should you doubt it?”

“You left this morning, and have only just returned?”

“As I told you.”

She averted her look. After examining her curiously, Everard came and stood before her.

“I want to ask your leave to meet you somewhere during these next three weeks. At any point on your route. We could have a day’s ramble together, and then—say good-bye.”

“The lake country is free to you, Mr. Barfoot.”

“But I mustn’t miss you. You will leave Seascale to-morrow week?”

“At present I think so. But I can’t restrict myself by any agreement. Holiday must be a time of liberty.”

They looked at each other, she with a carelessness which was all but defiance, he with a significant smile.

“To-morrow week, then, perhaps we may meet again.”

Rhoda made no reply, beyond a movement of her eyebrows, as if to express indifference.

“I won’t stay longer this evening. A pleasant journey to you!”

He shook hands, and left the room. In

the hall Miss Barfoot came to meet him ; they exchanged a few words, unimportant and without reference to what had passed between him and Rhoda. Nor did Rhoda speak of the matter when joined by her friend. She retired early, having settled all the arrangements for her departure by the ten o'clock express from Euston next morning.

Her luggage was to consist of one trunk and a wallet with a strap, which would serve the purposes of a man's knapsack. Save the indispensable umbrella, she carried no impeding trifles. A new costume, suitable for shore and mountain, was packed away in the trunk ; Miss Barfoot had judged of its effect, and was of opinion that it became the wearer admirably.

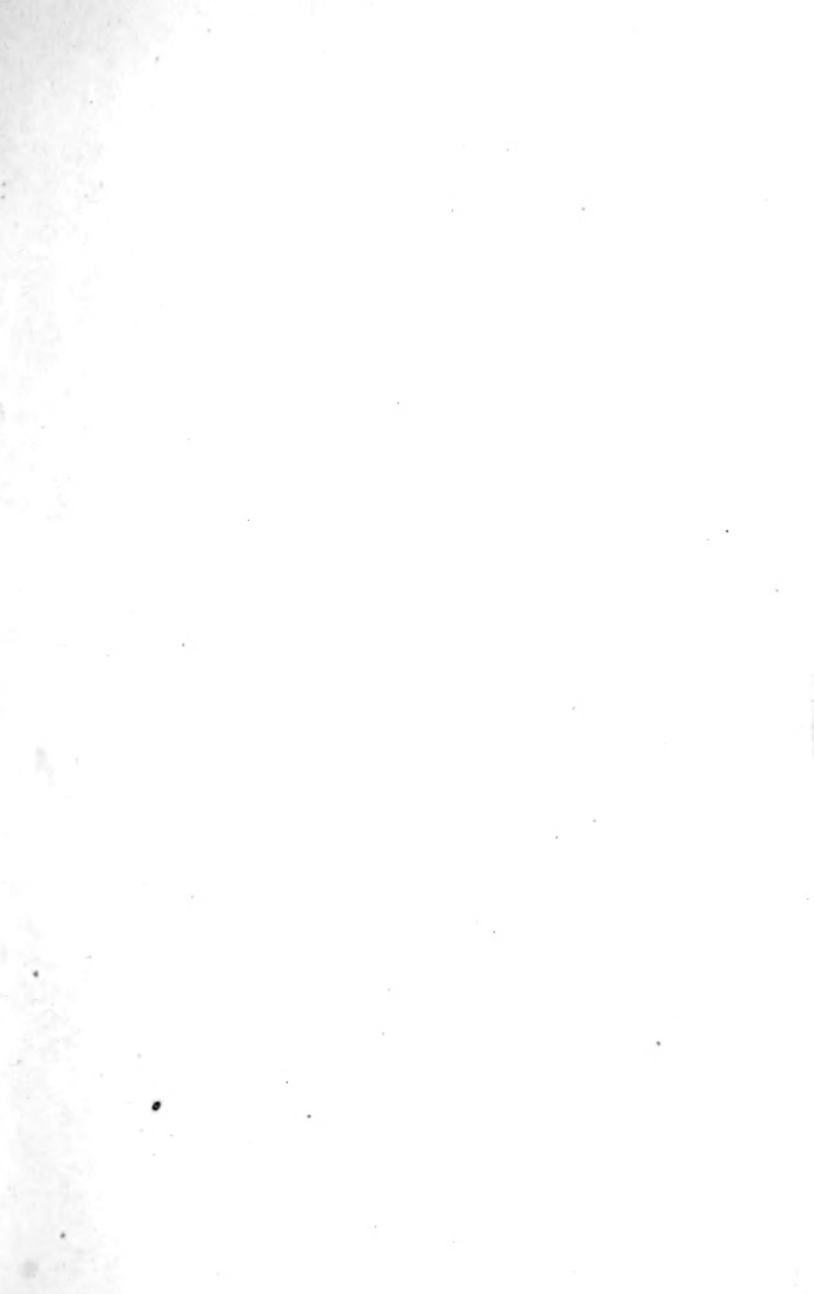
But Rhoda, having adjusted everything that she was going to take with her, still had an occupation which kept her up for several hours. From a locked drawer she

brought forth packets of letters, the storage of many years, and out of these selected carefully perhaps a tithe, which she bound together and deposited in a box; the remainder she burnt in the empty fire-place. Moreover, she collected from about the room a number of little objects, ornaments and things of use, which also found a place in the same big box. All her personal property which had any value for her, except books, was finally under lock and key, and in portable repositories. But still she kept moving, as if in search of trifles that might have escaped her notice; silently, in her soft slippers, she strayed hither and thither, till the short summer night had all but given place to dawn: and when at length weariness compelled her to go to bed, she was not able to sleep.

Nor did Mary Barfoot enjoy much sleep that night. She lay thinking, and forecasting strange possibilities.

On Monday evening, returned from Great Portland Street, the first thing she did was to visit Rhoda's chamber. The ashes of burnt paper had been cleared away, but a glance informed her of the needless, and unprecedented care with which Miss Nunn had collected and packed most of the things that belonged to her. Again Mary had a troubled night.

END OF VOL. II.







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