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SIR CHARLES DANVERS.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"THE DANVERS JEWELS."

"Es ist eine alte Geschichte."

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



LONDON:
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,
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Telford Johnson, 26 Nov. 1957.

James Ray, 2164 N. Edwards St.

TO
MY FATHER.

SIR CHARLES DANVERS.



CHAPTER I.

“DEAR heart, Miss Ruth, my dear, now don’t ye be a-going yet, and me that hasn’t set eyes on ye this month and more, and as hardly hears a body speak from morning till night.”

“Come, come, Mrs. Eccles, I am always finding people sitting here. I expect to see the latch go every minute.”

“Well, and if they do, and some folks are always a-dropping in, and a-setting themselves down, and a clack-clacking till a body can’t get a bit of peace! And the things they say! Eh! Miss Ruth, the things I have

heard folks say, a-setting as it might be there, in poor Eccles his old chair by the chimley, as the Lord took him in."

To the uninitiated, Mrs. Eccles' allusion might have seemed to refer to photography. But Ruth knew better; a visitation from the Lord being synonymous in Slumberleigh parish with a fall from a ladder, a stroke of paralysis, or the midnight cart-wheel that disabled Brown when returning late from the Blue Dragon "not quite hisself."

"Lor!" resumed Mrs. Eccles, with an extensive sigh, "there's a deal of talk in the village now," glancing inquisitively at her visitor, "about him as succeeds to old Mr. Dare; but I never listen to their tales."

They made a pleasant contrast to each other, the neat old woman, with her shrewd spectacled eyes and active hard-worked fingers, and the young girl, tranquil, graceful, sitting in the shadow, with her slender ungloved hands in her lap.

They were not sitting in the front parlour,

because Ruth was an old acquaintance ; but Mrs. Eccles *had* a front parlour—a front parlour with the bottled-up smell in it peculiar to front parlours ; a parlour with a real mahogany table, on which photograph albums and a few select volumes were symmetrically arranged round an inkstand, nestling in a very choice woolwork mat ; a parlour with wax flowers under glass shades on the mantel-piece, and an avalanche of paper roses and mixed paper herbs in the fireplace.

Ruth knew that sacred apartment well. She knew the name of each of the books ; she had expressed a proper admiration for the wax flowers ; she had heard, though she might have forgotten, for she was but young, the price of the “real Brussels” carpet, and so she might safely be permitted to sit in the kitchen, and watch Mrs. Eccles darning her son’s socks.

I am almost afraid Ruth liked the kitchen best, with its tiled floor and patch of afternoon sun ; with its tall clock in the corner,

its line of straining geraniums in the low window-shelf, and its high mantel-piece crowned by two china dogs with red lozenges on them, holding baskets in their mouths.

“Yes, a deal of talk there is, but nobody rightly seems to know anything for certain,” continued Mrs. Eccles, spreading out her hand in the heel of a fresh sock, and pouncing on a modest hole. “Ye see, we never gave a thought to *him*, with that great hearty Mr. George, his eldest brother, to succeed when the old gentleman went. And such a fine figure of a man in his clothes as poor Mr. George used to be, and such a favourite with his old uncle! And then to be took like that, horseback riding at polar, only six weeks after the old gentleman! But I can’t hear as anybody’s set eyes on his half-brother as comes in for the property now. He never came to Vandon in his uncle’s lifetime. They say old Mr. Dare couldn’t bide the French madam as his brother took when his first

wife died—a foreigner, with black curls; it wasn't likely. He was always partial to Mr. George, and he took him up when his father died; but he never would have anything to say to this younger one, bein' nothin' in the world, so folks say, but half a French, and black, like his mother. I wonder now——” began Mrs. Eccles tentatively, with her usual love of information.

“I wonder now,” interposed Ruth quietly, “how the rheumatism is getting on? I saw you were in church on Sunday evening.”

“Yes, my dear,” began Mrs. Eccles, readily diverted to a subject of such interest as herself. “Yes, I always come to the evening service now, though I won't deny as the rheumatics are very pinching at times. But, dear Lord! I never come up to the stalls near the chancel, so you ain't likely to see me. To see them Harrises always a-goin' up to the very top, it does go agen me. I don't say as it's everybody as ought to take the lowest place. The Lord knows I'm

not proud, but I won't go into them chairs down by the font myself; but to see them Harrises that to my certain knowledge hasn't a bite of butcher's meat in their heads but onst a week, a-settin' theirselves up——”

“Now, Mrs. Eccles, you know perfectly well all the seats are free in the evening.”

“And so they may be, Miss Ruth, my dear—and don't ye be a-getting up yet—and good Christians, I'm sure, the quality are to abide it. And it did my heart good to hear the Honourable John preaching as he did in his new surplice (as Widder Pegg always puts too much blue in the surplices to my thinking), all about rich and poor, and one with another. A beautiful sermon it was. But I wouldn't come up like they Harrises. There's things as is suitable, and there's things as is not. No, I keep to my own place; and I had to turn out old Bessie Pugh this very last Sunday night, as I found a-cocked up there, tho' I was not a matter of five minutes late. Bessie Pugh always

was one to take upon herself, and, as I often says to her, when I hear her a-goin' on about free grace and the like, 'Bessie,' I says, 'if I was a widder on the parish, and not so much as a pig to fat up for Christmas, and coming to church reg'lar on Loaf Sunday, which it's not that I ain't sorry for ye, but *I* wouldn't take upon myself, if I was you, to talk of things as I'd better leave to them as is beholden to nobody and pays their rent reg'lar. I've no patience—— But eh, dear Miss Ruth! look at that gentleman going down the road, and the dog too. Why, ye haven't so much as got up. He's gone. He was a foreigner, and no mistake. Why, good Lord! there he is coming back again. He's seen me through the winder. Mercy on us! he's opening the gate; he's coming to the door."

As she spoke, a shadow passed before the window, and some one knocked.

Mrs. Eccles hastily thrust her darning-needle into the front of her boddice, the

general *rendezvous* of the pins and needles of the establishment, and proceeded to open the door and plant herself in front of it.

Ruth caught a glimpse of an erect light-grey figure in the sunshine, surmounted by a brown face, and the lightest of light-grey hats. Close behind stood a black poodle of a dignified and self-engrossed deportment, wearing its body half shaved, but breaking out in ruffles round its paws, and a tuft at the end of a stiffly undemonstrative tail.

“The key of the church is kep’ at Joneses by the pump,” said Mrs. Eccles, in the brusque manner peculiar to the freeborn Briton when brought in contact with a foreigner.

“Thank you, madam,” was the reply, in the most courteous of tones, and the grey hat was off in a moment, showing a very dark, cropped head, “but I do not look for the church. I only ask for the way to the house of the pastor, Mr. Alwynn.”

Mrs. Eccles gave full and comprehensive directions in a very high key, accompanied by much gesticulation, and then the grey hat was replaced, and the grey figure, followed by the black poodle, marched down the little garden path again, and disappeared from view.

Mrs. Eccles drew a long breath, and turned to her visitor again.

“Well, my dear, and did ye ever see the like of that? And his head, Miss Ruth! Did ye take note of his head? Not so much as a shadder of a parting. All the same all the way over; and asking the way to the Rectory. Why, you ain’t never going yet? Well, good-bye, my dear, and God bless ye! And now,” soliloquized Mrs. Eccles, as Ruth finally escaped, “I may as well run across to Joneses, and see if *they* know anything about the gentleman, and if he’s put up at the inn.”

It was a glorious July afternoon, but it

was hot. The roads were white, and the tall hedgerows grey with dust. A waggon-load of late hay, with a swarm of children just out from school careering round it, was coming up the road in a dim cloud of dust. Ruth, who had been undecided which way to take, beat a hasty retreat towards the churchyard, deciding that, if she must hesitate, to do so among cool tombstones in the shade. She glanced up at the church clock, as she selected her tombstone under one of the many yew trees in the old churchyard. Half-past four, and already an inner voice was suggesting *tea!* To miss five o'clock tea on a thirsty afternoon like this was not to be thought of for a moment. She had no intention of going back to tea at Atherstone, where she was staying with her cousins, Mr. and Mrs. Danvers. Two alternatives remained. Should she go to Slumberleigh Hall close by, and see the Thursbys, who she knew had all returned from London yesterday, or should she go across the fields

to Slumberleigh Rectory, and have tea with Uncle John and Aunt Fanny ?

She knew that Sir Charles Danvers, Ralph Danvers's eldest brother, was expected at Atherstone that afternoon. His aunt, Lady Mary Cunningham, was also staying there, partly with a view of meeting him. Ralph Danvers had not seen his brother or Lady Mary her nephew for some time, and, judging by the interest they seemed to feel in his visit, Ruth had determined not to interrupt a family meeting, in which she imagined she might be *de trop*.

"My fine tact," she thought, "will enable them to have a quiet talk among themselves till nearly dinner-time. But I must not neglect myself any longer. The Hall is the nearest, and the drive is shady ; but, to put against that, Mabel will insist on showing me her new gowns, and Mrs. Thursby will make her usual remarks about Aunt Fanny. No ; in spite of that burning expanse of glebe, I will go to tea at the Rectory. I

have not seen Uncle John for a week, and—who knows?—perhaps Aunt Fanny may be out.”

So the gloves were put on, the crisp white dress shaken out, the parasol put up, and Ruth took the narrow church path across the fields up to Slumberleigh Rectory.

For many years since the death of her parents, Ruth Deyncourt had lived with her grandmother, a wealthy, witty, and wise old lady, whose house had been considered one of the pleasantest in London by those to whom pleasant houses are open.

Lady Deyncourt, a beauty in her youth, a beauty in middle life, a beauty in her old age, had seen and known all the marked men of the last two generations, and had reminiscences to tell which increased in point and flavour, like old wine, the longer they were kept. She had frequented as a girl the Miss Berrys' drawing-room, and people were wont to say that hers was the nearest approach to a *salon* which remained after the

Miss Berrys disappeared. She had married a grave politician, a rising man, whom she had pushed into a knighthood, and at one time into the ministry. If he had died before he could make her the wife of a premier, the disappointment had not been without its alleviations. She had never possessed much talent for domestic life, and, the yoke once removed, she never felt the least inclination to take it upon herself again. As a widow, her way through life was one long triumphal procession. She had daughters, dull, tall, serious girls, with whom she had nothing in common, whom she educated well, brought out, laced in, and then married, one after another, relinquishing the last with the utmost cheerfulness, and refusing the condolences of friends on her lonely position with her usual frankness.

But her son, her only son, she had loved. He was like her, and understood her, and was at ease with her, as her daughters had never been. The trouble of her life was

the death of her son. She got over it, as she got over everything; but when several years afterwards his widow, with whom, it is hardly necessary to say, she was not on speaking terms, suddenly died (being a faint-hearted, feeble creature), Lady Deyncourt immediately took possession of her grandchildren—a boy and two girls—and proceeded as far as in her lay to ruin the boy for life.

“A woman,” she was apt to remark in after-years, “is not intended by nature to manage any man except her husband. I am a warning to the mothers, aunts, and grandmothers, particularly the grandmothers, of the future. A husband is a sufficient field for the employment of a woman’s whole energies. I went beyond my sphere, and I am punished.”

And when Raymond Deyncourt finally disappeared in America for the last time, having been fished up therefrom on several occasions, each time in worse case than the

last, she excommunicated him, and cheerfully altered her will, dividing the sixty thousand pounds she had it in her power to leave between her two granddaughters, and letting the fact become known, with the result that Anna was married by the end of her second season; and if at the end of five seasons Ruth was still unmarried, she had, as Lady Deyncourt took care to inform people, no one to thank for it but herself.

But in reality, now that Anna was provided for, Lady Deyncourt was in no hurry to part with Ruth. She liked her as much as it was possible for her to like any one—indeed, I think she even loved her in a way. She had taken but small notice of her while she was in the schoolroom, for she cared little about girls as a rule; but as she grew up tall, erect, with the pale, stately beauty of a lily, Lady Deyncourt's heart went out to her. None of her own daughters had been so distinguished-looking, so ornamental. Ruth's clothes always looked well on her, and she

had a knack of entertaining people, and much taste in the arrangement of flowers. Though she had inherited the Deyncourt earnestness of character, together with their dark serious eyes and a certain annoying rigidity as to right and wrong, these defects were counter-balanced by flashes of brightness and humour which reminded Lady Deyncourt of herself in her own brilliant youth, and inclined her to be lenient, when in her daughters' cases she would have been sarcastic. The old woman and the young one had been great friends, and not the less so perhaps because of a tacit understanding which existed between them that certain subjects should be avoided upon which, each instinctively felt, they were not likely to agree. And if the shrewd old woman of the world ever suspected the existence of a strength of will and depth of character in Ruth, such as had in her own early life been a source of annoyance and perplexity to herself in her dealings with her husband, she was skilful enough to ignore

any traces of it that showed themselves in her granddaughter, and thus avoided those collisions of will, the result of which she felt might have been doubtful.

And so Ruth had lived a life full of varied interests, and among interesting people, and had been woke up suddenly in a grey and frosted dawn to find that chapter of her life closed. Lady Deyncourt, who never thought of travelling without her maid and footman, suddenly went on a long journey alone one wild January morning, starting without any previous preparation for a land in which she had never professed much interest heretofore. It seemed a pity that she should have to die when she had so thoroughly acquired the art of living with little trouble to herself, and much pleasure to others; but so it was.

And then in Ruth's confused remembrance of what followed, all the world seemed to have turned to black and grey. There was no colour anywhere, where all had been

colour before. Miles of black cloth and crape seemed to extend before her; black horses came and stamped black hoof-marks in the snow before the door. Endless arrangements had to be made, endless letters to be written. Something was carried heavily downstairs all in black, scoring the wall at the turn on the stairs in a way which would have annoyed Lady Deyncourt exceedingly if she had been there to see it, but she had left several days before it happened. The last pale shadow of the kind, gay little grandmother was gone from the great front bedroom upstairs. Mr. Alwynn, one of Ruth's uncles, came up from the country and went to the funeral, and took Ruth away afterwards. Her own sister Anna was abroad with her husband, her brother Raymond had not been heard of for years. As she drove away from the house, and looked up at the windows with wide tearless eyes, she suddenly realized that this departure was final, that there would be no coming back, no home left

for her in the familiar rooms where she and another had lived so long together.

Uncle John was by her side in the carriage, patting her cold hands and telling her not to cry, which she felt no inclination to do ; and then, seeing the blank pallor in her face, he suddenly found himself fumbling for his own pocket handkerchief.

CHAPTER II.

ON this particular July afternoon, Mr. Alwynn, or, as his parishioners called him, "The Honourable John," was sitting in his arm-chair in the little drawing-room of Slumberleigh Rectory. Mrs. Honourable John was pouring out tea; and here, once and for all, let it be known that meals, particularly five o'clock tea, will occupy a large place in this chronicle, not because of any importance especially attaching to them, but because in the country, at least in Slumberleigh, the day is not divided by hours but by the meals that take place therein, and to write of Slumberleigh and its inhabitants with disregard to their divisions of time is "impossible, and cannot be done."

So I repeat boldly, Mr. and Mrs. Alwynn were at tea. They were alone together, for they had no children, and Ruth Deyncourt, who had been living with them since her grandmother's death in the winter, was now staying with her cousin, Mrs. Ralph Danvers, at Atherstone, a couple of miles away.

If it had occasionally crossed Mr. Alwynn's mind during the last few months that he would have liked to have a daughter like Ruth, he had kept the sentiment to himself, as he did most sentiments in the company of his wife, who, while she complained of his habit of silence, made up for it nobly herself at all times and in all places. It had often been the subject of vague wonder among his friends, and even at times to Mr. Alwynn himself, how he had come to marry "Fanny, my love."

Mr. Alwynn dearly loved peace and quiet, but these dwelt not under the same roof with Mrs. Alwynn. Nay, I even believe, if the truth were known, he liked order and

tidiness, judging by the exact arrangement of his own study, and the rueful glances he sometimes cast at the litter of wools and letters on the newspaper table, and the gay garden hats and goloshes, hidden but not concealed, under the drawing-room sofa. Conversation about the dearness of butchers' meat and the enormities of servants palled upon him, I think, after a time, but he had taken his wife's style of conversation for better for worse when he took her gaily dressed self under those ominous conditions, and he never showed impatience. He loved his wife, but I think it grieved him when smart-coloured glass vases were strewn among the cherished bits of old china and enamel which his soul loved. He did not like chromo-lithographs or the framed photographs, which Mrs. Alwynn called her "momentums of travel," among his rare old prints either. He bore them, but after their arrival in company with large and inappropriate nails, and especially after the cut glass

candlesticks appeared on the drawing-room chimney-piece, he ceased to make his little occasional purchases of old china and old silver. The curiosity shops knew him no more, or if he still at times brought home some treasure in his hat-box on his return from Convocation, it was unpacked and examined in private, and a little place was made for it among the old Chelsea figures on the bookcase in his study, which had stood ever since he had inherited them from his father on the drawing-room mantel-piece, but had been silently removed, when a pair of comic china elephants playing on violins had appeared in their midst.

Mr. Alwynn sighed a little when he looked at them this afternoon, and shook his head ; for had he not brought back in his empty soup tin an old earthenware cow of Dutch extraction which he had long coveted on the shelf of a parishioner ? He had bought it very dear, for when in all his life had he ever bought anything cheap ? And now, as

he was tenderly wiping a suspicion of beef-tea off it, he wondered, as he looked round his study, where he could put it. Not among the old oriental china, where bits of Wedgwood had already elbowed in for want of room elsewhere. Among his Lowestoft cups and saucers? Never. He would rather not have it than see it there. He had a vision of a certain bracket, discarded from the hall, and put aside by his careful hands in the lowest drawer of the cupboard by the window, in which he kept little stores of nails and string and brown paper, among which "Fanny, my love" performed fearful ravages when minded to tie up a parcel.

Mr. Alwynn nailed up the bracket under an old etching, and placed the cow thereon, and, after contemplating it over his spectacles, went into the drawing-room to tea with his wife.

Mrs. Alwynn was a stout, florid, good-humoured looking woman, with a battered fringe, considerably younger than her husband

in appearance, and with a tendency to bright colours in dress.

“Barnes is very poorly, my dear,” said Mr. Alwynn, patiently fishing out one of the lumps of sugar which his wife had put in his tea. He took one lump, but she took two herself, and consequently always gave him two. “I should say a little strong soup would——”

At this juncture the front door-bell rang, and a moment afterwards “Mr. Dare” was announced.

The erect, light-grey figure which had awakened the curiosity of Mrs. Eccles came in close behind the servant. Mrs. Alwynn received a deep bow in return for her look of astonishment; and then, with an eager exclamation, the visitor had seized both Mr. Alwynn’s hands, regardless of the neatly folded slice of bread-and-butter in one of them, and was shaking them cordially.

Mr. Alwynn looked for a moment as astonished as his wife, and the blank, depre-

cating glance he cast at his visitor showed that he was at a loss.

The latter let go his hands, and spread his own out with a sudden gesture.

“Ah! you do not know me,” he said, speaking rapidly; “it is twenty years ago, and you have forgotten. You do not remember Alfred Dare, the little boy whom you saw last in sailing costume, the little boy for whom you cut the whistles, the son of your old friend, Henry Dare?”

“Good gracious!” ejaculated Mr. Alwynn, with a sudden flash of memory. “Henry’s other son. I remember now. It *is* Alfred, and I remember the whistles too. You have your mother’s eyes. And, of course, you have come to Vandon now that your poor brother—— We have all been wondering when you would turn up. My dear boy, I remember you perfectly now; but it is a long time ago, and you have changed very much.”

“Between eight years and twenty-eight there is a great step,” replied Dare, with a

brilliant smile. "How could I expect that you should remember all at once? But *you* are not changed. I knew you the first moment. It is the same kind, good face which I remember well."

Mr. Alwynn blushed a faint blush, which any word of praise could always call up; and then, reminded of the presence of Mrs. Alwynn by a short cough, which that lady always had in readiness wherewith to recall him to a sense of duty, he turned to her and introduced Dare.

Dare made another beautiful bow; and while he accepted a cup of tea from Mrs. Alwynn, Mr. Alwynn had time to look attentively at him with his mild grey eyes. He was a slight, active-looking young man of middle height, decidedly un-English in appearance and manner, with dark, roving eyes, moustaches very much twirled up, and a lean brown face that was exceedingly handsome in a style to which Mr. Alwynn was not accustomed.

And this was Henry Dare's second son, the son by his French wife, who had been brought up abroad, of whom no one had ever heard or cared to hear, who had now succeeded, by his half-brother's sudden death, to Vandon, a property adjoining Slumberleigh.

The eager foreign face was becoming familiar to Mr. Alwynn. Dare was like his mother; but he sat exactly as Mr. Alwynn had seen his father sit many a time in that very chair. The attitude was the same. Ah! but that flourish of the brown hands! How unlike anything Henry would have done! And those sudden movements! He was roused by Dare turning quickly to him again.

"I am telling Mrs. Alwynn of my journey here," he began; "of how I miss my train; of how I miss my carriage, sent to meet me from the inn; of how I walk on foot up the long hills; and when I get there, they think I am no longer coming. I arrived only last

night at Vandon. To-day I walk over to see my old friend at Slumberleigh."

Dare leant forward, laying the tips of his fingers lightly against his breast.

"You seem to have had a good deal of walking," said Mr. Alwynn, rather taken aback, but anxious to be cordial; "but, at any rate, you will not walk back. You must stay the night now you are here, mustn't he, Fanny?"

Dare was delighted—beaming. Then his face became overcast. His eyebrows went up. He shook his head. Mr. and Mrs. Alwynn were most kind—but—he became more and more dejected—a bag, a simple valise—

It could be sent for.

Ah! Mr. Alwynn was too good. He revived again. He showed his even white teeth. He was about to resume his tea, when suddenly a tall white figure came lightly in through the open French window, and a clear voice began—

“Oh, Uncle John, there is such a heathen of a black poodle making excavations in the flower-beds! Do——”

Ruth stopped suddenly as her eyes fell upon the stranger. Dare rose instinctively.

“This is Mr. Dare, Ruth,” said Mr. Alwynn. “He has just arrived at Vandon.”

Ruth bowed. Dare surpassed himself, and was silent. All his smiles and flow of small talk had suddenly deserted him. He began patting his dog, which had followed Ruth indoors, and a moment of constraint fell upon the little party.

“She is shy,” said Dare to himself. “She is adorably shy.”

Ruth’s quiet, self-possessed voice dispelled that pleasing illusion.

“I have had a very exhausting afternoon with Mrs. Eccles, Aunt Fanny, and I have come to you for a cup of tea before I go back to Atherstone.”

“Why did you walk so far this hot afternoon, my dear; and how are Mrs. Danvers

and Lady Mary; and is any one else staying there; and, my dear, *are* the dolls finished?"

"They are," said Ruth. "They are all outrageously fashionable. Even Molly is satisfied. There is to be a school-feast here to-morrow," she added, turning to Dare, who appeared bewildered at the turn the conversation was taking. "All our energies for the last fortnight have been brought to bear on dolls. We have been dressing dolls morning, noon, and night."

"When is it to be, this school-feast?" said Dare eagerly. "I will buy one, three dolls."

After a lengthy explanation from Mrs. Alwynn as to the nature of a school-feast as distinct from a bazaar, Ruth rose to go, and Mr. Alwynn offered to accompany her part of the way.

"And so that is the new Mr. Dare about whom we have all been speculating," she said, as they strolled across the fields together. "He is not like his half-brother."

"No; he seems to be entirely a French-

man. You see, he was educated abroad, and that makes a great difference. He was a very nice little boy twenty years ago. I hope he will turn out well, and do his duty by the place."

The neighbouring property of Vandon, with its tumbledown cottages, its neglected people, and hard agent, were often in Mr. Alwynn's thoughts.

"Oh, Uncle John, he will, he must! You must help him and advise," said Ruth eagerly. "He ought to stay and live on the place, and look into things for himself."

"I am afraid he will be poor," said Mr. Alwynn meditatively.

"Anyhow, he will be richer than he was before," urged Ruth, "and it is his duty to do something for his own people."

When Ruth had said it was a duty, she imagined, like many another young soul before her, that nothing remained to be said, having yet to learn how much beside often remained to be done.

“We shall see,” said Mr. Alwynn, who had seen something of his fellow-creatures ; and they walked on together in silence.

The person whose duty Ruth had been discussing so freely, looked after the two retreating figures till they disappeared, and then turned to Mrs. Alwynn.

“You and Mr. Alwynn also go to the school-feast to-morrow ?”

Mrs. Alwynn, a little nettled, explained that of course she went, that it was her *own* school-feast, that Mrs. Thursby at the Hall had nothing to do with it. (Dare did not know who Mrs. Thursby was, but he listened with great attention.) She, Mrs. Alwynn, gave it herself. Her own cook, who had been with her five years, made the cakes, and her own donkey-cart conveyed the same to the field where the repast was held.

“Miss Deyncourt, will she be there ?” asked Dare.

Mrs. Alwynn explained that all the neigh-

bourhood, including the Thursbys, would be there ; that she made a point of asking the Thursbys.

“ I also will come,” said Dare gravely.

CHAPTER III.

ATHERSTONE was a rambling, old-fashioned, black-and-white house, half covered with ivy, standing in a rambling, old-fashioned garden—a charming garden, with clipped yews, and grass paths, and straggling flowers and herbs growing up in unexpected places. In front of the house, facing the drawing-room windows, was a bowling-green, across which, at this time of the afternoon, the house had laid a cool green shadow.

Two ladies were sitting under its shelter, each with her work.

It was hot still, but the shadows were deepening and lengthening. Away in the sun, hay was being made and carried, with crackings of whips and distant voices.

Beyond the hayfields lay the silver band of the river, and beyond again the spire of Slumberleigh Church and a glimpse among the trees of Slumberleigh Hall.

“Ralph has started in the dog-cart to meet Charles. They ought to be here in half an hour, if the train is punctual,” said Mrs. Ralph.

She was a graceful woman, with a placid, gentle face. She might be thirty, but she looked younger. With her pleasant home, and her pleasant husband, and her child to be mildly anxious about, she might well look young. She looked particularly so now, as she sat in her fresh cotton draperies, winding wool with cool white hands.

The handiwork of some women has a hard masculine look. If they sew, it is with thick cotton in some coarse material; if they knit, it is with cricket-balls of wool which they manipulate into wiry stockings and comforters. Evelyn's wools, on the contrary, were always soft, fleecy, liable to weak-

mindful tangles, and to turning after long periods of time into little feminine futilities for which it was difficult to divine any possible use.

Lady Mary Cunningham, her husband's aunt, made no immediate reply to her small remark. Evelyn Danvers was not a little afraid of that lady, and, in truth, Lady Mary, with her thin face and commanding manner, was a very imposing person. Though past seventy, she sat erect in her chair, her stick by her side, some elaborate embroidery in her delicate old ringed hands. Her pale, colourless eyes were as keen as ever. Her white hair was covered by a wonderful lace cap, which no one had ever succeeded in imitating, that fell in soft lappets and graceful folds round the severe, dignified face. Molly, Evelyn's little daughter, stood in great awe of Lady Mary, who had such a splendid stick with a silver crook of her very own, and who made remarks in French in Molly's presence which that young lady could not

understand, and felt that it was not intended she should. She even regarded with a certain veneration the cap itself, which she had once met in equivocal circumstances, journeying with a plait of white hair towards Lady Mary's rooms.

It was the first time since their marriage, of which she had not approved, that Lady Mary had paid a visit to Ralph and Evelyn at Atherstone. Lady Mary had tried to marry Ralph in days gone by to a woman who—but it was an old story and better forgotten. Ralph had married his first cousin when he had married Evelyn, and Lady Mary had strenuously objected to the match, and had even gone so far as to threaten to alter certain clauses in her will, which she had made in favour of Ralph, her younger nephew, at a time when she was at daggers drawn with her eldest nephew, Charles, now Sir Charles Danvers. But that was an old story too, and better forgotten.

When Charles succeeded his father some three years ago, and when after eight years Molly had still remained an only child, and one of the wrong kind, of no intrinsic value to the family, Lady Mary decided that by-gones should be by-gones, and became formally reconciled to Charles, with whom she had already found it exceedingly inconvenient, and consequently unchristian, not to be on speaking terms. As long as he was the scapegrace son of Sir George Danvers, her Christian principles remained in abeyance ; but when he suddenly succeeded to the baronetcy and Stoke Moreton, the air of which suited her so well, and, moreover, to that convenient *piéd à terre*, the house in Belgrave Square, she allowed feelings, which she said she had hitherto repressed with difficulty, their full scope, expressed a Christian hope that now that he had come to his estate Charles would put away Bohemian things, and instantly set to work to find a suitable wife for him.

At first Lady Mary felt that the task which she had imposed upon herself would (D.V.) be light indeed. Charles received her overtures with the same courteous demeanour which had been the chief sting of their former warfare. He had paid his creditors no one knew how, for his father had left nothing to him unentailed; and once out of money difficulties, he seemed in no hurry to plunge into them again. If he had not as yet thoroughly taken up the life of an English country gentleman for want of that necessary adjunct which Lady Mary was so anxious to supply, at least he lived in England and in good society. In short, Lady Mary was fond of telling her friends, Charles had entirely reformed, hinting at the same time that she had been the humble instrument in the hands of an all-wise Providence which had turned him back into the way in which the English aristocracy should walk, and from which he had deviated so long. But one thing remained—to marry

him. Every one said Charles *must* marry. Lady Mary did not say it, but with her whole soul she meant it. What she intended to do, she, as a rule, performed; occasionally at the expense of those who were little able to afford it, but still the thing was (always, of course, by the co-operation of Providence) done. Ralph certainly had proved an exception to the rule. He had married Evelyn against Lady Mary's will, and consequently without the blessing of Providence. After that, of course, she had never expected there would be a son, and with each year her anxiety to see Charles safely married had increased. He had seemed so amenable that at first she could hardly believe that the steed which she had led to waters of such divers merit would refuse to drink from any of them. If rank had no charm for him, which apparently it had not, she would try beauty. When beauty failed, even beauty with money in its hand, Lady Mary hesitated, and then fell back on goodness. But either

the goodness was not good enough, or, as Lady Mary feared, it was not sufficiently High Church to be really genuine—even goodness failed. For three years she had strained every nerve, and at the end of them she was no nearer the object in view than when she began.

An inconvenient death of a sister, with whom she had long since quarrelled about church matters (and who had now gone where her folly in differing from Lady Mary would be fully, if painfully, brought home to her), had prevented Lady Mary continuing her designs this year in London. But if thwarted in one direction, she knew how to throw her energies into another. The first words she uttered indicated what that direction was.

Evelyn's little remark about the dog-cart, which had gone to meet Charles, had so long remained without any response, that she was about to coin another of about the same stamp, when Lady Mary suddenly said, with

a decision that was intended to carry conviction to the heart of her companion—

“It is an exceedingly suitable thing.”

Evelyn evidently understood what it was that was so suitable, but she made no reply.

“A few years ago,” continued Lady Mary, “I should have looked higher. I should have thought Charles might have done better, but——”

“He never could do better than—than,” said Evelyn, with a little mild flutter. “There is no one in the world more——”

“Yes, yes, my dear, of course, we all know that,” returned the elder lady. “She is much too good for him, and all the rest of it. A few years ago, I was saying, I might not have regarded it quite in the light I do now. Charles, with his distinguished appearance and his position, might have married anybody. But time passes, and I am becoming seriously anxious about him; I am, indeed. He is eight and thirty. In two years he will be forty; and at forty, you never know what a

man may not do. It is a critical age even when they are married. Until he is forty, a man may be led under Providence into forming a connection with a woman of suitable age and family. After that age he will never look at any girl out of her teens, and either perpetrates a folly, or does not marry at all. If the Danvers family is not to become extinct, or to be dragged down by a *mésalliance*, measures must be taken at once."

Evelyn winced at the allusion to the extinction of the Danvers family, of which Charles and Ralph were the only representatives. She felt keenly having failed to give Ralph a son, and the sudden smart of the old hurt added a touch of sharpness to her usually gentle voice as she said—

"I cannot see what *has* been left undone."

"No, my dear," said Lady Mary, more suavely, "you have fallen in with my views most sensibly. I only hope Ralph——"

"Ralph knows nothing about it."

"Quite right. It is very much better he

should not. Men never can be made to look at things in their proper light. They have no power of seeing an inch in front of them. Even Charles, who is less dense than most men, has never been allowed to form an idea of the plans which from time to time I have made for him. Nothing sets a man more against a marriage than the idea that it has been put in his way. They like to think it is all their own doing, and that the whole universe will be taken by surprise when the engagement is given out. Charles is no exception to the rule. Our duty is to provide a wife for him, and then allow him to think his own extraordinary cleverness found her for himself. How old is this cousin of yours, Miss Deyncourt ? ”

“ About three and twenty.”

“ Exceedingly suitable. Young, and yet not too young. She is not beautiful, but she is decidedly handsome, and very high-bred looking, which is better than beauty. I know all about her family ; good blood on

both sides ; no worsted thread. I forget if there is any money."

This was a pious fraud on Lady Mary's part, as she was of course aware of the exact sum.

"Lady Deyncourt left her thirty thousand pounds," said Evelyn unwillingly. She hated herself for the part she was taking in her aunt's plans, although she had been so unable to support her feeble opposition by any show of reason that it had long since melted away before the consuming fire of Lady Mary's determined authority.

"Twelve hundred a year," said that lady. "I fear Lady Deyncourt was far, very far, from the truth, but she seems to have made an equitable will. I am glad Miss Deyncourt is not entirely without means ; and she has probably something of her own as well. The more I see of that girl the more convinced I am that she is the very wife for Charles. There is no objection to the match in any way, unless it lies in that disreputable

brother, who seems to have entirely disappeared. Now, Evelyn, mark my words. You invited her here at my wish, after I saw her with that dreadful Alwynn woman at the flower-show. You will never regret it. I am seventy-five years of age, and I have seen something of men and women. Those two will suit."

"Here comes the dog-cart," said Evelyn, with evident relief.

"Where is Miss Deyncourt?"

"She went off to Slumberleigh, some time ago. She said she was going to the Rectory, I believe."

"It is just as well. Ah! here is Charles."

A tall, distinguished-looking man in a light overcoat came slowly round the corner of the house as she spoke, and joined them on the lawn. Evelyn went to meet him with evident affection, which met with as evident a return, and he then exchanged a more formal greeting with his aunt.

"Come and sit down here," said Evelyn,

pulling forward a garden chair. "How hot and tired you look!"

"I am tired to death, Evelyn. I went to London in May a comparatively young man. Aunt Mary said I ought to go, and so, of course, I went. I have come back not only sadder and wiser—that I would try to bear—but visibly aged."

He took off his hat as he spoke, and wearily pushed back the hair from his forehead. Lady Mary looked at him over her spectacles with grave scrutiny. She had not seen her nephew for many months, and she was not pleased with what she saw. His face looked thin and worn, and she even feared she could detect a grey hair or two in the light hair and moustache. His tired, sarcastic eyes met hers.

"I was afraid you would think I had *gone off*," he said, half shutting his eyes in the manner habitual to him. "I fear I took your exhortations too much to heart, and overworked myself in the good cause."

“A season is always an exhausting thing,” said Lady Mary; “and I dare say London is very hot now.”

“Hot! It’s more than hot. It is a solemn warning to evildoers; a foretaste of a future state.”

“I suppose everybody has left town by this time?” continued Lady Mary, who often found it necessary even now to ignore parts of her nephew’s conversation.

“By everybody I know you mean *one* family. Yes, they are gone. Left London to-day. Consequently, I also conveyed my remains out of town, feeling that I had done my duty.”

“Where is Ralph?” asked Evelyn, rising, dimly conscious that Charles and his aunt were conversing in an unknown tongue, and feeling herself *de trop*.

“I left him in the shrubbery. A stoat crossed the road before the horse’s nose as we drove up, and Ralph, who seems to have been specially invented by Providence for

the destruction of small vermin, was in attendance on it in a moment. I had seen something of the kind before, so I came on."

Evelyn laid down her work, and went across the lawn and round the corner of the house in the direction of the shrubbery, from which the voice of her lord and master "rose in snatches," as he plunged in and out among the laurels.

"And how is Lord Hope Acton?" continued Lady Mary, with an air of elaborate unconcern. "I used to know him in old days as one of the best waltzers in London. I remember him very slim and elegant-looking; but I suppose he is quite elderly now, and has lost his figure, or so some one was saying?"

"Not lost, but gone before, I should say, to judge by appearances," said Charles meditatively, gazing up into the blue of the summer sky.

The mixed impiety and indelicacy of her nephew's remark caused a sudden twitch to

the High Church embroidery in Lady Mary's hand ; but she went on a moment later in her usual tone.

“ And Lady Hope Acton ? Is she in stronger health ? ”

“ I believe she was fairly well ; not robust, you know, but, like other fond mothers with daughters out, ‘ faint yet pursuing. ’ ”

Lady Mary bit her lip ; but long experience had taught her that it was wiser to refrain from reproof, even when it was so urgently needed.

“ And their daughter, Lady Grace ? How beautiful she is ! Was she looking as lovely as usual ? ”

“ More so, ” replied Charles with conviction. “ Her nose is even straighter, her eyelashes even longer than they were last summer. I do not hesitate to say that her complexion is all that her fancy paints it. ”

“ You are so fond of joking, Charles, that I don't know when you are serious. And you saw a good deal of her ? ”

“Of course I did. I leant on railings in the Row, and watched her riding with Lord Hope Acton, whose personal appearance you feel such an interest in. At the meeting of the four-in-hands, was not she on the box-seat beside me? At Henley, were we not in the same boat? At Hurlingham, did we not watch polo together, and together drink our tea? At Lord’s, did not I tear her new muslin garment in helping her up one of those poultry ladders on the Torringtons’ drag? Have I not taken her into dinner five several times? Have I not danced with her at balls innumerable? Have I not, in fact, seen as much of her as—of several others?”

“Oh, Charles!” said Lady Mary, “I wish you would talk seriously for one moment, and not in that light way. Have you spoken?”

“In a light way, I should say I had spoken a good deal; but, *seriously*—No. I have never ventured to be serious.”

“But you will be. After all this, you *will* ask her?”

“Aunt Mary,” replied Charles, with gentle reproach, “a certain delicacy should be observed in probing the exact state of a man’s young affections. At five and thirty (I know I am five and thirty, because you have told people so for the last three years), there exists a certain reticence in the youthful heart which declines to lay bare its inmost feelings even for an aunt to—we won’t say peck at, but—speculate upon. I have told you all I know. I have done what I was bidden to do, up to a certain point. I am now here to recruit, and restore my wasted energies, and possibly to heal (observe, I say possibly) my wounded affections in the intimacy of my family circle. That reminds me, that little ungrateful imp Molly has not yet made the slightest demonstration of joy at my arrival. Where is she?” and without waiting for an answer, which he was well aware would not be forthcoming, Charles

rose and strolled towards the house with his hands behind his back.

“Molly!” he called. “Molly!” standing bareheaded in the sunshine, under a certain latticed window, the iron bars of which suggested a nursery within.

There was a sudden answering cackle of delight, and a little brown head was thrust out amid the ivy.

“Come down this very moment, you little hard-hearted person, and embrace your old uncle.”

“I’m comin’, Uncle Charles, I’m comin’;” and the brown head disappeared, and a few seconds later a white frock and two slim black legs rushed round the corner, and Molly precipitated herself against the waist-coat of “Uncle Charles.”

“What do you mean by not coming down and paying your respects sooner?” he said, when the first enthusiasm of his reception was over, looking down at Molly with a great kindness in the keen light eyes which

had looked so apathetic and sarcastic a moment before.

As he spoke, Ralph Danvers, a square, ruddy man in grey knickerbockers, came triumphantly round from the shrubbery, holding by its tail a minute corpse with outstretched arms and legs.

“Got him!” he said, smiling, and wiping his brow with honest pride. “See, Charles? See, Molly? Got him!”

“Don’t bring it here, Ralph, please. We are going to have tea,” came Evelyn’s gentle voice from the lawn; and Ralph and the terrier Vic retired to hang the body of the slain upon a fir tree on the back premises, the recognized long home of stoats and weasels at Atherstone.

Molly, in the presence of Lady Mary and the stick with the silver crook, was always more or less depressed and shy. She felt the pale cold eye of that lady was upon her, as indeed it generally was, if she moved or spoke. She did not therefore join in the

conversation as freely as was her wont in the family circle, but sat on the grass by her uncle, watching him with adoring eyes, trying to work the signet ring off his big little finger, which in the memory of man—of Molly, I mean—had never been known to work off, while she gave him the benefit of small pieces of local and personal news in a half whisper from time to time as they occurred to her.

“Cousin Ruth is staying here, Uncle Charles.”

“Indeed,” said Charles absently.

His eyes had wandered to Evelyn taking Ralph his cup of tea, and giving him a look with it which he returned—the quiet grave look of mutual confidence which sometimes passes between married people, and which for the moment makes the single state seem very single indeed.

Molly saw that he had not heard, and that she must try some more exciting topic in order to rivet his attention.

“There was a mouse at prayers yesterday, Uncle Charles.”

“There *wasn't* ?”

Uncle Charles was attending again now.

Molly gave an exact account of the great event, and of how “Nanny” had gathered her skirts round her, and how James had laughed, only father did not see him, and how—— There was a great deal more, and the story ended tragically for the mouse, whose final demise under a shovel when prayers were over Molly described in graphic detail.

“And how are the guinea pigs ?” asked Charles, putting down his cup.

“Come and see them,” whispered Molly, insinuating her small hand delightedly into his big one ; and they went off together, each happy in the society of the other. Charles was introduced to the guinea pigs, which had multiplied exceedingly since he had presented them, the one named after him being even then engaged in rearing a large family.

Then, after Molly had copiously watered her garden, and Charles's unsuspecting boots at the same time, objects of interest still remained to be seen and admired; confidences had to be exchanged; inner pockets in Charles's waistcoat to be explored; and it was not till the dressing-bell and the shrill voice of "Nanny" from an upper window recalled them, that the friends returned towards the house.

As they turned to go indoors, Charles saw a tall white figure skimming across the stretches of low sunshine and long shadow in the field beyond the garden, and making swiftly for the garden gate.

"Oh, Molly, Molly!" he said, in a tone of sudden consternation, squeezing the little brown hand in his. "*Who* is that?"

Molly looked at him astonished. A moment ago Uncle Charles had been talking merrily, and now he looked quite sad.

"It's only Ruth," she said reassuringly.

"Who is Ruth?"

“Cousin Ruth,” replied Molly. “I told you she was here.”

“She’s not *staying* here?”

“Yes, she is. She is rather nice, only she says the guinea pigs smell nasty, which isn’t true. She *will* be late”—with evident concern—“if she is going to be laced up; and I know she is, because I saw it on her bed. She doesn’t see us yet. Let us go and meet her.”

“Run along then,” said Charles, in a tone of deep dejection, loosing Molly’s hand. “I think I’ll go indoors.”

CHAPTER IV.

“ I’VE done Uncle Charles a button-hole, and put it in his water-bottle,” said Molly, in an important *affaire* whisper, as she came into Ruth’s room a few minutes before dinner, where Ruth and her maid were struggling with a black-lace dress. “ Mrs. Jones, you must be very quick. Why do you have pins in your mouth, Mrs. Jones? James has got his coat on, and he is going to ring the bell in one minute. I told him you had only just got your hair done ; but he said he could not help that. Uncle Charles,” peeping through the door, “ is going down now, and he’s got on a beautiful white waistcoat. He’s brought that nice Mr. Brown with him that unpacks his things and plays on the concertina. Ah ! there’s the bell ;” and Molly hurried down

to give a description of the exact stage at which Ruth's toilet had arrived, which Ruth cut short by appearing hard upon her heels.

"It is a shame to come indoors now, isn't it?" said Charles, as he was introduced and took her in to dinner in the wake of Lady Mary and Ralph. "Just the first cool time of the day."

"Is it?" said Ruth, still rather pink with her late exertions. "When I heard the dressing-bell ring across the fields, and the last gate would not open, and I found the railings through which I precipitated myself had been newly painted, I own I thought it had never been so hot all day."

"How trying it is to be forgotten!" said Charles, after a pause. "We have met before, Miss Deyncourt; but I see you don't remember me. I gave you time to recollect me by throwing out that little remark about the weather; but it was no good."

Ruth glanced at him and looked puzzled.

"I am afraid I don't," she said at last. "I

have seen you playing polo once or twice, and driving your four-in-hand ; but I thought I only knew you by sight. When did we meet before ?”

“ You have no recollection of a certain ball after some theatricals at Stoke Moreton which you and your sister came to, as little girls in pigtails ? ”

“ Of course, I remember that. And were you there ? ”

“ Was I there ? Oh, the ingratitude of woman ! Did not I dance three times with each of you, and suggest chicken at supper instead of lobster salad ? Does not the lobster salad awaken memories ? Surely you have not forgotten that ? ”

Ruth began to smile.

“ I remember now. So you were the kind man, name unknown, who took such care of Anna and me ? How good-natured you were ! ”

“ Thanks ! You evidently do remember now, if you say that. I recognized you at

once when I saw you again, by your likeness to your brother Raymond. You were very like him then, but much more so now. How is he?"

Ruth's dark-grey eyes shot a sudden surprised glance at him. People had seldom of late inquired after Raymond.

"I believe he is quite well," she replied in a constrained tone. "I have not heard from him for some time."

"It is some years since I met him," said Charles, noting but ignoring her change of tone. "I used to see a good deal of him before he went to—was it America? I heard from him about three years ago. He was prospecting, I think, at that time."

Ruth remembered that Charles had succeeded his father about three years ago. She remembered also Raymond's capacities for borrowing. A sudden instinct told her what the drift of that letter had been. The blood rushed into her face.

"Oh! he didn't—did he?"

The other three people were talking together; Lady Mary, opposite, was joining with a bland smile of inward satisfaction in the discussion between Ralph and Evelyn as to the rival merits of "Cochin Chinas" and "Plymouth Rocks."

"If he did," said Charles quietly, "it was only what we had often done for each other before. There was a time, Miss Deyncourt, when your brother and I both rowed in the same boat; and both, I fancy, split on the same rock. It is not so long ago since——"

There was a sudden silence. The chicken question was exhausted. It dropped dead. Charles left his sentence unfinished, and, turning to his brother, the conversation became general.

In the evening, when the others had said good night, Charles and Ralph went out into the cool half-darkness to smoke, and paced up and down on the lawn in the soft summer night. The two brothers had not

met for some time, and in an undemonstrative way they had a genuine affection for each other, which showed itself on this occasion in walking about together without exchanging a word.

At last Charles broke the silence. "I thought, when I settled to come down here, you said you would be alone?" There was a shade of annoyance in his tone.

"Well, now, that is just what I said at the time," said Ralph sleepily, with a yawn that would have accommodated a Jonah, "only I was told I did not understand. They always say I don't understand, if they're set on anything. I thought you wanted a little peace and quietness. I said so; but Aunt Mary settled we must have some one. I say, Charles," with a chuckle of deep masculine cunning, "you just look out. There's some mystery up about Ruth. I believe Aunt Mary got Evelyn to ask her here with an eye to business."

"I would not do Aunt Mary the injustice

to doubt *that* for a moment," replied Charles rather bitterly; and they relapsed into silence and smoke.

Presently Ralph, who had been out all day, yawned himself into the house, and left Charles to pace up and down by himself.

If Lady Mary, who was at that moment composing herself to slumber in the best spare bedroom, had heard the gist of Ralph's remarks to his brother, I think she would have risen up and confronted him then and there on the stairs. As it was, she meditated on her couch with much satisfaction, until the sleep of the just came upon her, little recking that the clumsy hand of brutal man had even then torn the veil from her carefully concealed and deeply laid feminine plans.

Charles, meanwhile, remained on the lawn till late into the night. After two months of London smuts, and London smoke, and London nights, the calm scented darkness had a peculiar charm for him. The few lights in the windows were going out one

by one, and thousands and thousands were coming out in the quiet sky. Through the still air came the sound of a corncrake perpetually winding up its watch at regular intervals in a field hard by. A little desultory breeze hovered near, and just roused the sleepy trees to whisper a good night. And Charles paced and paced, and thought of many things.

Only last night! His mind went back to the picture-gallery where he and Lady Grace had sat, amid a grove of palms and flowers. Through the open archway at a little distance came a flood of light, and a surging echo of plaintive, appealing music. It was late, or rather early, for morning was looking in with cold, dispassionate eyes through the long windows. The gallery was comparatively empty for a London gathering, for the balconies and hall were crowded, and the rooms were thinning. To all intents and purposes they were alone. How nearly—how nearly he had asked for what he knew

would not have been refused! How nearly he had decided to do at once what might still be put off till to-morrow! And he *must* marry. He often told himself so. She was there beside him on the yellow brocade ottoman. She was much too good for him; but she liked him. Should he do it? Now? he asked himself, as he watched the slender gloved hand swaying the feather fan with monotonous languor.

But when he took her back to the ball-room, back to an expectant, tired mother, he had not done it. He should be at their house in Scotland later. He thought he would wait till then. He breathed a long sigh of relief in the quiet darkness now, at the thought that he had *not* done it. He had a haunting presentiment, that neither in the purple heather, any more than in a London ball-room, would he be able to pass beyond that "certain point," to which in divers companionship, with or without assistance, he had so often attained.

For Charles was genuinely anxious to marry. He regarded with the greatest interest every eligible and ineligible young woman whom he came across. If Lady Mary had been aware of the very serious light in which he had considered Miss Louisa Smith, youngest daughter of a certain curate Smith, who in his youth had been originally extracted from a refreshment room at Liverpool to become an ornament of the Church, that lady would have swooned with horror. But neither Miss Louisa Smith, with her bun and sandwich ancestry, nor the eighth Lord Breakwater's young and lovely sister, though both willing to undertake the situation, were either of them finally offered it. Charles remained free as air, and a dreadful stigma gradually attached to him as a heartless flirt and a perverter of young girls' minds from men of more solid worth. A man who pleases easily and is hard to please soon gets a bad name among—mothers. I don't think Lady Hope Acton thought very kindly of

him, as she sped up to Scotland in the night mail.

Perhaps he was not so much to blame as she thought. Long ago, ten long years ago, in the reckless days of which Lady Mary had then made so much and now made so little, poor Charles had been deeply in love with a good woman, a gentle quiet girl, who after a time had married his brother Ralph. No one had suspected his attachment, Ralph and Evelyn least of all, but several years elapsed before he found time to visit them at Atherstone; and I think his fondness for Molly had its origin in his feeling for her mother. Even now it sometimes gave him a strange pang to meet the adoration in Molly's eyes, which, with their dark lashes, she had copied so exactly from Evelyn's.

And now that he could come with ease on what had been forbidden ground, he had seen of late clearly, with the insight that comes of dispassionate consideration, that Evelyn, the only woman whom he had ever

earnestly loved, whom he would have turned heaven and earth to have been able to marry, had not been in the least suited to him, and that to have married her would have entailed a far more bitter disappointment than the loss of her had been.

Evelyn made Ralph an admirable wife. She was so placid, so gentle, and—with the exception of muddy boots in the drawing-room—so unexacting. It was sweet to see her read to Molly, but did she never take up a book or a paper? What she said was always gracefully put forth; but oh! in old days, used she in that same gentle voice to utter such platitudes, such little stereotyped remarks? Used she in the palmy days that were no more (when she was not Ralph's wife), so mildly but so firmly to adhere to a preconceived opinion? Had she formerly such fixed opinions on every subject in general, and on new laid eggs and the propriety of chicken-hutches on the lawn in particular? Disillusion may be for our good,

like other disagreeable things, but it is seldom pleasant at the time, and is apt to leave in all except the most conceited natures (whose life-long mistakes are committed for our learning) a strange self-distrustful caution behind, which is mortally afraid of making a second mistake of the same kind.

Charles suddenly checked his pacing.

And yet surely, surely, he said to himself, there were in the world somewhere, good women of another stamp, who might be found for diligent seeking.

He turned impatiently to go indoors.

“Oh, Molly, Molly!” he said half aloud, gazing at the darkened windows behind which the body of Molly was sleeping, while her little soul was frisking away in fairyland, “why did you complicate matters by being a little girl?” With which reflection he brought his meditations to a close for the night.

CHAPTER V.

MOLLY awoke early on the following morning, and early informed the rest of the household that the weather was satisfactory. She flew into Ruth's room with the hot water, to wake her and set her mind at rest on a subject of such engrossing interest ; she imparted it repeatedly to Charles through his keyhole, until a low incoherent muttering convinced her that he also was rejoicing in the good news. She took all the dolls out of the baskets in which Ruth's careful hands had packed them the evening before, in the recognized manner in which dolls travel without detriment to their toilets, namely, head downwards, with their orange top boots turned upwards to the sky. In short,

Molly busied herself in the usual ways in which an only child finds employment.

It really was a glorious day. Except in Molly's eyes it was almost too good a day for a school-feast; too good a day, Ruth thought, as she looked out, to be spent entirely in playing at endless games of "Sally Water" and "Oranges and Lemons," and in pouring out sweet tea in a tent. She remembered a certain sketch at Arleigh, an old deserted house in the neighbourhood, which she had long wished to make. What a day for a sketch! But she shut her eyes to the temptation of the evil one, and went out into the garden, where Molly's little brown hands were devastating the beds for the approaching festival, and Molly's shrill voice was piping through the fresh morning air.

There had been rain in the night, and to-day the earth had all her diamonds on, just sent down reset from heaven. The trees came out resplendent, unable to keep

their leaves still for very vanity, and dropping gems out of their settings at every rustle. No one had been forgotten. Every tiniest shrub and plant had its little tiara to show; rare jewels cut by a Master Hand, which at man's rude touch, or, for that matter, Molly's either, slid away to tears.

"You don't mean to say, Molly," said Charles, later in the day, when all the dolls had been passed in review before him, and he had criticised each, "that you are going to leave me all day by myself? What shall I do between luncheon and tea time, when I have fed the guinea pigs and watered the 'blue-belias,' as you call it?—Where has that imp disappeared to now? I think," with a glance at Ruth, who was replacing the cotton wool on the doll's faces, "I really think, though I own I fancied I had a previous engagement, that I shall be obliged to come to the school-feast too."

"Don't," said Ruth, looking up suddenly from her work with grey serious eyes. "Be

advised. No man who respects himself makes himself common by attending village school-feasts and attempting to pour out tea, which he is never allowed to do in private life."

"I could hand buns," suggested Charles. "You take a gloomy view of your fellow-creatures, Miss Deyncourt. I see you under-rate my powers with plates of buns."

"Far from it. I only wished to keep you from quitting your proper sphere."

"What, may I ask, is my proper sphere?"

"Not to come to school-feasts at all; or, if you feel that is beyond you, only to arrive when you are too late to be of any use; to stand about with a hunting-crop in your hand—for, of course, you will come on horseback—and then, after refreshing all of us workers by a few well-chosen remarks, to go away again at an easy canter."

"I think I could do that, if it would give pleasure; and I am most grateful to you for pointing out my proper course to me. I

have observed it is the prerogative of woman in general not only to be absolutely convinced as to her own line of action, but also to be able to point out that of man to his obtuser perceptions."

"I believe you are perfectly right," said Ruth, becoming serious. "If men, especially prime ministers, were to apply to almost any woman I know (except, of course, myself) for advice as to the administration of the realm or their own family affairs, I have not the slightest doubt that not one of them would be sent empty away, but would be furnished instantly with a complete guide-book as to his future movements on this side the grave."

"Oh, some people don't stop there," said Charles. "Aunt Mary, in my young days, used to think nothing of the grave if I had displeased her. She still revels in a future court of justice, and an eternal cat-o'-nine-tails beyond the tomb. Well, Molly, so here you are, back again! What's the last news?"

The news was the extraordinary arrival of

five new kittens, which, according to Molly, the old stable cat had just discovered in a loft, and took the keenest personal interest in. Charles was dragged away only half acquiescent, to help in a decision that must instantly be come to, as to which of the two spotted or the three plain ones should be kept.

It was a day of delight to Molly. She had the responsibility and honour of driving Ruth and the dolls in her own donkey-cart to the scene of action, where the school children, and some of the idlest or most good-natured of Mrs. Alwynn's friends, were even then assembling, and where Mrs. Alwynn herself was already dashing from point to point, buzzing like a large "bumble" bee.

As the donkey-cart crawled up, a grey figure darted out of the tent, and flew to meet them from afar. Dare, who had been on the lookout for them for some time, offered to lift out Molly, helped out Ruth, held the baskets, wished to unharness the donkey, let the wheel go over his patent leather shoe, and in

short made himself excessively agreeable, if not in Ruth's, at least in Molly's eyes, who straightway entered into conversation with him, and invited him to call upon herself and the guinea pigs at Atherstone at an early date.

Then ensued the usual scene at festivities of this description. Tea was poured out like water (very like warm water), buns, cakes, and bread and butter were eaten, were crumbled, were put in pockets, were stamped underfoot. Large open tarts, covered with thin sticks of pastry, called by the boys "the tarts with the grubs on 'em," disappeared apace, being constantly replaced by others made in the same image, from which the protecting but adhesive newspaper had to be judiciously peeled. When the last limit of the last child had been reached, the real work of the day began—the games. Under a blazing sun for the space of two hours "Sally Water" or "Nuts in May" must be played, with an occasional change to "Oranges and Lemons."

Ruth, who had before been staying with

the Alwynns at the time of their school-feast, hardened her heart and began that immoral but popular game of "Sally Water."

"Sally, Sally Water, come sprinkle your pan ;
Rise up a husband, a handsome young man.
Rise, Sally, rise, and don't look sad,
You shall have a husband, good or bad."

The last line showing how closely the state of feeling of village society as regards the wedded state resembles the view taken of it in the highest circles.

Other games were already in full swing. Mrs. Alwynn, flushed and shrill, was organizing an infant troop. A good-natured curate was laying up for himself treasure elsewhere, by a present expenditure of halfpence secreted in a tub of bran. Dare, not to be behindhand, took to swinging little girls with desperate and heated good-nature. His bright smile and genial brown face soon gained the confidence of the children ; and then he swung them as they had never been swung before. It was positively the first time that some of

the girls had ever seen their heels above their heads. And his powers of endurance were so great. First his coat and then his waistcoat were cast aside as he warmed to his work, until at last he dragged the sleeve of his shirt out of the socket, and had to retire into private life behind a tree, in company with Mrs. Eccles and a needle and thread. But he reappeared again, and was soon swept into a game of cricket that was being got up among the elder boys ; bowled the schoolmaster ; batted brilliantly and with considerable flourish for a few moments, only to knock his own wickets down with what seemed singular want of care ; and then fielded with cat-like activity and an entire oblivion of the game, receiving a swift ball on his own person, only to choke, coil himself up, and recover his equanimity and the ball in a moment.

All things come to an end, and at last the Slumberleigh church clock struck four, and

Ruth could sink giddily on to a bench, and push back the few remaining hair-pins that were left to her, and feebly endeavour, with a pin eagerly extracted by Dare from the back of his neck, to join the gaping ruin of torn gathers in her dress, so daintily fresh two hours ago, so dilapidated now.

“There they come,” said Mrs. Alwynn indignantly, who was fanning herself with her pocket-handkerchief, which stout women ought to be forbidden by law to do. “There are Mrs. Thursby and Mabel. Just like them, arriving when the games are all over! And, dear me! who is that with them? Why, it is Sir Charles Danvers. I had no idea he was staying with them. Brown particularly told me they had not brought back any friend with them yesterday. Dear me! How odd! And Brown——”

“Sir Charles Danvers is staying at Atherstone,” said Ruth.

“At Atherstone, is he? Well, my dear,

this is the first I have heard of it, if he is. I don't see what there is to make a secret of in *that*. Most natural he should be staying there, I should have thought. And if that's one of Mabel's new gowns, all I can say is that yours is quite as nice, Ruth, though I know it is from last year, and those full fronts as fashionable as ever."

As Mr. and Mrs. Alwynn went forward to meet the Thursbys, Charles strolled up to Ruth, and planted himself deliberately in front of her.

"You observe that I am here?" he said.

"I do."

"At the proper time?"

"At the proper time."

"And in my sphere? I have tampered with no buns, you will remark, and teapots have been far from me."

"I am rejoiced my little word in season has been of such use."

"It has, Miss Deyncourt. The remark you made this morning I considered honest,

though poor; and I laid it to heart accordingly. But," with a change of tone, "you look tired to death. You have been out in the sun too long. I am going off now. I only came because I met the Thursbys, and they dragged me here. Come home with me through the woods. You have no idea how agreeable I am in the open air. It will be shady all the way, and not half so fatiguing as being shaken in Molly's donkey-cart."

"In the donkey-cart I must return, however, if I die on the way," said Ruth, with a tired smile. "I can't leave Molly. Besides, all is not over yet. The races and prizes take time; and when at last they are dismissed, a slice of——"

"No, Miss Deyncourt, *no!* Not more food!"

"A slice of cake will be applied *externally* to each of the children, which rite brings the festivities to a close. There! I see the dolls are being carried out. I must go;" and a

moment later Ruth and Molly and Dare, who had been hovering near, were busily unpacking and shaking out the dolls; and Charles, after a little desultory conversation with Mabel Thursby, strolled away, with his hands behind his back and his nose in the air in the manner habitual to him.

And so the day wore itself out at last; and after a hymn had been shrieked, the children were dismissed, and Ruth and Molly at length drove away.

“Hasn't it been delicious?” said Molly. “And my doll was chosen first. Lucy Bigg, with the rash on her face, got it. I wish little Sarah had had it. I do love Sarah so very much; but Sarah had yours, Ruth, with the real pocket and the handkerchief in it. That will be a surprise for her when she gets home. And that new gentleman was so kind about the teapots, wasn't he? He always filled mine first. He's coming to see me very soon, and to bring a curious

black dog that he has of his very own, called——”

“Stop, Molly,” said Ruth, as the donkey’s head was being sawed round towards the blazing high-road; “let us go home through the woods. I know it is longer, but I can’t stand any more sun and dust to-day.”

“You do look tired,” said Molly, “and your lips are quite white. My lips turned white once, before I had measles, and I felt very curious inside, and then spots came all over. You don’t feel like spots, do you, Cousin Ruth? We will go back by the woods, and I’ll open the gates, and you shall hold the reins. I dare say Balaam will like it better too.”

Molly had called her donkey Balaam partly owing to a misapprehension of Scripture narrative, and partly owing to the assurance of Charles, when in sudden misgiving she had consulted him on the point, that Balaam *had* been an ass.

Balaam’s reluctant under-jaw was accord-

ingly turned in the direction of the woods, and, little thinking the drive might prove an eventful one, Ruth and Molly set off at that easy amble which a well-fed pampered donkey will occasionally indulge in.

CHAPTER VI.

AFTER the glare and the noise, the shrill blasts of penny trumpets, and the sustained beating of penny drums, the silence of the Slumberleigh woods was delightful to Ruth ; the comparative silence, that is to say, for where Molly was, absolute silence need never be feared.

Long before the first gate had been reached Balaam had, of course, returned to the mode of procedure which suited him and his race best, and it was only when the road inclined to be downhill that he could be urged into anything like a trot.

“Never mind,” said Molly consolingly to Ruth, as he finally settled into a slow lounge, gracefully waving his ears and tail at the

army of flies which accompanied him, "when we get to the place where the firs are, and the road goes between the rocks, its downhill all the way, and we'll gallop down."

But it was a long way to the firs, and Ruth was in no hurry. It was an ideal afternoon, verging towards evening; an afternoon of golden lights and broken shadows, of vivid greens in shady places. It must have been on such a day as this, Ruth thought, that the Almighty walked in the garden of Eden when the sun was low, while as yet the tree of knowledge was but in blossom, while as yet autumn and its apples were far off, long before fig-leaves and millinery were thought of.

On either side the bracken and the lady-fern grew thick and high, almost overlapping the broad moss-grown path, across which the young rabbits popped away in their new brown coats, showing their little white linings in their lazy haste. A dog-rose had hung out a whole constellation of pale stars for

Molly to catch at as they passed. A family of honeysuckle clung, faint and sweet, just beyond the reach of the little hand that stretched after them in turn.

They had reached the top of an ascent that would have been a level to anything but the mean spirit of a donkey, when Molly gave a start.

“Cousin Ruth! there’s something creeping among the trees. Don’t you hear it? Oh-h-h!”

There really was a movement in the bracken, which grew too thick and high to allow of anything being easily seen at a little distance.

“If it’s a lion,” said Molly in a faint whisper, “and I feel in my heart it is, he must have Balaam.”

Balaam at this moment pricked his large ears, and Molly and Ruth both heard the snapping of a twig, and saw a figure slip behind a tree. Molly’s spirits rose, and Ruth’s went down in proportion. The woods

were lonely, and they were nearing the most lonely part.

“It’s only a man,” said Ruth rather sharply. “I expect it is one of the keepers.” (Oh, Ruth!). “Come, Molly, we shall never get home at this rate. Whip up Balaam, and let us trot down the hill.”

Much relieved about Balaam’s immediate future, Molly incited him to a really noble trot, and did not allow him to relapse even on the flat which followed. Through the rattling and the jolting, however, Ruth could still hear a stealthy rustle in the fern and underwood. The man was following them.

“He’s coming after us,” whispered Molly, with round frightened eyes, “and Balaam will stop in a minute, I know. Oh! Cousin Ruth, what shall we do?”

Ruth hesitated. They were nearing the steep pitch where the firs overhung the road, which was cut out between huge boulders of rock and sandstone. The ground rose rough and precipitous on their right, and fell away

to their left. Just over the brow of the hill, out of sight, was, as she well knew, the second gate. The noise in the brushwood had ceased. Turning suddenly, her quick eye just caught sight of a figure disappearing behind the slope of the falling ground to the left. He was a lame man, and he was running. In a moment she saw that he was making a short cut, with the intention of waylaying them at the gate. He would get there long before they would, and even then Balaam was beginning the ascent, which really was an ascent this time, at his slowest walk.

Molly's teeth were chattering in her little head.

"Now, Molly," said Ruth sharply, "listen to me, and don't be a baby. He'll wait for us at the gate, so he can't see us here. Get out this moment, and we will both run up the hill to the keeper's cottage at the top of the bank. We shall get there first, because he is lame."

They had passed the bracken now, and were among the moss and sandstone beneath the firs. Ruth hastily dragged Molly out of the cart without stopping Balaam, who proceeded, twirling his ears, leisurely without them.

“Oh, my poor Balaam!” sobbed Molly, with a backward glance at that unconscious favourite marching towards its doom.

“There is no time to think of poor Balaam now,” replied Ruth. “Run on in front of me, and don’t step on anything crackly.”

“Never in this world,” thought Ruth, “will I come alone here with Molly again. Never again will I——”

But it was stiff climbing, and the remainder of the resolution was lost.

They are high to the right above the white gate now. The keeper’s cottage is in sight, built against a ledge of rock, up to which wide rough steps have been cut in the sandstone. Ruth looks down at the gate below. He is waiting—the dreadful

man is waiting there, as she expected; and Balaam, toying with a fern, is at that moment coming round the corner. She sees that he takes in the situation instantly. There is but one way in which they can have fled, and he knows it. In a moment he comes halting and pounding up the slope. He sees their white dresses among the firs. Run, Molly! run, Ruth! Spare no expense. If your new black sash catches in the briars, let it catch; heed it not, for he is making wonderful play with that lame leg up the hill. It is an even race. Now for the stone steps! How many more there are than there ever were before! Quick through the wicket, and up through the little kitchen garden. Molly is at the door first, beating upon it, and calling wildly on the name of Brown.

And then Ruth's heart turns sick within her. The door is locked. Through the window, which usually blossoms with geraniums, she can see the black fireplace and the bare walls. No Brown within answers to Molly's

cries. Brown has been turned away for drinking. Mrs. Brown, who hung a slender "wash" on the hedge only last week, has departed with her lord. Brown's cottage is tenantless. The pursuer must have known it when he breasted the hill. A mixed sound as of swearing and stumbling comes from the direction of the stone steps. The pursuer is evidently intoxicated, probably lunatic!

"Quick, Molly!" gasps Ruth, "round by the back, and then cut down towards the young plantation, and make for the road again. Don't stop for me."

The little yard, the pigstye, the water-butt, fly past. Past fly the empty kennels. Past does *not* fly the other gate. Locked; padlocked. It is like a bad dream. Molly, with a windmill-like exhibition of black legs, gives Ruth a lead over. Now for it, Ruth! The bars are close together and the gate is high. It is not a time to stick at trifles. What does it matter if you can get over best by assuming a masculine equestrian attitude

for a moment on the top bar? There! And now, down the hill again, away to your left. Take to your heels, and be thankful they are not high ones. Never mind if your hair is coming down. You have a thousand good qualities, Ruth, high principles, and a tender conscience, but you are not a swift runner, and you have not played "Sally Water" all day for nothing. Molly is far in front now. A heavy trampling is not far behind; nay, it is closer than you thought. And your eyes are becoming misty, Ruth, and armies of drums are beating every other sound out of your ears—that shouting behind you, for instance. The intoxicated, murderous lunatic is close behind. One minute! Two minutes! How many more seconds can you keep it up? Through the young plantation, down the hill, into the sandy road again, the sandy, uphill road. How much longer can you keep it up?

Charles strolled quietly homewards, enjoy-

ing the beauties of nature, and reflecting on the quantity of rabbit shooting that Mr. Thursby must enjoy. He may also have mused on Lady Grace, for anything that can be known to the contrary, and have possibly made a mental note that if it had been she whom he had asked to walk home with him, instead of Ruth, he would not have been alone at that moment. Be that how it may, he leisurely pursued his path until a fallen tree beside the bank looked so inviting, that (Evelyn and Ralph having gone out to friends at a distance) Charles, who was in no hurry to return to Lady Mary, seated himself thereon, with a cigarette to bear him company.

To him, with rent garments and dust upon her head, and indeed all over her, suddenly appeared Molly; Molly, white with panic, breathless, unable to articulate, pointing in the direction from which she had come. In a moment Charles was tearing down the road at full speed. A tall, swaying figure

almost ran against him at the first turn, and Ruth only avoided him to collapse suddenly in the dry ditch, her face in the bank, and a yard of sash biting the dust along the road behind her.

Her pursuer stopped short. Charles made a step towards him, and stopped short also. The two men stood and looked at each other without speaking.

When Ruth found herself in a position to make observations, she discovered that she was sitting by the roadside, with her head resting against—was it a tweed arm or the bank? She moved a little, and found that first impressions are apt to prove misleading. It was the bank. She opened her eyes to see a brown, red-lined hat on the ground beside her, half full of water, through which she could dimly discern the golden submerged name of the maker. She seemed to have been contemplating it with vague interest for about an hour, when she became aware that

some one was dabbing her forehead with a wet silk handkerchief.

“Better?” asked Charles’s voice.

“Oh!” gasped Ruth, suddenly trying to sit up, but finding the attempt resulted only in the partial movement of a finger somewhere in the distance. “Have I really—surely, surely, I was not so abject as to *faint*?”

“Truth,” said Charles, with a reassured look in his quick, anxious eyes, “obliges me to say you did.”

“I thought better of myself than that.”

“Pride goes before a fall or a faint.”

“Oh, dear!” turning paler than ever.
“Where is Molly?”

“She is all right,” said Charles hastily, applying the pocket handkerchief again. “Don’t alarm yourself, and pray don’t try to get up. You can see just as much of the view sitting down. Molly has gone for the donkey-cart.”

“And that dreadful man?”

“That dreadful man has also departed. By the way, did you see his face? Would you know him again if the policeman succeeds in finding him?”

“No; I never looked round. I only saw, when he began to run to cut us off at the gate, that he was lame.”

“H’m!” said Charles reflectively. Then more briskly, with a new access of dabbing, “How is the faintness going on?”

“Capitally,” replied Ruth, with a faint, amused smile; “but—if it does not seem ungrateful—I should be very thankful if I might be spared the rest of the water in the hat, or if it might be poured over me at once, if you don’t wish it to be wasted.”

“Have I done too much? I imagined my services were invaluable. Let me help you to find your own handkerchief, if you would like a dry one for a change. Ah! what a good shot into that labyrinth of drapery. You have found it for yourself. You are certainly better.”

“But my self-respect,” replied Ruth, drying her face, “is gone for ever.”

“I lost mine years ago,” said Charles, carefully dusting Ruth’s hat, “but I got over it. I had no idea those bows were supported by a wire inside. One lives and learns.”

“I never did such a thing before,” continued Ruth ruefully. “I have always felt a sort of contempt for girls who scream or faint just when they ought not.”

“For my part, I am glad to perceive you have some little feminine weakness. Your growing solicitude also as to the state of your back hair is pleasing in the extreme.”

“I am too confused and shaken to retaliate just now. You are quite right to make hay while the sun shines; but, when I am myself again, beware!”

“And your gown,” continued Charles. “What yawning gulfs, what chasms appear; and what a quantity of extraneous matter you have brought away with you. Reminiscences of travel—burrs, very perfect speci-

mens of burrs, thistledown, chips of fir, several complete spiders' webs; and your sash, which seems to have a particularly adhesive fringe, is a museum in itself. Ah! here comes that coward of little cowards, Molly, with Balaam and the donkey-cart."

Molly, who had left Ruth for dead, greeted her cousin with a transport of affection, and then proceeded to recount the fearful risks that Balaam had encountered by being deserted, and the stoic calm with which he had waited for them at the gate.

"He's not a common donkey," she said with pride. "Get in, Ruth. Are you coming in, Uncle Charles? There's just room for you to squeeze in between Ruth and me—isn't there, Ruth? Oh, you're not going to walk beside, are you?"

But Charles was determined not to let them out of his sight again, and he walked beside them the remainder of the way to Atherstone. He remained silent and pre-occupied during the evening which followed,

pored over a newspaper, and went off to his room early, leaving Ralph dozing in the smoking-room.

It was a fine moonlight night, still and clear. He stood at the open window looking out for a few minutes, and then began fumbling in a dilapidated old travelling-bag such as only rich men use.

“Not much,” he said to himself, spreading out a few sovereigns and some silver on the table; “but it will do.”

He put the money in his pocket, took off his gold hunting watch, and then went back to the smoking-room.

“I am going out again, Ralph, as I did last night. If I come in late, you need not take me for a burglar.”

Ralph murmured something unintelligible, and Charles ran downstairs, and let himself out of the drawing-room French window, that long French window to the ground, which Evelyn had taken a fancy to in a neighbour's drawing-room, and which she

could never be made to see was not in keeping with the character of her old black-and-white house. He put the shutter back after he had passed through, and carefully drawing the window to behind him, without actually closing it, he took a turn or two upon the bowling-green, and then walked off in the direction of the Slumberleigh woods.

After the lapse of an hour or more he returned, as quietly as he had gone, let himself in, made all secure, and stole up to his room.

CHAPTER VII.

VANDON was considered by many people to be the most beautiful house in ——shire.

In these days of great brand-new imitation of intensely old houses, where the amount of ground covered measures the purse of the builder, it is pleasant to come upon a place like Vandon, a quiet old manor-house, neither large nor small, built of ancient bricks, blent to a dim purple and a dim red by that subtle craftsman Time.

Whoever in the years that were no more had chosen the place whereon to build had chosen well. Vandon stood on the slope of a gentle hill, looking across a sweep of green valley to the rising woods beyond, which in days gone by had been a Roman camp, and

where the curious might still trace the wide ledges cut among the regular lines of the trees.

Some careful hand had planned the hanging gardens in front of the house, which fell away to the stream below. Flights of wide stone steps led down from terrace to terrace, each built up by its south wall covered with a wealth of jasmine and ivy and climbing roses. But all was wild and deserted now. Weeds had started up between the stone slabs of the steps, and the roses blossomed out sweet and profuse, for it was the time of roses, amid convolvulus and campion. The quaint old dovecote near the house had almost disappeared behind the trees that had crowded up round it, and held aloft its weathercock in silent protest at their encroachment. The stables close at hand, with their worn-out clock and silent bell, were tenantless. The coach-houses were full of useless old chariots and carriages. Into one splendid court coach the pigeons had found

their way through an open window, and had made nests, somewhat to the detriment of the green-and-white satin fittings.

Great cedars, bent beneath the weight of years, grew round the house. The patriarch among them had let fall one of his gnarled supplicating arms in the winter, and there it still lay where it had fallen.

Anything more out of keeping with the dignified old place than its owner could hardly be imagined, as he stood in his eternal light-grey suit (with a badge of affliction lightly borne on his left arm), looking at his heritage, with his cropped head a little on one side.

The sun was shining, but, like a smile on a serious face, Vandon caught the light on all its shuttered windows, and remained grave, looking out across its terraces to the forest.

“If it were but a villa on the Mediterranean, or a house in London,” he said to himself; “but I have no chance.” And he

shrugged his shoulders, and wandered back into the house again. But if the outside oppressed him, the interior was not calculated to raise his spirits.

Dare had an elegant taste, which he had never hitherto been able to gratify, for blue satin furniture and gilding; for large mirrors and painted ceilings of lovers and cupids, and similar small deer. The old square hall at Vandon, with its great stained glass windows, representing the various quarterings of the Dare arms, about which he knew nothing and cared less, oppressed him. So did the black polished oak floor, and the walls with their white bas-reliefs of twisting wreaths and scrolls, with busts at intervals of Cicero and Dante, and other severe and melancholy personages. The rapiers upon the high white chimney-piece were more to his taste. He had taken them down the first day after his arrival, and had stamped and cut and thrust in the most approved style, in the presence of Faust, the black poodle.

Dare was not the kind of man to be touched by it; but to many minds there would have been something pathetic in seeing a house, which had evidently been an object of the tender love and care of a bygone generation, going to rack and ruin from neglect. Careful hands had embroidered in the fine exquisite work of former days marvellous coverlets and hangings, which still adorned the long suites of empty bedrooms. Some one had taken an elaborate pleasure in fitting up those rooms, had put *pot-pourri* in tall Oriental jars in the passages, had covered the old inlaid Dutch chairs with dim needlework.

The Dare who had lived at court, whose chariot was now the refuge of pigeons, whose court suits, with the tissue paper still in the sleeves, yet remained in one of the old oak chests, and whose jewelled swords still hung in the hall, had filled one of the rooms with engravings of the royal family and ministers of his day. The Dare who had been an

admiral had left his miniature surrounded by prints of the naval engagements he had taken part in, and on the oak staircase a tattered flag still hung, a trophy of unremembered victory.

But they were past and forgotten. The hands which had arranged their memorials with such pride and love had long since gone down to idleness, and forgetfulness also. Who cared for the family legends now? They, too, had gone down into silence. There was no one to tell Dare that the old blue enamel bowl in the hall, in which he gave Faust refreshment, had been brought back from the loot of the Winter Palace of Peking; or that the drawer in the Heisner table in the drawing-room was full of treasured medals and miniatures, and that the key thereof was rusting in a silver patch-box on the writing-table.

The iron-clamped boxes in the lumber-room kept the history to themselves of all the silver plate that had lived in them once

upon a time, although the few odd pieces remaining hinted at the splendour of what had been. In one corner of the dining-room the mahogany tomb still stood of a great gold racing cup, under the portrait of the horse that had won it; but the cup had followed the silver dinner service, had followed the diamonds, had followed in the wake of a handsome fortune, leaving the after generations impoverished. If their money is taken from them, some families are left poor indeed, and to this class the Dares belonged. It is curious to notice the occasional real equality underlying the apparent inequality of different conditions of life. The unconscious poverty, and even bankruptcy, of some rich people in every kind of wealth except money affords an interesting study; and it seems doubly hard when those who have nothing to live upon, and be loved and respected for except their money, have even that taken from them. As Dare wandered through the deserted rooms, the want of

money of his predecessors, and consequently of himself, was borne in upon him. It fell like a shadow across his light pleasure-loving soul. He had expected so much from this unlooked-for inheritance, and all he had found was a melancholy house with a past.

He went aimlessly through the hall into the library. It was there that his uncle had lived; there that he had been found when death came to look for him; among the books which he had been unable to carry away with him at his departure; rare old tomes and first editions, long shelves of dead authors, who, it is to be hoped, continue to write in other worlds for those who read their lives away in this. Old Mr. Dare's interests and affections had all been bound in morocco and vellum. A volume lay open on the table, where the old man had put it down beside the leather arm-chair where he had sat, with his back to the light, summer and winter, winter and summer, for so many years.

No one had moved it since. A wavering pencil-mark had scored the page here and there. Dare shut it up, and replaced it among its brethren. How *triste* and silent the house seemed! He wondered what the old uncle had been like, and sauntered into the staircase hall, where the Dares that had gone before him lived, much in need of varnish. But these were too ancient to have his predecessor among them. He went into the long oak-panelled dining-room, where, above the high carved dado, were more Dares. Perhaps that man with the book was his namesake, the departed Alfred Dare. He wondered vaguely how he should look when he also took his place among his relations. Nature had favoured him with a better moustache than most men, but he had a premonitory feeling that the very moustache itself, though undeniable in real life, would look out of keeping among these bluff, frank, light-haired people, of whom it seemed he—he who had never been

near them before—was the living representative.

A sudden access of pleasurable dignity came over him as he sat on the dining-table, the great mahogany dining-table which still showed vestiges of a bygone polish, and was heavily dented by long years of hammered applause. These ancestors of his! He would not disgrace them. A few minutes ago he had been wondering whether Vandon might not be let. Now, with one of the rapid transitions habitual to him, he resolved that he would live at Vandon, that in all things he would be as they had been. He would become that vague, indefinable, to him mythical personage—a “country squire.” Fortunately, he had a neat leg for a stocking. It was lost, so to speak, in his present mode of dress; but he felt that it would appear to advantage in the perpetual knickerbockers which he supposed it would be his lot to wear. It would also become his duty and his pleasure to marry. For those who

tread in safety the slippery heights of married life he felt a true esteem. It would be a strain no doubt, a great effort; but at this moment he was capable of anything. The finger of duty was plain. And with that adorable Miss Ruth, with or without a fortune—— Alas! he trusted she had a fortune, for, as he came to think thereon, he remembered that he was desperately poor. As far as he could make out from his agent, a grim silent man, who had taken an evident dislike to him from the first, there was no money anywhere. The rents would come in at Michaelmas; but the interest of heavy mortgages had to be paid, the estate had to be kept up. There was succession duty; there were debts—long outstanding debts, which came pouring in now, which Waters spread before him with an iron smile, and which poor Dare contemplated with his head on one side and solemn, arched eyebrows. When Dare was not smiling, he was always preternaturally solemn. There was

no happy medium in his face, or consequently in his mind, which was generally gay, but if not, was involved in a tragic gloom.

“These bills, my friend,” he would say at last, tapping them in deep dejection, and raising his eyebrows into his hair, “how do we pay them?”

But Waters did not know. How should he, Waters, know? Waters only knew that the farmers would want a reduction in these bad times—Mr. Dare might be sure of *that*. And what with arrears, and one thing and another, he need not expect more than two-thirds of his rents when they did arrive. Mr. Dare might lay his account for *that*.

The only money which Dare received, to carry on with on his accession to the great honour and dignity of proprietor of Vandon, was brought to him by the old dairywoman of the house, a faithful creature, who produced out of an old stocking the actual coins which she had received for the butter and cheese she had sold, of which she showed

Dare an account, chalked up in some dead language on the dairy door.

She was a little doubled-up woman, who had served the family all her life. Dare's ready smile and handsome face had won her heart before he had been many days at Vandon, in spite of "his foreign ways," and he found himself constantly meeting her unexpectedly round corners, where she had been lying in wait for him, each time with a secret revelation to whisper respecting what she called the "goin's on."

"You'll not tell on me, sir, but it's only right you should know as Mrs. Smith" (the housekeeper of whom Dare stood in mortal terror) "has them fine damask table-cloths out for the housekeeper's room. I see 'em myself; and everything goin' to rag and ruin in the linen closet!" Or, "Joseph has took in another fitch this very day, sir, as Mrs. Smith sent for, and the old fitch all cut to waste. Do'e go and look at the fitches, sir, and the hams. They're in the room over the

stables. And it's always butter, butter, butter in the kitchen! Not a bit o' dripping used. There's not a pot of dripping in the larder, or so much as a skin of lard. Where does it all go to? You ask Mrs. Smith, and how she sleeps in her bed at night I don't know!"

Dare listened, nodded, made his escape, and did nothing. In the village it was as bad. Time, which had dealt so kindly with Vandon itself, had taken the straggling village in hand too. Nothing could be more picturesque than the crazy black and white houses, with lichen on their broken-in thatch, and the plaster peeling off from between the irregular beams of black wood; nothing more picturesque—and nothing more miserable.

When Time puts in his burnt umbers and brown madders with a lavish hand, and introduces his beautiful irregularities of outline, and his artistic disrepair, he does not look to the drainage, and takes no thought for holes in the roof.

Dare could not go out without eager

women sallying out of cottages as he passed, begging him just to come in and walk upstairs. They would say no more—but would the new squire walk upstairs? And Dare would stumble up and see enough to promise—Alas! how much he promised in those early days. And in the gloaming, heavy dull-eyed men met him in the lanes coming back from their work, and followed him to “beg pardon, sir, and” lay before the new squire things that would never reach him through Waters—bitter things, small injustices, too trivial to seem worthy of mention, which serve to widen the gulf between class and class. They looked to Dare to help them, to make the crooked straight, to begin a new *régime*. They looked to the new king to administer his little realm, the new king, who, alas! cared for none of these things. And Dare promised that he would do what he could, and looked anxious and interested, and held out his brown hand, and raised hopes. But he had no money—no money.

He spoke to Waters at first; but he soon found that was no good. The houses were bad? Of course they were bad. Cottage property did not pay; and would Mr. Dare kindly tell him where the money for repairing them was to come from? Perhaps Mr. Dare might like to put a little of his private fortune into the cottages and the drains and the new pumps. Dare winced. His fortune had not gone the time-honoured way of the fortunes of spirited young men of narrow means with souls above a sordid economy, but still it had gone all the same, and in a manner he did not care to think of.

It was after one of these depressing interviews with Waters, that Ralph and Evelyn found the new owner of Vandon when they rode over together to call, a day or two after the school-feast. Poor Dare was sitting on the low ivy-covered wall of the topmost terrace, a prey to the deepest dejection. If he had lived in Spartan days, when it was possible to conceal gnawing foxes under

wearing apparel, he would have made no use of the advantages of Grecian dress for such a purpose. Captivated by Evelyn's gentleness and sympathetic manner (strangers always thought Evelyn sympathetic), and impressed by Ralph's kindly, honest face, he soon found himself telling them something of his difficulties, of the maze in which he found himself, of the snubs which Waters had administered.

Ralph slapped himself with his whip, whistled, and gave other masculine signs of interest and sympathy. Evelyn looked from one to the other, amiably distressed in her well-fitting habit. After a long conversation, in which Evelyn disclosed that Ralph was possessed of the most extraordinary knowledge and experience in such matters, the two good-natured young people, seeing he was depressed and lonely, begged him to come and stay with them at Atherstone the very next day, when he might discuss his affairs with Ralph, if so disposed, and take

counsel with him. Dare accepted with the most genuine pleasure, and his speaking countenance was in a moment radiant with smiles. Was not the little Molly of the school-feast their child? and was not Miss Deyncourt likewise staying with them?

When his visitors departed, Dare took a turn at the rapiers; then opened the piano with the internal derangement, and sang to his own accompaniment a series of little confidential French songs, which would have made the hair of his ancestors stand on end, if painted hair could do such a thing. And the "new squire," as he was already called, shrugged his shoulders, and lowered his voice, and spread out his expressive rapid hands, and introduced to Vandon, one after another, some of those choice little ditties, French and English, which had made him such a favourite companion in Paris, so popular in a certain society in America.

CHAPTER VIII.

“SIR CHARLES?”

“Miss Deyncourt!”

“I fear,” with a glance at the yellow-back in his hand, “I am interrupting a studious hour, but——”

“Not in the least, I assure you,” said Charles, shutting his novel. “What is regarded as study by the feminine intellect, is to the masculine merely relaxation. I was ‘unbending over a book,’ that was all.”

The process of “unbending” was being performed in the summer house, whither he had retired after Evelyn and Ralph had started on their afternoon’s ride to Vandon, in which he had refused to join.

“I thought I should find you here,” con-

tinued Ruth frankly. "I have been wishing to speak to you for several days, but you are as a rule so surrounded and encompassed on every side by Molly, that I have not had an opportunity."

It had occurred to Charles once or twice during the last few days that Molly was occasionally rather in the way. Now he was sure of it. As Ruth appeared to hesitate, he pulled forward a rustic contorted chair for her.

"No, thanks;" she said. "I shall not long interrupt the unbending process. I only came to ask——"

"To ask?" repeated Charles, who had got up as she was standing, and came and stood near her.

"You remember the first evening you were here?"

"I do."

"And what we spoke of at dinner?"

"Perfectly."

"I came to ask you how much you lent

Raymond ?” Ruth’s clear, earnest eyes were fixed full upon him.

At this moment Charles perceived Lady Mary at a little distance, propelling herself gently over the grass in the direction of the summer-house. In another second she had perceived Charles and Ruth, and had turned precipitately, and hobbled away round the corner with surprising agility.

“Confound her !” inwardly ejaculated Charles.

“I wish to know how much you lent him ?” said Ruth again, as he did not answer, happily unconscious of what had been going on behind her back.

“Only what I was well able to afford.”

“And has he paid it back since ?”

“I am sure he understood I should not expect him to pay it back at once.”

“But he has had it three years.”

Charles did not answer.

“I feel sure he is not able to pay it. Will you kindly tell me how much it was ?”

“No, Miss Deyncourt; I think not.”

“Why not?”

“Because—excuse me, but I perceive that if I do you will instantly wish to pay it.”

“I do wish to pay it.”

“I thought so.”

There was a short silence.

“I still wish it,” said Ruth at last.

Charles was silent. Her pertinacity annoyed and yet piqued him. Being unmarried, he was not accustomed to opposition from a woman. He had no intention of allowing her to pay her brother's debt, and he wished she would drop the subject gracefully, now that he had made that fact evident.

“Perhaps you don't know,” continued Ruth, “that I am very well off.” (As if he did not know it. As if Lady Mary had not casually mentioned Ruth's fortune several times in his hearing!) “Lady Deyncourt left me twelve hundred a year, and I have a little of my own besides. You may not be

aware that I have fourteen hundred and sixty-two pounds per annum."

"I am very glad to hear it."

"That is a large sum, you will observe."

"It is riches," assented Charles, "if your expenditure happens to be less."

"It does happen to be considerably less in my case."

"You are to be congratulated. And yet I have always understood that society exacts great sacrifices from women, in the sums they feel obliged to devote to dress."

"Dress is an interesting subject, and I should be delighted to hear your views on it another time; but we are talking of something else just at this moment."

"I beg your pardon," said Charles quickly, who did not quite like being brought back to the case in point. "I—the truth was, I wished to turn your mind from what we were speaking of. I don't want you to count sovereigns into my hand. I really should dislike it very much."

“You intend me to think from that remark that it was a small sum,” said Ruth, with unexpected shrewdness. “I now feel sure it was a large one. It ought to be paid, and there is no one to do it but me. I know that what is firmness in a man is obstinacy in a woman, so do not on your side be too firm, or, who knows? you may arouse some of that obstinacy in me to which I should like to think myself superior.”

“If,” said Charles, with sudden eagerness, as if an idea had just struck him, “if I let you pay me this debt, will you on your side allow me to make a condition?”

“I should like to know the condition first.”

“Of course. If I agree”—Charles’s light-grey eyes had become keen and intent—“if I agree to receive payment of what I lent Deyncourt three years ago, will you promise not to pay any other debt of his, or ever to lend him money without the knowledge and approval of your relations?”

Ruth considered for a few minutes.

“I have so few relations,” she said at length, with rather a sad smile, “and they are all prejudiced against poor Raymond. I think I am the only friend he has left in the world. I am afraid I could not promise that.”

“Well,” said Charles eagerly, “I won’t insist on relations. I know enough of those thorns in the flesh myself. I will say instead ‘natural advisers.’ Come, Miss Deyncourt, you can’t accuse me of firmness now!”

“My natural advisers,” repeated Ruth slowly. “I feel as if I ought to have natural advisers somewhere; but who are they? Where are they? I could not ask my sister or her husband for advice. I mean, I could not take it, if I did. I should think I knew better myself. Uncle John? Evelyn? Lord Polesworth? Sir Charles, I am afraid the truth is I have never asked for advice in my life. I have always tried to do what seemed best, without troubling to know what other people thought about it. But as I am

anxious to yield gracefully, will you substitute the word 'friends' for 'natural advisers'? I hope and think I have friends whom I could trust."

"Friends, then, let it be," said Charles. "Now," holding out his hand, "do you promise never, et cetera, et cetera, without first consulting your *friends*?"

Ruth put her hand into his.

"I do."

"That is right. How amiable we are both becoming! I suppose I must now inform you that two hundred pounds is the exact sum I lent your brother?"

Ruth went back to the house, and in a few minutes returned with a cheque in her hand. She held it towards Charles, who took it, and put it in his pocket-book.

"Thank you," she said, with gratitude in her eyes and voice.

"We have had a pitched battle," said Charles, relapsing into his old indifferent manner. "Neither of us has been actually

defeated, for we never called out our reserves, which I felt would have been hardly fair on you; but we do not come forth with flying colours. I fear, from your air of elation, you actually believe you have been victorious."

"I agree with you that there has been no defeat," replied Ruth; "but I won't keep you any longer from your studies. I am just going out driving with Lady Mary to have tea with the Thursbys."

"Miss Deyncourt, don't allow a natural and most pardonable vanity to delude you to such an extent. Don't go out driving the victim of a false impression. If you will consider one moment——"

"Not another moment," replied Ruth; "our bugles have sung truce, and I am not going to put on my war-paint again for any consideration. There comes the carriage," as a distant rumbling was heard. "I must not keep Lady Mary waiting;" and she was gone.

Charles heard the carriage roll away again, and when half an hour later he sauntered

back towards the house, he was surprised to see Lady Mary sitting in the drawing-room window.

“What! Not gone, after all!” he exclaimed, in a voice in which surprise was more predominant than pleasure.

“No, Charles,” returned Lady Mary in her measured tones, looking slowly up at him over her gold-rimmed spectacles. “I felt a slight return of my old enemy, and Miss Deyncourt kindly undertook to make my excuses to Mrs. Thursby.”

No one knew what the old enemy was, or in what manner his mysterious assaults on Lady Mary were conducted; but it was an understood thing that she had private dealings with him, in which he could make himself very disagreeable.

“Has Molly gone with her?”

“No; Molly is making jam in the kitchen, I believe. Miss Deyncourt most good-naturedly offered to take her with her; but” (with a shake of the head) “the poor child’s

totally unrestrained appetites and lamentable self-will made her prefer to remain where she was."

"I am afraid," said Charles meditatively, as if the idea were entirely a novel one, "Molly is getting a little spoilt amongst us. It is natural in you, of course; but there is no excuse for me. There never is. There are, I confess, moments when I don't regard the child's immortal welfare sufficiently to make her present existence less enjoyable. What a round of gaiety Molly's life is! She flits from flower to flower, so to speak; from me to cook and the jam-pots; from the jam-pots to some fresh delight in the loft or in your society. Life is one long feast to Molly. Whatever that old impostor the Future may have in store for her, at any rate she is having a good time now."

There was a shade of regretful sadness in Charles's voice that ruffled his aunt.

"The child is being ruined," she said with resigned bitterness.

“Not a bit of it. I was spoiled as a child, and look at me!”

“You *are* spoilt. I don’t spoil you; but other people do. Society does. And the result is that you are so hard to please that I don’t believe you will ever marry. You look for a perfection in others which is not to be found in yourself.”

“I don’t fancy I should appear to advantage side by side with perfection,” said Charles in his most careless manner; and he rose and wandered away into the garden.

He was irritated with Lady Mary, with her pleased looks during the last few days, with her annoying celerity that afternoon in the garden. It was all the more annoying because he was conscious that Ruth amused and interested him in no slight degree. She had the rare quality of being genuine. She stood for what she was without effort or self-consciousness. Whether playful or serious, she was always real. Beneath a reserved and rather quiet manner there lurked a

piquant unconventionality. The mixture of earnestness and humour, which were so closely interwoven in her nature that he could never tell which would come uppermost, had a strange attraction for him. He had grown accustomed to watch for and try to provoke the sudden gleam of fun in the serious eyes, which always preceded a retort given with an air of the sweetest feminine meekness, which would make Ralph rub himself all over with glee, and tell Charles, chuckling, he "would not get much change out of Ruth."

If only she had not been asked to Atherstone on purpose to meet him! If only Lady Mary had not arranged it; if only Evelyn did not know it; if only Ralph had not guessed it; if only he himself had not seen it from the first instant! Ruth and Molly were the only two unconscious persons in the house.

"I wonder," said Charles to himself, "why people can't allow me to manage my own affairs? Oh, what a world it is for unmarried

men with money! Why did I not marry fifteen years ago, when every woman with a straight nose was an angel of light; when I felt a noble disregard for such minor details as character, mind, sympathy, if the hair and the eyes were the right shade? Why did I not marry when I was out of favour with my father, when I was head over ears in debt, and when at least I could feel sure no one would marry me for my money? Molly," as that young lady came running towards him with lingering traces of jam upon her flushed countenance, "you have arrived just in time. Uncle Charles was getting so dull without you. What have you been after all this time?"

"Cook and me have made thirty-one pots and a little one," said Molly, inserting a very sticky hand into Charles's. "And your Mr. Brown helped. Cook told him to go along at first—which wasn't kind, was it?—but he stayed all the same; and I skimmed with a big spoon, and she poured it in the pots.

Only they aren't covered up with paper yet, if you want to see them. And oh! Uncle Charles, what *do* you think? Father and mother have come back from their ride, and that nice funny man who was at the school-feast is coming here to-morrow, and I shall show him my guinea pigs. He said he wanted to see them very much."

"Oh, he did, did he? When was that?"

"At the school-feast. Oh!" with enthusiasm, "he was so nice, Uncle Charles, so attentive, and getting things when you want them; and the wheel went over his foot when he was shaking hands, and he did not mind a bit; and he filled our teapots for us, Ruth's big one, you know, that holds such a lot."

"Oh! He filled the big teapot did he?"

"Yes, and mine too; and then he helped us to unpack the dolls. He was so kind to me and Cousin Ruth."

"Kind to Miss Deyncourt, was he?"

'Yes; and when we went away he ran

and opened the gate for us. Oh, there comes Cousin Ruth back again in the carriage. I'll run and tell her he's coming. She *will* be glad."

"Aunt Mary is right," said Charles, watching his niece disappear. "Molly has formed a habit of expressing herself with unnecessary freedom. Decidedly she is a little spoilt."

CHAPTER IX.

DARE arrived at Atherstone the following afternoon. Evelyn and Ralph, who had enlarged on the state of morbid depression of the lonely inhabitant of Vandon, were rather taken aback by the jaunty appearance of the sufferer, when he appeared, overflowing with evident satisfaction and small talk, his face wreathed with smiles.

“He bears up wonderfully,” said Charles aside to Ruth later in the evening, as Dare warbled a very discreet selection of his best songs after dinner. “No one knows better than myself that many a breaking heart beats beneath a smiling waistcoat, but unless we had been told beforehand we should never have guessed it in his case.”

Dare, who was looking at Ruth, and saw Charles go and sit down by her, brought his song to an abrupt conclusion, and made his way to her also.

“You also sing, Miss Deyncourt?” he asked. “I am sure, from your face, you sing.”

“I do.”

“Thank Heaven!” said Charles fervently. “I did you an injustice. I thought you were going to say ‘a little.’ Every singing young lady I ever met, when asked that question, invariably replied ‘a little.’”

“I leave my friends to say that for me,” said Ruth.

“Perhaps you yourself sing a *little*?” asked Dare, wishing Charles would leave Ruth’s ball of wool alone.

“No,” said Charles; “I have no tricks.” And he rose and went off to the newspaper table. Dare’s songs were all very well, but really his voice was nothing so very wonderful, and he was not much of an acquisition in other ways.

Then Dare took his opportunity. He dropped into Charles's vacant chair; he wound wool; he wished to learn to knit; his inquiring mind craved for information respecting shooting stockings. He talked of music; of songs, Italian, French, and English; of American nigger melodies. Would Miss Deyncourt sing? Might he accompany her? Ah! she preferred the simple old English ballads. He *loved* the simple English ballad.

And Ruth, nothing loth, sang in her fresh, clear voice one song after another, Dare accompanying her with rapid sympathy and ease.

Charles put down his paper, and moved slightly, so that he had a better view of the piano. Evelyn laid down her work and looked affectionately at Ruth.

"Exquisite," said Lady Mary from time to time, who had said the same of Lady Grace's wavering little soprano.

"You also sing duets? You sing duets?"

eagerly inquired Dare, the music-stool creaking with his suppressed excitement; and, without waiting for an answer, he began playing the opening chords of "Greeting."

The two voices rose and fell together, now soft, now triumphant, harmonizing as if they sung together for years. Dare's second was low, pathetic, and it blended at once with Ruth's clear young contralto. Charles wondered that the others should applaud when the duet was finished. Ruth's voice went best alone in his opinion.

"And the 'Cold Blast'?" asked Dare immediately afterwards. "The 'Cold Blast' was here a moment ago"—turning the leaves over rapidly. "You are not tired, Miss Deyncourt?"

"Tired!" replied Ruth, her eyes sparkling. "It never tires me to sing. It rests me."

"Ah! so it is with me. That is just how I feel," said Dare. "To sing, or to listen to the voice of—of——"

“Of what? Confound him!” wondered Charles.

“Of *another*,” said Dare. “Ah! here he is!” and he pounced on another song, and lightly touched the opening chords.

“‘Oh! wert thou in the cold blast,’”

sang Ruth, fresh and sweet.

“‘I’d shelter thee,’”

Dare assured her with manly fervour. He went on to say what he would do if he were monarch of the realm, affirming that the brightest jewel of his crown would be his queen.

(“Anyhow, he can’t pronounce Scotch,” Charles thought.)

“Would be his queen,” Dare repeated, with subdued emotion and an upward glance at Ruth, which she was too much absorbed in the song to see, but which did not escape Charles. Dare’s dark sentimental eyes spoke volumes of—not sermons—at that moment.

“Oh! Uncle Charles,” whispered Molly, who had been allowed to sit up about two hours beyond her nominal bedtime, at which hour she rarely felt disposed to retire; “oh, Uncle Charles! ‘The brightest jewel in his crown!’ Don’t you wish you and me could sing together like that?”

Charles moved impatiently, and took up his paper again.

The evening passed all too quickly for Dare, who loved music and the sound of his own voice, and he had almost forgotten, until Charles left him and Ralph alone together in the smoking-room, that he had come to discuss his affairs with the latter.

“Dear me,” said Evelyn, who had followed her cousin to her room after they had dispersed for the night, and was looking out of Ruth’s window, “that must be Charles walking up and down on the lawn. Well now, how thoughtful he is to leave Mr. Dare and Ralph together. You know, Ruth, poor Mr. Dare’s affairs are in a very bad

way, and he has come to talk things over with my Ralph."

"I hope Ralph will make him put his cottages in order," said Ruth with sudden interest, shaking back her hair from her shoulders. "Do you think he will?"

"Whatever Ralph advises will be sure to be right," replied Evelyn, with the soft conviction of his infallibility which caused her to be considered by most of Ralph's masculine friends an ideal wife. It is women without reasoning powers of any kind whom the nobler sex should be careful to marry, if they wish to be regarded through life in this delightful way by their wives. Men not particularly heroic in themselves, who yet are anxious to pose as heroes in their domestic circle, should remember that the smallest modicum of common sense on the part of the worshipper will inevitably mar a happiness, the very existence of which depends entirely on a blind unreasoning devotion. In middle life the absence of

reason begins perhaps to be felt; but why in youth take thought for such a far-off morrow!

“I hope he will,” said Ruth, half to herself. “What an opportunity that man has if he only sees it. There is so much to be done, and it is all in his hands.”

“Yes, it’s not entailed; but I don’t think there is so very much,” said Evelyn. “But then, so long as people are nice, I never care whether they are rich or poor. That is the first question I ask when people come into the neighbourhood. Are they really nice? Dear me, Ruth, what beautiful hair you have; and mine coming off so! And, talking of hair, did you ever see anything like Mr. Dare’s? Somebody must really speak to him about it. If he would keep his hands still, and not talk so quick, and let his hair grow a little, I really think he would not look so like a foreigner.”

“I don’t suppose he minds looking like one.”

“My dear !”

“His mother was a Frenchwoman, wasn't she ? I am sure I have heard so fifty times since his uncle died.”

“And if she was,” said Evelyn reprovingly, “is not that an extra reason for his giving up anything that will remind people of it ? And we ought to try and forget it, Ruth, and behave just the same to him as if she had been an Englishwoman. I wonder if he is a Roman Catholic ?”

“Ask him.”

“I hope he is not,” continued Evelyn, taking up her candle to go. “We never had one to stay in the house before. I don't mean,” catching a glimpse of Ruth's face, “that Catholics are—well—I don't mean *that*. But still, you know, one would not like to make great *friends* with a Catholic, would one, Ruth ? And he is so nice and so amusing that I do hope, as he is going to be a neighbour, he is a Protestant.” And after a few more remarks of about the same calibre from

Evelyn, the two cousins kissed and parted for the night.

“Will he do it?” said Ruth to herself, when she was alone. “Has he character enough, and perseverance enough, and money enough? Oh! I wish Uncle John would talk to him.”

Ruth was not aware that one word from herself would have more weight with a man like Dare than any number from an angel of heaven, if that angel were of the masculine gender. If at the other side of the house Dare could have known how earnestly Ruth was thinking about him, he would not have been surprised (for he was not without experience), but he would have felt immensely flattered.

Vandon lay in a distant part of Mr. Alwynn's parish, and a perpetual curate had charge of the district. Mr. Alwynn consequently seldom went there, but on the few occasions on which Ruth had accompanied him in his periodical visits, she had seen

enough. Who cares for a recital of what she saw? Misery and want are so common. We can see them for ourselves any day. In Ruth's heart a great indignation had kindled against old Mr. Dare, of Vandon, who was inaccessible as a ghost in his own house, haunting the same rooms, but never to be found when Mr. Alwynn called upon him to "put things before him in their true light." And when Mr. Dare descended to the Vandon vault, all Mr. Alwynn's interest, and consequently a good deal of Ruth's, had centred in the new heir, who was so difficult to find, and who ultimately turned up from the other end of nowhere just when people were beginning to despair of his ever turning up at all.

And now that he had come. Would he make the crooked straight? Would the new broom sweep clean? Ruth recalled the new broom's brown handsome face, with the eager eyes and raised eyebrows, and involuntarily shook her head. It is difficult

to be an impartial judge of any one with a feeling for music, and a pathetic tenor voice ; but the face she had called to mind did not inspire her with confidence. It was kindly, amiable, pleasant ; but was it strong ? In other words, was it not a trifle weak ?

She found herself comparing it with another, a thin, reserved face, with keen light eyes and a firm mouth ; a mouth with a cigar in it at that moment on the lawn. The comparison, however, did not help her meditations much, being decidedly prejudicial to the “ new broom ; ” and the faint chime of the clock on the dressing-table breaking in on them at the same moment, she dismissed them for the night, and proceeded to busy herself in putting to bed her various little articles of jewellery before betaking herself there also.

Any doubts entertained by Evelyn about Dare’s religious views were completely set at rest the following morning, which happened

to be a Sunday. He appeared at breakfast in a black frock coat, the splendour of which quite threw Ralph's ancient Sunday garment into the shade. He wore also a chastened, decorous aspect, which seemed unfamiliar to his mobile face, and rather ill suited to it. After breakfast, he inquired when service would be, and expressed a wish to attend it. He brought down a high hat and an enormous Prayer-book, and figured with them in the garden.

"Who is going to Greenacre, and who is going to Slumberleigh?" called out Ralph from the smoking-room window. "Because, if any of you are going to foot it to Slumberleigh, you had better be starting. Which are you going to, Charles?"

"I am going where Molly goes. Which is it to be, Molly?"

"Slumberleigh," said Molly with decision, "because it's the shortest sermon, and I want to see the little foal in Brown's field."

"Slumberleigh be it," said Charles. "Now,

Miss Deyncourt," as Ruth appeared, "which church are you going to support—Greenacre, which is close in more senses than one, where they never open the windows, and the clergyman preaches for an hour; or Slumberleigh, shady, airy, cool, lying past a meadow with a foal in it? If I may offer that as any inducement, Molly and I intend to patronize Slumberleigh"

Ruth said she would do the same.

"Now, Dare, *you* will be able to decide whether Greenacre, with a little fat tower, or Slumberleigh, with a beautiful tall steeple, suits your religious views best."

"I will also go to Slumberleigh," said Dare, without a moment's hesitation.

"I thought so. I suppose"—to Ralph and Evelyn—"you are going to Greenacre with Aunt Mary? Tell her I have gone to church, will you? It will cheer her up. Sunday is a very depressing day with her, I know. She thinks of all she has done in the week, preparatory to doing a little more

on Monday. Good-bye. Now then, Molly, have you got your Prayer-book? Miss Deyncourt, I don't see yours anywhere. Oh, there it is! No, don't let Dare carry it for you. Give it me. He will have enough to do, poor fellow, to travel with his own. Come, Molly! Is Vic chained up? Yes, I can hear him howling. The craving for church privileges of that dumb animal, Miss Deyncourt, is an example to us Christians. Molly, have you got your penny? Miss Deyncourt, can I accommodate you with a threepenny bit? Now, *are* we all ready to start?"

"When this outburst of eloquence has subsided," said Ruth, "the audience will be happy to move on."

And so they started across the fields, where the grass was already springing faint and green after the haymaking. There was a fresh wandering air, which fluttered the ribbons in Molly's hat, as she danced on ahead, frisking in her short white skirt

beside her uncle, her hand in his. Charles was the essence of wit to Molly, with his grave face that so seldom smiled, and the twinkle in the kind eyes, that always went before those wonderful delightful jokes which he alone could make. Sometimes, as she laughed, she looked back at Ruth and Dare, half a field behind, in pity at what they were missing.

“Shall we wait and tell them that story, Uncle Charles?”

“No, Molly. I dare say he is telling her another which is just as good.”

“I don't think he knows any like yours.”

“Some people like the old, old story best.”

“Do I know the old, old one, Uncle Charles?”

“No, Molly.”

“Can you tell it?”

“No. I have never been able to tell that particular story.”

“And do you really think he is telling it to her now?” with a backward glance.

“Not at this moment. It’s no good running back. He’s only thinking about it now. He will tell it her in about a month or six weeks’ time.”

“I hope I shall be there when he tells it.”

“I hope you may; but I don’t think it is likely. And now, Molly, set your hat straight, and leave off jumping. I never jump when I go to church with Aunt Mary. Quietly now, for there’s the church, and Mr. Alwynn’s looking out of the window.”

Dare, meanwhile, walking with Ruth, caught sight of the church and lych-gate with heartfelt regret. The stretches of sunny meadow land, the faint clamour of church bells, the pale, refined face beside him, had each individually and all three together appealed to his imagination, always vivid when he himself was concerned. He suddenly felt as if a great gulf had fixed itself, without any will of his own, between his old

easy-going life and the new existence that was opening out before him. He had crossed from the old to the new without any perception of such a gulf, and now, as he looked back, it seemed to yawn between him and all that hitherto he had been. He did not care to look back, so he looked forward. He felt as if he were the central figure (when was he *not* a central figure?) in a new drama. He was fond of acting, on and off the stage, and now he seemed to be playing a new part, in which he was not yet thoroughly at ease, but which he rather suspected would become him exceedingly well. It amused him to see himself going to church—to *church!* to hear himself conversing on flowers and music with a young English girl. The idea that he was rapidly falling in love was specially delightful. He called himself a *vieux scélérat*, and watched the progress of feelings which he felt did him credit with extreme satisfaction. He and Ruth arrived at the church porch all too soon for Dare;

and though he had the pleasure of sitting on one side of her during the service, he would have preferred that Charles, of whom he felt a vague distrust, had not happened to be on the other.

CHAPTER X.

“My dear,” said Mrs. Alwynn to her husband that morning, as they started for church across the glebe, “if any of the Atherstone party are in church, as they ought to be, for I hear from Mrs. Smith that they are not at all regular at Greenacre—only went once last Sunday, and then late—I shall just tell Ruth that she is to come back to me to-morrow. A few days won’t make any difference to her, and it will fit in so nicely her coming back the day you go to the palace. After all I’ve done for Ruth, new curtains to her room, and the piano tuned and everything, I don’t think she would like to stay there with friends, and me all by myself, without a creature to speak to. Ruth may be only a

niece by marriage, but she will see in a moment——”

And in fact she did. When Mrs. Alwynn took her aside after church, and explained the case in the all-pervading whisper for which she had apparently taken out a patent, Ruth could not grasp any reason why she should return to Slumberleigh three days before the time, but she saw at once that return she must if Mrs. Alwynn chose to demand it; and so she yielded with a good grace, and sent Mrs. Alwynn back smiling to the lych-gate, where Mr. Alwynn and Mabel Thursby were talking with Dare and Molly, while Charles interviewed the village policeman at a little distance.

“No news of the tramp,” said Charles, meeting Ruth at the gate; and they started homewards in different order to that in which they had come, in spite of a great effort at the last moment on the part of Dare, who thought the old way was better. “The policeman has seen nothing of him. He has gone off to pastures new, I expect.”

“ I hope he has.”

“ Mrs. Alwynn does not want you to leave Atherstone to-morrow, does she ? ”

“ I am sorry to say she does.”

“ But you won't go ? ”

“ I must not only go, but I must do it as if I liked it.”

“ I hope Evelyn won't allow it.”

“ While I am living with Mrs. Alwynn, I am bound to do what she likes in small things.”

“ H'm ! ”

“ I should have thought, Sir Charles, that this particularly feminine and submissive sentiment would have met with your approval.”

“ It does ; it does,” said Charles hastily. “ Only, after the stubborn rigidity of your—shall I say your—week-day character, especially as regards money, this softened Sabbath mood took me by surprise for a moment.”

“ You should see me at Slumberleigh,”

said Ruth, with a smile half sad, half humorous. "You should see me tying up Uncle John's flowers, or holding Aunt Fanny's wools. Nothing more entirely feminine and young ladylike can be imagined."

"It must be a great change, after living with a woman like Lady Deyncourt—to whose house I often went years ago, when her son was living—to come to a place like Slumberleigh."

"It *is* a great change. I am ashamed to say how much I felt it at first. I don't know how to express it; but everything down here seems so small and local, and hard and fast."

"I know," said Charles gently; and they walked on in silence. "And yet," he said at last, "it seems to me, and I should have thought you would have felt the same, that life is very small, very narrow and circumscribed everywhere; though perhaps more obviously so in Cranfords and Slumberleighs. I have seen a good deal during the last fifteen years. I have mixed with many sorts

and conditions of men, but in no class or grade of society have I yet found independent men and women. The groove is as narrow in one class as in another, though in some it is better concealed. I sometimes feel as if I were walking in a ball-room full of people all dancing the lancers. There are different sets of course—fashionable, political, artistic—but the people in them are all crossing over, all advancing and retiring, with the same apparent aimlessness, or setting to partners.”

“There is occasionally an aim in that.”

Charles smiled grimly.

“They follow the music in that as in everything else. You go away for ten years, and still find them on your return, going through the same figures to new tunes. I wonder if there are any people anywhere in the world who stand on their own feet, and think and act for themselves; who don't set their watches by other people's; who don't live and marry and die by rote, expecting to go straight up to heaven by rote afterwards!”

“I believe there are such people,” said Ruth earnestly; “I have had glimpses of them, but the real ones look like the shadows, and the shadows like the real ones, and—we miss them in the crowd.”

“Or one thinks one finds them, and they turn out only clever imitations after all. In these days there is a mania for shamming originality of some kind. I am always imagining people I meet are real, and not shadows, until one day I unintentionally put my hand through them, and find out my mistake. I am getting tired of being taken in.”

“And some day you will get tired of being cynical.”

“I am very much obliged to you for your hopeful view of my future. You evidently imagine that I have gone in for the fashionable creed of the young man of the present day. I am not young enough to take pleasure in high collars and cheap cynicism, Miss Deyncourt. Cynical people are never disappointed in others, as I so often am,

because they expect the worst. In theory I respect and admire my fellow-creatures, but they continually exasperate me because they won't allow me to do so in real life. I have still—I blush to own it—a lingering respect for women, though they have taken pains to show me, time after time, what a fool I am for such a weakness."

Charles looked intently at Ruth. Women are so terribly apt in handling any subject to make it personal. Would she fire up, or would she, like so many women, join in abuse of her own sex? She did neither. She was looking straight in front of her, absently watching the figures of Dare and Molly in the next field. Then she turned her grave, thoughtful glance towards him.

"I think respect is never weakness," she said. "It is a sign of strength, even when it is misplaced. There is not much to admire in cunning people who are never taken in. The best people I have known, the people whom it did me good to be with, have been

those who respected others and themselves. Do not be in too great a hurry to get rid of any little fragment that still remains. You may want it when it is gone."

Charles's apathetic face had become strangely earnest. There was a keen searching look in his tired, restless eyes. He was about to make some answer, when he suddenly became aware of Dare and Molly sitting perched on a gate close at hand waiting for them. Never had he perceived Molly's little brown face with less pleasure than at that moment. She scrambled down with a noble disregard of appearances, and tried to take his hand. But it was coolly withdrawn. Charles fell behind on some pretence of fastening the gate, and Molly had to content herself with Ruth's and Dare's society for the remainder of the walk.

Ruth had almost forgotten, until Molly suggested at luncheon a picnic for the following day, that she was returning to

Slumberleigh on Monday morning; and when she made the fact known, Ralph had to be "hushed" several times by Evelyn for muttering opinions behind the sirloin respecting Mrs. Alwynn, which Evelyn seemed to have heard before, and to consider unsuited to the ears of that lady's niece.

"But if you go away, Cousin Ruth, we can't have the picnic; can we, Uncle Charles?"

"Impossible, Molly. Rather bread-and-butter at home, than a mixed biscuit in the open air without Miss Deyncourt."

"Is Mrs. Alwynn suffering?" asked Lady Mary politely down the table.

Ruth explained that she was not in ill health, but that she did not wish to be left alone; and Ralph was "hushed" again.

Lady Mary was annoyed, or more properly speaking, she was "moved in the spirit," which in a Churchwoman seems to be the same thing as annoyance in the unregenerate or unorthodox mind. She regretted Ruth's departure more than any one, except perhaps

Ruth herself. She had watched the girl very narrowly, and she had seen nothing to make her alter the opinion she had formed of her ; indeed, she was inclined to advance beyond it. Even she could not suspect that Ruth had “played her cards well ;” although she would have aided and abetted her in any way in her power, if Ruth had shown the slightest consciousness of holding cards at all, or being desirous of playing them. Her frank yet reserved manner, her distinguished appearance, her sense of humour (which Lady Mary did not understand, but which she perceived others did), and the quiet *savoir faire* of her treatment of Dare’s advances, all enhanced her greatly in the eyes of her would-be aunt. She bade her good-bye with genuine regret. The only person who bore her departure without a shade of compunction being Dare, who stood by the carriage till the last moment, assuring Ruth that he hoped to come over to the Rectory very shortly ; while Charles and

Molly held the gate open meanwhile, at the end of the short drive.

“I know that Frenchman means business,” said Lady Mary wrathfully to herself, as she watched the scene from the garden. Her mind, from the very severity of its tension, was liable to occasional lapses of this painful kind from the spiritual and ecclesiastical to the mundane and transitory. “I saw it directly he came into the house; and with *his* opportunities, and living within a stone’s throw, I should not wonder if he were to succeed. Any man would fetch a fancy price at Slumberleigh; and the most fastidious woman in the world ceases to be critical, if she is reduced to the proper state of dulness. He is handsome, too, in his foreign way. But she does not like him now. She is inclined to like Charles, though she does not know it. There is an attraction between the two. I knew there would be. And he likes her. Oh, what fools men are! He will go away; and Dare, on the contrary, will ride

over to Slumberleigh every day, and by the time he is engaged to her Charles will see her again, and find out that he is in love with her himself. Oh, the folly, the density, of unmarried men! and, indeed" (with a sudden recollection of the deceased Mr. Cunningham), "of the whole race of them! But of all men I have ever known, I really think the most provoking is Charles."

"Musing?" inquired her nephew, sauntering up to her.

"I was thinking that we had just lost the pleasantest person of our little party," said Lady Mary, viciously seizing up her work.

"I am still here," suggested Charles, by way of consolation. "I don't start for Norway in Wyndham's yacht for three days to come."

"Do you mean to say you are going to Norway?"

"I forget whether it was to be Norway; but I know I'm booked to go yachting somewhere. It's Wyndham's new toy. He

paid through the parental nose for it, and he made me promise in London to go with him on his first cruise. I believe a very charming Miss Wyndham is to be of the party."

"And how long, pray, are you going to yacht with Miss Wyndham?"

"It is with her brother I propose to go. I thought I had explained that before. I shall probably cruise about, let me see, for three weeks or so, till the grouse shooting begins. Then I am due in Scotland, at the Hope Actons, and several other places."

Lady Mary laid down her work, and rose to her feet, her thin hand closing tightly over the silver crook of her stick.

"Charles," she said, in a voice trembling with anger, looking him full in the face, "you are a fool!" and she passed him without another word, and hobbled away rapidly into the house.

"Am I?" said Charles, half aloud to himself, when the last fold of her garment had

been twitched out of sight through the window. *Am I?* Molly," with great gravity, as Molly appeared, "yes, you may sit on my knee; but don't wriggle. Molly, what is a fool?"

"I think its Raca, only worse," said Molly. "Uncle Charles, Mr. Dare is going away too. His dog-cart has just come into the yard."

"Has it? I hope he won't keep it waiting."

"You are not going away, are you?"

"Not for three days more."

"Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. Why, they will be gone in a moment."

But to Charles they seemed three very long days indeed. He was annoyed with himself for having made so many engagements before he left London. At the time there did not seem anything better to be done, and he supposed he must go somewhere; but now he thought he would have liked to stay on at Atherstone, though he

would not have said so to Lady Mary for worlds. He was tired of rushing up and down. He was not so fond of yachting, after all; and he remembered that he had been many times to Norway.

“I would get out of it, if I could,” he said to Lady Mary on the last morning; “and of this blue serge suit too (you should see Miss Wyndham in blue serge!); but it is not a question of pleasure, but of principle. I don’t like to throw over Wyndham at the last moment, after what you said when I failed the Hope Actons last year. Twins could not feel more exactly together than you and I do where a principle is involved. I see you are about to advise me to keep my engagement. Do not trouble to do so. I am going to Portsmouth by the midday train. Brown is at this moment packing my telescope and life-belt.”

CHAPTER XI.

IT was the end of August. The little lawn at Slumberleigh Rectory was parched and brown. The glebe beyond was brown. So was the field beyond that. The thirsty road was ash white between its grey hedgerows. It was hotter in the open air than in the house, but Ruth had brought her books out into the garden all the same, and had made a conscientious effort to read under the chestnut-tree.

For under the same roof with Mrs. Alwynn she had soon learned that application or study of any kind was an impossibility. Mrs. Alwynn had several maxims as to the conduct of herself, and consequently of every one else, and one of those to which she most

frequently gave utterance was that "young people should always be cheery and sociable, and should not be left too much to themselves."

When in the winter Mr. Alwynn had brought home Ruth, quite overwhelmed for the time by the shock of the first real trouble she had known, Mrs. Alwynn was kindness itself in the way of food and warm rooms, but the only thing Ruth craved for, to be left alone, she would not allow for a moment. No! Mrs. Alwynn was cheerful, brisk, and pious, at intervals. If she found her niece was sitting in her own room, she bustled upstairs, poked the fire, gave her a kiss, and finally brought her down to the drawing-room, where she told her she would be as quiet as in her own room. She need not be afraid her uncle would come in; and she must not allow herself to get moped. What would she, Mrs. Alwynn, have done, she would like to know, if, when she was in trouble—and she knew what trouble meant,

if any one did—she had allowed herself to get moped. Ruth must try and bear up. And at Lady Deyncourt's age it was quite to be expected. And Ruth must remember she still had a sister, and that there was a happy home above. And now, if she would get that green wool out of the red plush iron (which really was a work-box—such a droll idea, wasn't it ?), Ruth should hold the wool, and they would have a cosy little chat till luncheon time.

And so Mrs. Alwynn did her duty by her niece ; and Ruth, in the dark days that followed her grandmother's death, took all the little kindnesses in the spirit in which they were meant, and did her duty by her aunt.

But after a time Mrs. Alwynn became more exacting. Ruth was visibly recovering from what Mrs. Alwynn called "her bereavement." She could smile again without an effort ; she took long walks with Mr. Alwynn, and, later in the spring, paid a visit to her

uncle, Lord Polesworth. It was after this visit that Mrs. Alwynn became more exacting. She had borne with half attention and a lack of interest in crewel-work while Ruth was still "fretting," as she termed it. But when a person lays aside crape, and goes into half-mourning, the time has come when she may—nay, when she ought to be "chatty." This time had come with Ruth, but she was not "chatty." Like Mrs. Dombey, she did not make an effort, and as the months passed on, Mrs. Alwynn began to shake her head, and to fear that "there was some officer or something on her mind." Mrs. Alwynn always called soldiers officers, and doctors physicians.

Ruth on her side was vaguely aware that she did not give satisfaction. The small talk, the perpetual demand on her attention, the constant interruptions seemed to benumb what faculties she had. Her mind became like a machine out of work—rusty, creaking, difficult to set going. If she had half an

hour of leisure she could not fix her attention to anything. She, who in her grandmother's time had been so keen and alert, seemed to have drifted, in Mrs. Alwynn's society, into a torpid state, from which she made vain attempts to emerge, only to sink the deeper.

When she stood once more, fresh from a fortnight of pleasant intercourse with pleasant people, in the little ornate drawing-room at Slumberleigh, on her return from Atherstone, the remembrance of the dulled, confused state in which she had been living with her aunt returned forcibly to her mind. The various articles of furniture, the red silk handkerchiefs dabbed behind pendent plates, the musical elephants on the mantel-piece, the imitation Eastern antimacassars, the shocking fate in the way of nailed and glued pictorial ornamentation that had overtaken the back of the cottage piano—indeed, all the various objects of luxury and *vertu* with which Mrs. Alwynn had surrounded herself,

seemed to recall to Ruth—as the apparatus of the sick-room recalls the illness to the patient, the stupor into which she had fallen in their company. With her eyes fixed upon the new brass pig (that was at heart a pen-wiper) which Mrs. Alwynn had pointed out as the gift of Mabel Thursby, who always brought her back some little “tasty thing from London”—with her eyes on the brass pig, Ruth resolved that, come what would, she would not allow herself to sink into such a state of mental paralysis again.

To read a book of any description was out of the question in the society of Mrs. Alwynn. But Ruth, with the connivance of Mr. Alwynn, devised a means of eluding her aunt. At certain hours in the day she was lost regularly, and not to be found. It was summer, and the world, or at least the neighbourhood of Slumberleigh Rectory, which was the same thing, was all before her where to choose. In after-years she used to say that some books had always remained associated

with certain places in her mind. With Emerson she learned to associate the scent of hay, the desultory remarks of hens, and the sudden choruses of ducks. Carlyle's "Sartor Resartus," which she read for the first time this year, always recalled to her afterwards the leathern odour of the box-room, with an occasional *soupeçon* of damp flapping linen in the orchard, which spot was not visible from the Rectory windows.

Gradually Mrs. Alwynn became aware of the fact that Ruth was never to be seen with a book in her hand, and she expressed fears that the latter was not keeping up her reading.

"And if you don't like to read to yourself, my dear, you can read to me while I work. German, now. I like the sound of German very well. It brings back the time when your Uncle John and I went up the Rhine on our honeymoon. And then, for English reading there's a very nice book Uncle John has somewhere on natural history, called

“Animals of a Quiet Life,” by a Mr. Hare, too—so comical, I always think. It’s good for you to be reading something. It is what your poor dear granny would have wished if she had been alive. Only it must not be poetry, Ruth, not poetry.”

Mrs. Alwynn did not approve of poetry. She was wont to say that for her part she liked only what was perfectly *true*, by which it is believed she meant prose.

She had no books of her own. In times of illness she borrowed from Mrs. Thursby (who had all Miss Young’s works, and selections from the publications of the S.P.C.K.). On Sundays, when she could not work, she read, half aloud, of course, with sighs at intervals, a little manual called “Gold Dust,” or a smaller one still, called “Pearls of Great Price,” which she had once recommended to Charles, whom she knew slightly, and about whom she affected to know a great deal, which nothing (except pressing) would induce her to repeat; which rendered the application

of the "Pearls," to be followed by the "Dust," most essential to his future welfare.

On this particular morning in August, Ruth had slipped out as far as the chestnut-tree, the lower part of which was hidden from the Rectory windows by a blessed yew hedge. It was too hot to walk, it was too hot to draw, it was even too hot to read. It did not seem, however, to be too hot to *ride*, for presently she heard a horse's hoofs clattering across the stones of the stable-yard, and she knew, from the familiarity of the sound at that hour of the day, that Dare had probably ridden over, and, more probably still, would stay to luncheon.

The foreign gentleman, as all the village people called him, had by this time become quite an institution in the neighbourhood of Vandon. Every one liked him, and he liked every one. Like the sun, he shone upon the just and the unjust. He went to every tennis party to which he was invited. He was pleased if people were at home when he

called. He became in many houses a privileged person, and he never abused his privileges. Women especially liked him. He had what Mrs. Eccles defined as "such a way with him;" his way being to make every woman he met think that she was particularly interesting in his eyes—for the time being. Men did not, of course, care for him so much. When he stayed anywhere, it was vaguely felt by the sterner sex of the party that he stole a march upon them. While they were smoking, after their kind, in clusters on the lawn, it would suddenly be observed that he was sitting in the drawing-room, giving a lesson in netting, or trying over a new song encircled by young ladyhood. It was felt that he took an unfair advantage. What business had he to come down to tea in that absurd amber plush smoking suit, just because the elder ladies had begged to see it? It was all the more annoying, because he looked so handsome in it. Like most men who are admired

by women, he was not much liked by men.

But the house to which he came the oftenest was Slumberleigh Rectory. He was faithful to his early admiration of Ruth; and the only obstacle to his making her (in his opinion) happy among women, namely, her possible want of fortune, had long since been removed by the confidential remarks of Mrs. Alwynn. To his foreign habits and ideas, fourteen or fifteen hundred a year represented a very large sum. In his eyes Ruth was an heiress, and in all good earnest he set himself to win her. Mr. Alwynn had now become the proper person to consult regarding his property; and at first, to Ruth's undisguised satisfaction, he consulted him nearly every other day, his horse at last taking the turn for Slumberleigh as a matter of course. Many a time in these August days might Mrs. Eccles and all the other inhabitants of Slumberleigh have seen Dare ride up the little street, taking as much active exercise

as his horse, only skywards ; the saddle being to him merely a point of rebound.

But if the object of his frequent visits was misunderstood by Ruth at first, Dare did not allow it to remain so long. And not only Ruth herself, but Mr. and Mrs. Alwynn, and the Rectory servants, and half the parish were soon made aware of the state of his affections. What was the good of being in love, of having in view a social aim of such a praiseworthy nature, if no one were aware of the same ? Dare was not the man to hide even a nightlight under a bushel ; how much less a burning and a shining hymeneal torch such as this. His sentiments were strictly honourable. If he raised expectations, he was also quite prepared to fulfil them. Miss Deyncourt was quite right to treat him with her adorable, placid assumption of indifference, until his intentions were more avowed. In the meanwhile, she was an angel, a lily, a pearl, a star, and several other things, animal, vegetable, and mineral, which his vivid imagination

chose to picture her. But whatever Dare's faults may have been—and Ruth was not blind to them—he was at least head over ears in love with her, fortune or none; and as his attachment deepened, it burned up like fire all the little follies with which it had begun.

A clergyman has been said to have made love to the helpmeet of his choice out of the Epistle to the Galatians. Dare made his out of material hardly more promising—plans for cottages, and estimate of repairs. He had quickly seen how to interest Ruth, though the reason for such an eccentric interest puzzled him. However, he turned it to his advantage. Ruth encouraged, suggested, sympathized in all the little he was already doing, and the much that he proposed to do.

Of late, however, a certain not ungrounded suspicion had gradually forced itself upon her which had led her to withdraw as much as she could from her former intercourse with Dare;

but her change of manner had not quite the effect she had intended.

“She thinks I am not serious,” Dare had said to himself; “she thinks that I play with her feelings. She does not know me. To-morrow I ride over; I set her mind at rest. To-morrow I propose; I make an offer; I claim that adored hand; I—become engaged.”

Accordingly, not long after the clatter of horse’s hoofs in the stable-yard, Dare himself appeared in the garden, and perceiving Ruth, for whom he was evidently looking, informed her that he had ridden over to ask Mr. Alwynn to support him at a dinner his tenants were giving in his honour—a custom of the Vandon tenantry from time immemorial, on the accession of a new landlord. He spoke absently; and Ruth, looking at him more closely as he stood before her, wondered at his altered manner. He had a rose in his button-hole. He always had a rose in his button-hole; but somehow this was more

of a rose than usual. His moustaches were twirled up with unusual grace.

“You will find Mr. Alwynn in the study,” said Ruth hurriedly.

His only answer was to cast aside his whip and gloves, as possible impedimenta later on, and to settle himself, with an elegant arrangement of the choicest gaiters, on the grass at her feet.

It is probably very disagreeable to repeat in any form, however discreetly worded, the old phrase—

“The reason why I cannot tell,
But I don't like you, Doctor Fell.”

But it must be especially disagreeable, if a refusal is at first not taken seriously, to be obliged to repeat it, still more plainly, a second time. It was Ruth's fate to be obliged to do this, and to do it hurriedly, or she foresaw complications might arise.

At last Dare understood, and the sudden utter blankness of his expression smote Ruth

to the heart. He had loved her in his way after all. It is a bitter thing to be refused. She felt that she had been almost brutal in her direct explicitness, called forth at the moment by an instinct that he would proceed to extreme measures unless peremptorily checked.

“I am so sorry,” she said involuntarily.

Poor Dare, who had recovered a certain amount of self-possession now that he was on his feet again, took up his gloves and riding-whip in silence. All his jaunty self-assurance had left him. He seemed quite stunned. His face under his brown skin was very pale.

“I am so sorry,” said Ruth again, feeling horribly guilty.

“It is I who am sorry,” he said humbly. “I have made a great mistake, for which I ask pardon ;” and, after looking at her for a moment, in blank incertitude as to whether she could really be the same person whom he had come to seek in such happy confidence

half an hour before, he raised his hat, his new light-grey hat, and was gone.

Ruth watched him go, and when he had disappeared, she sat down again mechanically in the chair from which she had risen a few moments before, and pressed her hands tightly together. She ought not to have allowed such a thing to happen, she said to herself. Somehow it had never presented itself to her in its serious aspect before. It is difficult to take a vain man seriously. Poor Mr. Dare! She had not known he was capable of caring so much about anything. He had never appeared to such advantage in her eyes as he had done when he had left her the moment before, grave and silent. She felt she had misjudged him. He was not so frivolous, after all. And now that her influence was at an end, who would keep him up to the mark about the various duties which she knew now he had begun to fulfil only to please her? Oh, who would help and encourage him in that most difficult of

positions, a landowner without means sufficient for doing the best by land and tenantry? She instinctively felt that he could not be relied upon for continuous exertion by himself.

“I wish I could have liked him,” said Ruth to herself. “I wish, I wish I could!”

CHAPTER XII.

DURING the whole of the following week Dare appeared no more at Slumberleigh. Mrs. Alwynn, whose time was much occupied as a rule in commenting on the smallest doings of her neighbours, or in wondering why they left undone certain actions which she herself would have performed in their place, Mrs. Alwynn would infallibly have remarked upon his absence many times during every hour of the day, had not her attention been distracted for the time being by a one-horse fly which she had seen go up the road on the afternoon of the day of Dare's last visit, the destination of which had filled her soul with anxious conjecture.

She did not ascertain till the following day

that it had been ordered for Mrs. Smith of Greenacre; though, as she told Ruth, she might have known that, as Mr. Smith was going for a holiday with Mrs. Smith, and their pony lame in its feet, that they would have to have a fly, and with that hill up to Greenacre she was surprised one horse was enough!

When the question of the fly had been thus satisfactorily settled, and Mrs. Alwynn had ceased wondering whether the Smiths had gone to Tenby or to Rhyl (she always imagined people went to one or other of these two places), her whole attention reverted to a screen which she was making, the elegance and novelty of which supplied her with a congenial subject of conversation for many days.

“There is something so new in a screen, an entire screen of Christmas cards,” Mrs. Alwynn would remark. “Now, Mrs. Thursby’s new screen is all pictures out of the *Graphic*, and those coloured Christmas

numbers. She has put all her cards in a book. There is something rather *passy* about those albums, I think. Now I fancy this screen will look quite out of the common, Ruth; and when it is done, I shall get some of those Japanese cranes, and stand them on the top. Their claws are made to twist round, you know, and I shall put some monkeys—you know those droll chenille monkeys, Ruth—creeping up the sides to meet the cranes. I don't honestly think, my dear"—with complacency—"that many people will have anything like it."

Ruth did not hesitate to say that she felt certain very few would.

Mrs. Alwynn was delighted at the interest she took in her new work. Ruth was coming out at last, she told her husband; and she passed many happy hours entirely absorbed in the arrangement of the cards upon the panels. Ruth, thankful that her attention had been providentially distracted from the matter that filled her own thoughts in a way

that surprised and annoyed her, sorted, and snipped, and pasted, and decided weighty questions as to whether a goitred robin on a twig should be placed next to a smiling plum-pudding, dancing a polka with a turkey, or whether a congealed cross with "Christian greeting" in icicles on it, should separate the two.

To her uncle Ruth told what had happened ; and as he slowly wended his way to Vandon on the day fixed for the tenants' dinner, Mr. Alwynn mused thereon, and I believe, if the truth were known, 'he was sorry that Dare had been refused. He was a little before his time, and he stopped on the bridge, and looked at the river, as it came churning and sweeping below, fretted out of its usual calm by the mill above. I think that as he leaned over the low stone parapet he made many quiet little reflections, besides the involuntary one of himself in the water below. He would have liked (he was conscious that it was selfish, but yet he *would* have liked) to

have Ruth near him always. He would have liked to see this strange son of his old friend in good hands, that would lead him—as it is popularly supposed a woman's hand sometimes can—in the way of all others, in which Mr. Alwynn was anxious that he should walk ; a way in which he sometimes feared that Dare had not made any great progress as yet. Mr. Alwynn felt at times, when conversing with him, that Dare's life could not have been one in which the nobler feelings of his nature had been much brought into play, so crude and unformed were his ideas of principle and responsibility, so slack and easy-going his views of life.

But if Mr. Alwynn felt an occasional twinge of anxiety and misgiving about his young friend, it speedily turned to self-upbraiding for indulging in a cynical, unworthy spirit, which was ever ready to seek out the evil and overlook the good ; and he gradually convinced himself that only favourable circumstances were required for the

blossoming forth of those noble attributes, of which the faintest indications on Dare's part were speedily magnified by the powerful lens of Mr. Alwynn's charity to an extent which would have filled Dare with satisfaction, and would have overwhelmed a more humble nature with shame.

And Ruth would not have him! Mr. Alwynn remembered a certain passage in his own youth, a long time ago, when somebody (a very foolish somebody, I think) would not have him either; and it was with that remembrance still in his mind that he met Dare, who had come as far as the lodge gates to meet him, and whose forlorn appearance touched Mr. Alwynn's heart the moment he saw him.

There was not time for much conversation. To his astonishment, Mr. Alwynn found Dare actually nervous about the coming ordeal; and on the way to the Green Dragon, where the dinner was to be given, he reassured him as best he could, and

suggested the kind of answer he should make when his health was drunk.

When, a couple of hours later, all was satisfactorily over, when the last health had been drunk, the last song sung, and Dare was driving Mr. Alywnn home in the shabby old Vandon dog-cart, both men were at first too much overcome by the fumes of tobacco, in which they had been hidden, to say a word to each other. At last, however, Mr. Alwynn drew a long breath, and said faintly—

“I trust I may never be so hot again. Drive slowly under these trees, Dare. It is cooling to look at them, after sitting behind that steaming volcano of a turkey. How is your head getting on? I saw you went in for punch.”

“Was that punch?” said Dare. “Then I take no more punch in the future.”

“You spoke capitally, and brought in the right sentiment, that there is no place like home, in first-rate style. You see, you need not have been nervous.”

“Ah! but it was you who spoke really well,” said Dare, with something of his old eager manner. “You know these people. You know their heart. You understand them. Now, for me, I said what you tell me, and they were pleased, but I can never be with them like you. I understand the words they speak, but themselves I do not understand.”

“It will come.”

“No,” with a rare accession of humility. “I have cared for none of these things till—till I came to hear them spoken of at Slumberleigh by you and—and now at first it is smooth because I say I will do what I can, but soon they will find out I cannot do much, and then——” He shrugged his shoulders.

They drove on in silence.

“But these things are nothing—nothing,” burst out Dare at last in a tremulous voice, “to the one thing I think of all night, all day—how I love Miss Deyncourt, and how,” with a simplicity which touched Mr. Alwynn, “she does not love me at all.”

There is something pathetic in seeing any cheerful, light-hearted animal reduced to silence and depression. To watch a barking, worrying, jovial puppy suddenly desist from parachute expeditions on unsteady legs, and from shaking imaginary rats, and creep, tail close at home, overcome by affliction, into obscurity, is a sad sight. Mr. Alwynn felt much the same kind of pity for Dare, as he glanced at him, resignedly blighted, handsomely forlorn, who but a short time ago had taken life as gaily and easily as a boy home for the holidays.

“Sometimes,” said Mr. Alwynn, addressing himself to the mill, and the bridge, and the world in general, “young people change their minds. I have known such things happen.”

“I shall never change mine.”

“Perhaps not; but others might.”

“Ah!” and Dare turned sharply towards Mr. Alwynn, scanning his face with sudden eagerness. “You think—you think possibly——”

“I don't think anything at all,” interposed Mr. Alwynn, rather taken aback at the evident impression his vague words had made, and anxious to qualify them. “I was only speaking generally ; but—ahem ! there is one point, as we are on the subject that——”

“Yes, yes ?”

“Whether you consider any decision as final or not,” Mr. Alwynn addressed the clouds in the sky, “I think, if you do not wish it to be known that anything has taken place, you had better come and see me occasionally at Slumberleigh. I have missed your visits for the past week. The fact is, Mrs. Alwynn has a way of interesting herself in all her friends. She has a kind heart, and—you understand—any little difference in their behaviour might be observed by her, and might possibly—might possibly”—Mr. Alwynn was at a loss for a word—“be, in short, commented on to others. Suppose now you were to come back with me to tea to-day?”

And Dare went, nothing loth, and arrived at a critical moment in the manufacture of the screen, when all the thickest Christmas cards threatened to resist the influence of paste, and to curl up, to the great anxiety of Mrs. Alwynn.

One of the principal reasons of Dare's popularity was the way in which he threw his whole heart into whatever he was doing, for the time ; never for a long time, certainly, for he rarely bored himself or others by adherence to one set of ideas after its novelty had worn off.

And now, as if nothing else existed in the world, and with a grave manner suggesting repressed suffering and manly resignation, he concentrated his whole mind on Mrs. Alwynn's recalcitrant cards, and made Ruth grateful to him by his tact in devoting himself to her aunt and the screen.

"Well, I never!" said Mrs. Alwynn, after he was gone. "I never *did* see any one like Mr. Dare. I declare he has made the church

stick, Ruth, and ' Blessings on my friend,' which turned up at the corners twice when you put it on, and the big middle one of the kittens skating too! Dear me! I am pleased. I hope Mrs. Thursby won't call till it's finished. But he did not look well, Ruth, did he? Rather pale now, I thought."

"He has had a tiring day," said Ruth.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT Slumberleigh you have time to notice the change of the seasons. There is no hurry at Slumberleigh. Spring, summer, autumn, and winter, each in their turn, take quite a year to come and go. Three months ago it was August; now September had arrived. It was actually the time of damsons. Those damsons which Ruth had seen dangling for at least three years in the cottage orchards were ripe at last. It seemed ages ago since April, when the village was a foaming mass of damson blossom, and the "plum winter" had set in just when spring really seemed to have arrived for good. It was a well-known thing in Slumberleigh, though Ruth till last April had not been aware of it, that

God Almighty always sent cold weather when the Slumberleigh damsons were in bloom, to harden the fruit. And now, the lame, the halt, and the aged of Slumberleigh all with one consent mounted on tottering ladders to pick their damsons, or that mysterious fruit, closely akin to the same, called "black Lamas ploums."

There were plum accidents, of course, in plenty. The Lord took Mrs. Eccles' own uncle from his half-filled basket to another world, for which, as a "tea and coffee totaller," he was, no doubt, well prepared. The too receptive organisms of unsuspecting infancy suffered in their turn. In short, it was a busy season for Mr. and Mrs. Alwynn.

Ruth had plenty of opportunities now for making her long-projected sketch of the ruined house of Arleigh, for the old woman who lived in the lodge close by, and had charge of the place, had "ricked" her back in a damson tree, and Ruth often went to see her. She had been Ruth's nurse in her

childhood, and having originally come from Slumberleigh, returned there when the Deyncourt children grew up, and lived happily ever after, with the very blind and entirely deaf old husband of her choice, in the grey stone lodge at Arleigh.

It was on her return from one of these almost daily visits that Mrs. Eccles pounced on Ruth as she passed her gate, and under pretence of inquiring after Mrs. Cotton, informed her that she herself was suffering in no slight degree. Ruth, who suddenly remembered that she had been remiss in "dropping in" on Mrs. Eccles of late, dropped in then and there to make up for past delinquencies.

"Is it rheumatism again?" she asked, as Mrs. Eccles seemed inclined to run off at once into a report of the goings on of Widow Jones's Sally.

"Not that, my dear, so much as a sinking," said Mrs. Eccles, passing her hand slowly over what seemed more like a rising than

a depression in her ample figure. "But there! I've not been myself since the Lord took old Samiwell Price, and that's the truth."

Samuel Price was the relation who had entered into rest off a ladder, and Ruth looked duly serious.

"I have no doubt it upset you very much," she said.

"Well, miss," returned Mrs. Eccles with dignity, "it's not as if I'd had my 'ealth before. I've had something wrong in the cistern" (Ruth wondered whether she meant system) "these many years. From a gell I suffered in my inside. But lor! I was born to trouble, baptized in a bucket, and taken with collects at a week old. And how did you say Mrs. Cotton of the lodge might be, miss, as I hear is but poorly too?"

Ruth replied that she was better.

"She's no size to keep her in 'ealth," said Mrs. Eccles, "and so bent as she does grow to be sure. Eh, dear, but it's a good thing to be tall. I always think little folks they're

like them little watches, they've no room for their insides. And I wonder now"—Mrs. Eccles was coming to the point that had made her entrap Ruth on her way past—" I wonder now——"

Ruth did not help her. She knew too well the universal desire for knowledge of good and evil peculiar to her sex, to doubt for a moment that Mrs. Eccles had begged her to "step in" only to obtain some piece of information, about which her curiosity had been aroused.

" I wonder, now, if Cotton at the lodge has heard anything of the poachers again this year, round Arleigh way?"

" Not that I know of," said Ruth, surprised at the simplicity of the question.

" Dear sakes! and to think of 'em at Vandon last night, and Mr. Dare and the keepers out all night after 'em."

Ruth was interested in spite of herself.

" And the doctor sent for in the middle of the night," continued Mrs. Eccles, covertly

eyeing Ruth. "Poor young gentleman! For all his forrin ways, there's a many in Vandon as sets store by him."

"I don't think you need be uneasy about Mr. Dare," said Ruth coldly, conscious that Mrs. Eccles was dying to see her change colour. "If anything had happened to him, Mr. Alwynn would have heard of it. And now," rising, "I must be going; and if I were you, Mrs. Eccles, I should not listen to all the gossip of the village."

"Me listen!" said Mrs. Eccles, much offended. "Me, as is too poorly so much as to put my foot out of the door! But, dear heart!" with her usual quickness of vision, "if there isn't Mr. Alwynn and Dr. Brown riding up the street now in Dr. Brown's gig! Well, I never! and Mr. Alwynn a-getting out, and a-talking as grave as can be to Dr. Brown. Poor Mr. Dare! Poor dear young gentleman!"

Ruth was conscious that she beat rather a hurried retreat from Mrs. Eccles' cottage,

and that her voice was not quite so steady as usual when she asked the doctor if it were true that Mr. Dare had been hurt.

“All the village will have it that he is killed ; but he is all right, I assure you, Miss Deyncourt,” said the kind old doctor, so soothingly and reassuringly that Ruth grew pink with annoyance at the tone. “Not a scratch. He was out with his keepers last night, and they had a brush with poachers ; and Martin, the head keeper, was shot in the leg. Bled a good deal, so they sent for me ; but no danger. I picked up your uncle here on his way to see him, and so I gave him a lift there and back. That is all, I assure you.”

And Dr. Brown and Mrs. Eccles, straining over her geraniums, both came to the same conclusion, namely, that, as Mrs. Eccles elegantly expressed it, “Miss Ruth wanted Mr. Dare.”

“And he’ll have her, too, I’m thinking, one of these days,” Mrs. Eccles would remark to the circle of her acquaintance.

Indeed, the match was discussed on numerous ladders, with almost as much interest as the unfailing theme of the damsons themselves.

And Dare rode over to the Rectory as often as he used to do before a certain day in August, when he had found Ruth under the chestnut-tree; the very day before Mrs. Alwynn started on her screen, now the completed glory of the drawing-room.

And was Ruth beginning to like him?

As it had not occurred to her to ask herself that question, I suppose she was *not*.

Dare had grown very quiet and silent of late, and showed a growing tendency to dark hats. His refusal had been so unexpected, that the blow, when it came, fell with all the more crushing force. His self-love and self-esteem had been wounded; but so had something else. Under the velvet corduroy waistcoat, which he wore in imitation of Ralph, he had a heart. Whether it was one of the very best of its kind or warranted to

wear well is not for us to judge ; but, at any rate, it was large enough to take in a very real affection, and to feel a very sharp pang. Dare's manner to Ruth was now as diffident as it had formerly been assured. To some minds there is nothing more touching than a sudden access of humility on the part of a vain man.

Whether Ruth's mind was one of this class or not we do not pretend to know.

CHAPTER XIV.

IT was Sunday morning at Atherstone. In the dining-room, breakfasting alone, for he had come down late, was Sir Charles Danvers. His sudden arrival on the previous Saturday was easily accounted for. When he had casually walked into the drawing-room late in the evening, he had immediately and thoroughly explained the reasons of his unexpected arrival. It seemed odd that he should have come to Atherstone, in the midland counties, "on his way" between two shooting visits in the north, but so it was. It might have been thought that one of his friends would have been willing to keep him two days longer, or receive him two days earlier; but no doubt every one

knows his own affairs best, and Charles might certainly, "at his age," as he was so fond of saying, be expected to know his.

Anyhow, there he was, leaning against the open window, coffee-cup in hand, lazily watching the dwindling figures of Ralph and Evelyn, with Molly between them, disappearing in the direction of Greenacre church hard by.

The morning mist still lingered on the land, and veiled the distance with a tender blue. And up across the silver fields, and across the standing armies of the yellowing corn, the sound of church bells came from Slumberleigh, beyond the river; bringing back to Charles, as to us all, old memories, old hopes, old visions of early youth, long cherished, long forgotten.

The single bell of Greenacre was giving forth a slow, persistent, cracked invitation to true believers, as an appropriate prelude to Mr. Smith's eloquence; but Charles did not hear its testimony.

He was listening to the Slumberleigh bells. Was that the first chime or the second?

Suddenly a thought crossed his mind. Should he go to church?

He smiled at the idea. It was a little late to think of that. Besides, he had let the others start, and he disliked that refuge of mildew and dust, 'Greenacre.

There was Slumberleigh!

There went the bells again!

Slumberleigh! Absurd! Why, he should positively have to run to get there before the First Lesson; and that mist meant heat, or he was much mistaken.

Charles contemplated the mist for a few seconds.

Tang, teng, ting, tong, tung!

He certainly always made a point of going to church at his own home. A good example is, after all, just as important in one place as another.

Tang, tong, teng, tung, *ting!* went the bells.

“Why not run?” suggested an inner voice. “Put down your cup. There! Now! Your hat’s in the hall, with your gloves beside it. Never mind about your Prayer-book. Dear me! Don’t waste time looking for your own stick. Take any. Quick! out through the garden gate! No one can see you. The servants have all gone to church except the cook, and the kitchen looks out on the yew hedge.”

“Over the first stile,” said Charles to himself. “I am out of sight of the house now. Let us be thankful for small mercies. I shall do it yet. Oh, what a fool I am! I’m worse than Raca, as Molly said. I shall be rushing precipitately down a steep place into the sea next. Confound this gate! Why can’t people leave them open? At any rate, it will remain open now. I am not going to have my devotions curtailed by a gate. I fancied it would be hot, but never anything half as hot as this. I hope I shan’t meet Brown taking a morning stroll. I

value Brown ; but I should have to dismiss him if he saw me now. I could never meet his eye again. What on earth shall I say to Ralph and Evelyn when I get back ? What a merciful Providence it is that Aunt Mary is at this moment intoning a response in the highest church in Scarborough !”

Ting, ting, ting !

“ Mr. Alwynn is getting on his surplice, is he ? Well, and if he is, I can make a final rush through the corn, can't I ? there's not a creature in sight. The bell's down ? What of that ? There is the voluntary. Easy over the last fields. There are houses in sight, and there may be wicked Sabbath-breakers looking out of windows. Brown's foal has grown since July. Here we are ! I am not the only Christian hurrying among the tombs. I shall get in with 'the wicked man' after all.”

Some people do not look round in church ; others do. Mrs. Alwynn always did, partly

because she wished to see what was going on behind her, and partly because, in turning back again, she could take a stealthy survey of Mrs. Thursby's bonnet, in which she always felt a burning interest, which she would not for worlds have allowed that lady to suspect.

If the turning round had been all, it would have mattered little; but Mrs. Alwynn suffered so intensely from keeping silence, that she was obliged to relieve herself at intervals by short whispered comments to Ruth.

On this particular morning it seemed as if the comments would never end.

"I am so glad we asked Mr. Dare into our pew, Ruth. The Thursbys are full. That's Mrs. Thursby's sister in the red bonnet."

Ruth made no reply. She was following the responses in the psalms with a marked attention, purposely marked to check conversation, and sufficient to have daunted anybody but her aunt.

Mrs. Alwynn took a spasmodic interest in the psalm, but it did not last.

“Only two basses in the choir, and the new *Te Deum*, Ruth! How vexed Mr. Alwynn will be!”

No response from Ruth. Mrs. Alwynn took another turn at her Prayer-book, and then at the congregation.

“‘I am become as it were a monster unto——’ Ruth! *Ruth!*”

Ruth at last turned her head a quarter of an inch.

“*Sir Charles Danvers is sitting in the free seats by the font.*”

Ruth nailed her eyes to her book, and would vouchsafe no further sign of attention during the rest of the service; and Dare, on the other side, anxious to copy Ruth in everything, being equally obdurate, Mrs. Alwynn had no resource left but to follow the service half aloud to herself, at the times when the congregation were *not* supposed to join in, putting great emphasis on certain

words which she felt applicable to herself, in a manner that effectually prevented any one near her from attending to the service at all.

It was with a sudden pang that Dare, following Ruth out into the sunshine after service, perceived for the first time Charles, standing, tall and distinguished-looking, beside the rather insignificant heir of all the Thursbys, who regarded him with the mixed admiration and gnawing envy of a very young man for a man no longer young.

And then—Charles never quite knew how it happened, but with the full intention of walking back to the Rectory with the Alwynns, and staying to luncheon, he actually found himself in Ruth's very presence accepting a cordial invitation to luncheon at Slumberleigh Hall. For the first time during the last ten years he had done a thing he had no intention of doing. A temporary long-lost feeling of shyness had seized upon him as he saw Ruth coming out, tall and pale and graceful, from the shadow of the

church porch into the blaze of the midday sunshine. He had not calculated either for that sudden disconcerting leap of the heart as her eyes met his. He had an idiotic feeling that she must be aware that he had run most of the way to church, and that he had contemplated the burnished circles of her back hair for two hours, without a glance at the fashionably scraped-up head-dress of Mabel Thursby, with its hogged mane of little wire curls in the nape of the neck. He felt he still looked hot and dusty, though he had imagined he was quite cool the moment before. To his own astonishment, he actually found his self-possession leaving him; and though its desertion proved only momentary, *in* that moment he found himself walking away with the Thursbys in the direction of the Hall. He was provoked, angry with himself, with the Thursbys, and, most of all, with Mr. Alwynn, who had come up a second later, and asked him to luncheon as a matter of course, also Dare, who ac-

cepted with evident gratitude. Charles felt that he had not gone steeplechasing over the country only to talk to Mrs. Thursby, and to see Ruth stroll away over the fields with Dare towards the Rectory.

However, he made himself extremely agreeable, which was with him more a matter of habit than those who occasionally profited by it would have cared to know. He asked young Thursby his opinion on E.C. cartridges; he condoled with Mrs. Thursby on the loss of her last butler, and recounted some alarming anecdotes of his own French cook. He admired a pallid water-colour drawing of Venice, in an enormous frame on an enormous easel, which he rightly supposed to be the manual labour of Mabel Thursby.

When he rose to take his leave, young Thursby, intensely flattered by having been asked for that opinion on cartridges by so renowned a shot as Charles, offered to walk part of the way back with him.

“I am afraid I am not going home yet,”

said Charles lightly. "Duty points in the opposite direction. I have to call at the Rectory. I want Mr. Alwynn's opinion on a point of clerical etiquette, which is setting my young spiritual shepherd at Stoke Moreton against his principal sheep, namely, myself.'

And Charles took his departure, leaving golden opinions behind him, and a determination to invite him once more to shoot, in spite of his many courteous refusals of the last few years.

Mrs. Alwynn always took a nap after luncheon, in her smart Sunday gown, among the mustard-coloured cushions of her high-art sofa. Mr. Alwynn, also, was apt at the same time to sink into a subdued, almost apologetic, doze in the old arm-chair which alone had resisted the march of discomfort and so called "taste" which had invaded the rest of the little drawing-room of Slumberleigh Rectory. Ruth was sitting with her dark head leant against the open window-

frame. Dare had not stayed after luncheon, being at times nervously afraid of giving her too much of his society, and she was at liberty to read over again, if she chose, the solitary letter which the Sunday post had brought her. But she did not do so; she was thinking.

And so her sister Anna was actually returning to England at last! She and her husband had taken a house in Rome, and had arranged that Ruth should join them in London in November, and go abroad with them after Christmas for the remainder of the winter. She had pleasant recollections of previous winters in Rome, or on the Riviera with her grandmother, and she was surprised that she did not feel more interested in the prospect. She supposed she would like it when the time came, but she seemed to care very little about it at the present moment. It had become very natural to live at Slumberleigh, and although there were drawbacks—here she glanced involuntarily

at her aunt, who was making her slumbers vocal by a running commentary on them through her nose—still she would be sorry to go. Mr. Alwynn gave the ghost of a miniature snore, and, opening his eyes, found Ruth's bent affectionately upon him. Her mind went back to another point in Anna's letter. After dilating on the extreme admiration and regard entertained for herself by her husband, his readiness with shawls, etc., she went on to ask whether Ruth had heard any news of Raymond.

Ruth sighed. Would there ever be any news of Raymond? The old nurse at Arleigh always asked the same question. "Any news of Master Raymond?" It was with a tired ache of the heart that Ruth heard that question, and always gave the same answer. Once she had heard from him since Lady Deyncourt's death, after she had written to tell him, as gently as she could, that she and Anna had inherited all their grandmother had to leave. A couple

of months later she had received a hurried note in reply, inveighing against Lady Deyncourt's injustice, saying (as usual) that he was hard up for money, and that, when he knew where it might safely be sent, he should expect her and her sister to make up to him for his disappointment. And since then, since April—not a word. June, July, August, September. Four months and no sign. When he was in want of money his letters heretofore had made but little delay. Had he fallen ill, and died out there, or met his death suddenly perhaps in some wild adventure under an assumed name? Her lips tightened, and her white brows contracted over her absent eyes. It was an old anxiety, but none the less wearing because it was old. Ruth put it wearily from her, and took up the first book which came to her hand, to distract her attention.

It was a manual out of which Mrs. Alwynn had been reading extracts to her in the morning, while Ruth had been engaged in

preparing herself to teach in the Sunday school. She wondered vaguely how pleasure could be derived, even by the most religious persons, from seeing favourite texts twined in and out among forget-me-nots, or falling aslant in old English letters off bunches of violets; but she was old enough and wise enough to know that one man's religion is another man's occasion of stumbling. Books are made to fit all minds, and small minds lose themselves in large-minded books. The thousands in which these little manuals are sold, and the confidence with which their readers recommend them to others, indicate the calibre of the average mind, and shows that they meet a want possibly "not known before," but which they alone, with their little gilt edges, can adequately fill. Ruth was gazing in absent wonder at the volume which supplied all her aunt's spiritual needs, when she heard the wire of the front door bell squeak faintly. It was a stiff-necked and obdurate bell, which for several years Mr. Alwynn had determined to see about.

A few moments later, James, the new and inexperienced footman, opened the door about half a foot, put in his head, murmured something inaudible, and withdrew it again.

A tall figure appeared in the doorway, and advanced to meet her, then stopped midway. Ruth rose hastily, and stood where she had risen, her eyes glancing first at Mr. and then at Mrs. Alwynn.

The alien presence of a visitor had not disturbed them. Mrs. Alwynn, her head well forward, and a succession of chins undulating in perfect repose upon her chest, was sleeping as a stout person only can—all over. Mr. Alwynn, opposite, his thin hands clasped listlessly over his knee, was as unconscious of the two pairs of eyes fixed upon him as Nelson himself, laid out in Madame Tussaud's.

Charles's eyes, twinkling with suppressed amusement, met Ruth's. He shook his head energetically, as she made a slight movement as if to wake them, and stepping forward,

pointed with his hat towards the open window, which reached to the ground. Ruth understood, but she hesitated. At this moment Mrs. Alwynn began a variation on the simple theme in which she had been indulging, and in so much higher a key, that all hesitation vanished. She stepped hastily out through the window, and Charles followed. They stood together for a moment in the blazing sunshine, both too much amused to speak.

“You are bareheaded,” he said suddenly; “is there any”—looking round—“any shade we could take refuge under?”

Ruth led the way round the yew hedge to the horse chestnut; that horse chestnut under which Dare had once lost his self-esteem.

“I am afraid,” said Charles, “I arrived at an inopportune moment. As I was lunching with the Thursbys, I came up in the hope of finding Mr. Alwynn, whom I wanted to consult about a small matter in my own parish.”

Charles was quite pleased with this sentence, when he had airily given it out. It had a true ring about it he fancied, which he remembered with gratitude was more than the door bell had. Peace be with that door bell, and with the engaging youth who answered it.

“I wish you had let me wake Mr. Alwynn,” said Ruth. “He will sleep on now till the bells begin.”

“On no account. I should have been shocked if you had disturbed him. I assure you I can easily wait until he naturally wakes up; that is,” with a glance at the book in her hand, “if I am not disturbing you—if you are not engaged in improving yourself at this moment.”

“No. I have improved myself for the day, thanks. I can safely afford to relax a little now.”

“So can I. I resemble Lady Mary in that. On Sunday mornings she reflects on her own shortcomings; on Sunday afternoons

she finds an innocent relaxation in pointing out mine."

"Where is Lady Mary now?"

"I should say she was in her bath chair on the Scarborough sands at this moment."

"I like her," said Ruth with decision.

"Tastes differ. Some people feel drawn towards wet blankets, and others have a leaning towards pokers. Do you know why you like her?"

"I never thought about it, but I suppose it was because she seemed to like *me*."

"Exactly. You admired her good taste. A very natural vanity, most pardonable in the young, was gratified at seeing marks of favour so well bestowed."

"I dare say you are right. At any rate, you seem so familiar with the workings of vanity in the human breast that it would be a pity to contradict you."

"By the way," said Charles, speaking in the way people do who have nothing to say, and are trying to hit on any subject of con-

versation, "have you heard any more of your tramp? There was no news of him when I left. I asked the Slumberleigh policeman about him again on my way to the station."

"I have heard no more of him, though I keep his memory green. I have not forgotten the fright he gave me. I had always imagined I was rather a self-possessed person till that day."

"I am a coward myself when I am frightened," said Charles consolingly, "though at other times as bold as a lion."

They were both sitting under the flickering shadow of the already yellowing horse chestnut tree, the first of all the trees to set the gorgeous autumn fashions. But as yet it was paling only at the edges of its slender fans. The air was sweet and soft, with a voiceless whisper of melancholy in it, as if the summer knew, for all her smiles, her hour had well-nigh come.

The Rectory cows, the mottled one, and

the red one, and the big white one that was always milked first, came slowly past on their way to the pond, blinking their white eyelashes leisurely at Charles and Ruth.

“It is almost as hot as that Sunday in July when we walked over from Atherstone. Do you remember?” said Charles suddenly.

“Yes.”

She knew he was thinking of their last conversation, and she felt a momentary surprise that he had remembered it.

“We never finished that conversation,” he said, after a pause.

“No; but then, conversations never are finished, are they? They always seem to break off just when they are coming to the beginning. A bell rings, or there is an interruption, or one is told it is bedtime.”

“Or fools rush in with their word where you and I should fear to tread, and spoil everything.”

“Yes.”

“And have you been holding the wool and

tying up the flowers, as you so graphically described, ever since you left Atherstone in July?"

"I hope I have; I have tried."

"I am sure of that," he said with sudden earnestness; then added more slowly, "I have not wound any wool; I have only enjoyed myself."

"Perhaps," said Ruth, turning her clear frank gaze upon him, "that may have been the harder work of the two; it sometimes is."

His light restless eyes, with the searching look in them which she had seen before, met hers, and then wandered away again to the level meadows, and the woods, and the faint sky.

"I think it was," he said at last; and both were silent. He reflected that his conversations with Ruth had a way of beginning in fun, becoming more serious, and ending in silence.

The bells rang out suddenly.

Charles thought they were full early.

“Mr. Alwynn will wake up now,” said Ruth. “I will tell him you are here.”

But before she had time to do more than rise from her chair, Mr. Alwynn came slowly round the yew hedge, and stopped suddenly in front of the chestnut tree, amazed at what he saw beneath it. His mild eyes gazed blankly at Charles through his spectacles, gathering a pained expression as they peered over the top of them, which did not lessen when they fell on Ruth.

Charles explained in a few words the purport of his visit, which had already explained itself quite sufficiently to Mr. Alwynn; and mentioning that he had waited in the hope of presently finding Mr. Alwynn “disengaged” (at this Mr. Alwynn blushed a little), asked leave to walk as far as the church with him to consult him on a small matter, etc., etc. It was a neat sentence, but it did not sound quite so well the third time. It had lost by the heathenish and vain repetitions to which it had been subjected.

“Certainly, certainly,” said Mr. Alwynn ; mollified but still discomposed. “You should have waked me, Ruth,” turning reproachfully to his niece, whose conduct had never in his eyes fallen short of perfection till this moment. “Little nap after luncheon. Hardly asleep. You should have waked me.”

“There was Aunt Fanny,” said Ruth, feeling as if she had committed some grave sin.

“Ah-h !” said Mr. Alwynn, as if her reason were a weighty one, his memory possibly recalling the orchestral flourish which as a rule heralded his wife’s return to consciousness. “True, true, my dear. I must be going,” as the chime ceased. “Are you coming to church this afternoon ?”

Ruth replied that she was not ; and Mr. Alwynn and Charles departed together, Charles ruefully remembering that he had still to ask advice on a subject the triviality of which would hardly allow of two opinions.

Ruth watched them walk away together,

and then went back noiselessly into the drawing-room.

Mrs. Alwynn was sitting bolt upright, her feet upon the floor, her gown upon the sofa. Her astonished eyes were fixed upon the dwindling figures of Mr. Alwynn and Charles.

“Goodness, Ruth!” she exclaimed, “who is that white waistcoat walking with your uncle?”

Ruth explained.

“Dear me! And as likely as not he came to see the new screen. I know Mrs. Thursby tells everybody about it. And his own house so full of beautiful things too. Was ever anything so annoying! We should have had so much in common, for I hear his taste is quite—well, really quite out of the way. How contrairy things are, Ruth! You awake, and me asleep, when it might just as well have been the other way. But it is Sunday, my dear, so we must not complain. And now, as we have missed church, I will lie

down again, and you shall read me that nice sermon, which I always like to hear when I can't go to church, the one in the green book, about Nabob's vineyard."

CHAPTER XV.

GREAT philosophers and profound metaphysicians should by rights have lived at Slumberleigh. Those whose lines have fallen to them "ten miles from a lemon," have time to think, if so inclined.

Only elementary natures complain of their surroundings; and though at first Ruth had been impatient and depressed, after a time she found that, better than to live in an atmosphere of thought, was to be thrown entirely on her own resources, and to do her thinking for herself.

Some minds of course sink into inanition if an outward supply of nutriment is withheld. Others get up and begin to forage for themselves. Happy are these—when the transi-

tion period is over—when, after a time, the first and worst mistakes have been made and suffered for, and the only teaching that profits anything at all, the bitter teaching of experience, has been laid to heart.

Such a nature was Ruth's, upright, self-reliant, without the impetuosity and impulsiveness that so often accompanies an independent nature, but accustomed to look at everything through her own eyes, and to think, but not till now to act for herself.

She had been brought up by her grandmother to believe that before all things *noblesse oblige*; to despise a dishonourable action, to have her feelings entirely under control, to be intimate with few, to be courteous to all. But to help others, to give up anything for them, to love an unfashionable or middle-class neighbour, or to feel a personal interest in religion, except as a subject of conversation, had never found a place in Lady Deyncourt's code, or consequently in Ruth's, though, as was natural

with a generous nature, the girl did many little kindnesses to those about her, and was personally unselfish, as those who live with self-centred people are bound to be if there is to be any semblance of peace in the house.

But now, new thoughts were stirring within her, were leavening her whole mind. All through these monotonous months she had watched the quiet routine of patient effort that went to make up the sum of Mr. Alwynn's life. He was a shy man. He seldom spoke of religion out of the pulpit, but all through these long months he preached it without words to Ruth, as she had never heard it preached before, by

“The best portion of a good man's life—
His little, nameless, unremembered acts
Of kindness and of love.”

It was the first time that she had come into close contact with a life spent for others, and its beauty appealed to her with a new force, and gradually but surely changed the current

of her thoughts, until, as "we needs must love the highest when we see it," she unconsciously fell in love with self-sacrifice.

The opinions of most young persons, however loudly and injudiciously proclaimed, rarely do the possessors much harm, because they are not as a rule acted upon; but with some few people a change of views means a change of life. Ruth was on the edge of a greater change than she knew.

At first she had often regretted the chapter of her life that had been closed by Lady Deyncourt's death. Now, she felt she could not go back to it, and find it all-sufficient as of old. It would need an added element, without which she began to see that any sort or condition of life is but a stony, dusty concern after all—an element which made even Mr. Alwynn's colourless existence a contented and happy one.

Ruth had been telling him one day, as they were walking together, of her sister's plans for the winter, and that she was sorry

to think her time at Slumberleigh was drawing to a close.

“I am afraid,” he said, “in spite of all you say, my dear, it has been very dull for you here. No little gaieties or enjoyments such as it is right young people should have. I wish we had had a picnic, or a garden party, or something. Mabel Thursby cannot be happy without these things, and it is natural at your age that you should wish for them. Your aunt and I lead very quiet lives. It suits us, but it is different for young people.”

“Does it suit you?” asked Ruth with sudden earnestness. “Do you really like it, or do you sometimes get tired of it?”

Mr. Alwynn looked a little alarmed and disconcerted. He never cared to talk about himself.

“I used to get tired,” he said at last, with reluctance, “when I was younger. There were times when I foolishly expected more from life than—than, in fact, I quite got, my dear; and the result was, I fear I had a very

discontented spirit—an unthankful, discontented spirit,” he repeated with sad retrospection.

Something in his tone touched Ruth to the quick.

“And now?”

“I am content now.”

“Uncle John, tell me. How did you grow to feel content?”

He saw there were tears in her eyes.

“It took a long time,” he said. “Anything that is worth knowing, Ruth, takes a long time to learn. I think I found in the end, my dear, that the only way was to put my whole heart into what I was doing” (Mr. Alwynn’s voice was simple and earnest, as if he were imparting to Ruth a great discovery). “I had tried before, from time to time, of course, but never quite as hard as I might have done. That was where I failed. When I put myself on one side, and really settled down to do what I could for others, life became much simpler and happier.”

He turned his grave, patient eyes to Ruth's again. Was something troubling her?

"I have often thought since then," he went on, speaking more to himself than to her, "that we should consider well what we are keeping back our strength for, if we find ourselves refusing to put the whole of it into our work. When at last one does start, one feels it is such a pity one did not do it earlier in life. When I look at all the young faces growing up around me, I often hope, Ruth, they won't waste as much time as I did."

How simple it seemed while she listened to him; how easy, how natural, this life for others!

She could not answer. One sentence of Mr. Alwynn's was knocking at the door of her heart for admission; was drowning with its loud beating the sound of all the rest—

"We should consider well what we are keeping back our strength for, if we refuse to put the whole of it into our work."

She and Mr. Alwynn walked on in silence;

and, after a time, always afraid of speaking much on the subject that was first in his own mind, he began to talk again on trivial matters, to tell her how he had met Dare that morning, and had promised on her behalf that she would sing at a little local concert which the Vandon schoolmaster was getting up that week to defray the annual expense of the Vandon cricket club, and in which Dare was taking a vivid interest.

“You won’t mind singing, will you, Ruth?” asked Mr. Alwynn, wishing she would show a little more interest in Dare and his concert.

“Oh no, of course not,” rather hurriedly. “I should be glad to help in any way.”

“And I thought, my dear, as it would be getting late, we had better accept his offer of staying the night at Vandon.”

Ruth assented, but so absently that Mr. Alwynn dropped the subject with a sigh, and walked on, revolving weighty matters in his mind. They had left the woods now, and were crossing the field where, two

months ago, the school-feast had been held. Mr. Alwynn made some slight allusion to it, and then coughed. Ruth's attention, which had been distracted, came back in a moment. She knew her uncle had something which he did not like, something which yet he felt it his duty to say, when he gave that particular cough.

"That was when you were staying with the Danvers, wasn't it, Ruth?" in a would-be casual, disengaged tone.

"Yes; I came over from Atherstone with Molly Danvers."

"I remember," said Mr. Alwynn, looking extremely uncomfortable; "and—if I am not mistaken—ahem! Sir Charles Danvers was staying there at the same time?"

"Certainly he was."

"Yes, and I dare say, Ruth—I am not finding fault, far from it—I dare say he made himself very agreeable for the time being?"

"I don't think he made himself so. I should have said he was naturally so, without

any effort, just as some people are naturally the reverse."

"Indeed! Well, I have always heard he was most agreeable; but I am afraid—I think perhaps it is just as well you should know—forewarned is forearmed, you know—that, in fact, he says a great deal more than he means sometimes."

"Does he? I dare say he does."

"He has a habit of appearing to take a great interest in people, which I am afraid means very little. I dare say he is not fully aware of it, or I am sure he would struggle against it, and we must not judge him; but still, his manner does a great deal of harm. It is peculiarly open to misconstruction. For instance," continued Mr. Alwynn, making a rush as his courage began to fail him, "it struck me, Ruth, the other day—Sunday, was it? Yes, I think it *was* Sunday—that really he had not much to ask me about his week-day services. I—ahem! I thought he need not have called."

“ I dare say not.”

“ But now, that is just the kind of thing he *does*—calls, and, er—under chestnut-trees, and that sort of thing—and how *are* young people to know unless their elders tell them that it is only his way, and that he has done just the same ever so often before ?”

“ And will again,” said Ruth, trying to keep down a smile. “ Is it true (Mabel is full of it) that he is engaged, or on the point of being so, to one of Lord Hope Acton’s daughters ?”

“ People are always saying he is engaged, to first one person and then another,” said Mr. Alwynn, breathing more freely now that his duty was discharged. “ It often grieves me that your aunt mentions his engagement so confidently to friends, because it gives people the impression that we know, and we really don’t. He is a great deal talked about, because he is such a conspicuous man in the county, on account of his wealth and his place, and the odd things he says and does.

There is something about him that is different from other people. I am sure I don't know why it is, but I like him very much myself. I have known him do such kind things. Dear me! What a pleasant week I had at Stoke Moreton last year. It is beautiful, Ruth; and the collection of old papers and manuscripts unique! Your aunt was in Devonshire with friends at the time. I wish he would ask me again this autumn, to see those charters of Edward IV.'s reign that have been found in the secret drawer of an old cabinet. I hear they are quite small, and have green seals. I wish I had thought of asking him about them on Sunday. If they are really small, but it was only Archdeacon Eldon who told me about them, and he never sees anything any particular size—if they should happen to be really small——” And Mr. Alwynn turned eagerly to the all-engrossing subject of the Stoke Moreton charters, which furnished him with conversation till they reached home.

“We should consider well what we are keeping back our strength for, if we refuse to put the whole of it into our work.”

All through the afternoon and the quiet monotonous evening, these words followed Ruth. She read them between the lines of the book she took up. She stitched them into her sewing. They went upstairs with her at night, they followed her into her room, and would not be denied. When she had sent away her maid, she sat down by the window, and, with the full harvest moon for company, faced them and asked them what they meant. But they only repeated themselves over and over again. What had they to do with her? Her mind tried to grapple with them in vain. As often as she came to close quarters with them they eluded her and disappeared, only to return with the old formula.

Her thoughts drifted away at last to what Mr. Alwynn had said of Charles, and all the disagreeable things which Mabel had come

up on Monday morning, with a bunch of late roses, on purpose to tell her respecting him. She had taken Mabel's information at its true worth, which I fear was but small; but she felt annoyed that both Mabel and Mr. Alwynn should have thought it necessary to warn her. As if, she said to herself, she had not known! Really, she had not been born and bred in Slumberleigh, nor had she lived there all her life. She had met men of that kind before. She always liked them. Charles especially amused her, and she could see that she amused him; and, now she came to think of it, she supposed he had paid her a good deal of attention at Atherstone, and perhaps he had not come over to Slumberleigh expressly to see Mr. Alwynn. It was as natural to men like Charles to be always interested in some one, as it would be unnatural in others ever to be so, except as the result of long forethought, and with a wedding ring and a set of bridesmaids well in view. But to attach any importance to

the fact that Charles liked to talk to her would have been absurd. With another man it might have meant much; but she had heard of Charles and his misdoings long before she had met him, and knew what to expect. Lord Breakwater's sister had confided to her many things respecting him, and had wept bitter tears on her shoulder, when he suddenly went off to shoot grizzlies in the Rocky Mountains.

“He has not sufficient vanity to know that he is exceedingly popular,” said Ruth to herself. “I should think there are few men, handicapped as he is, who have been liked more entirely for themselves, and less for their belongings; but all the time he probably imagines people admire his name, or his place, or his income, and not himself, and consequently he does not care much what he says or does. I am certain he does not mean to do any harm. His manner never deceived me for a moment. I can't see why it should offend others; but from all accounts he

seems to be frequently misunderstood. That is just the right word for him. He is misunderstood. At any rate I never misunderstood him. That Sunday call might have made me suspicious of any ordinary mortal ; but I knew no common rule could apply to such an exception as he is. I only wonder, when he really does find himself in earnest, how he is to convey his meaning to the future Lady Danvers. What words would be strong enough ; what ink would be black enough to carry conviction to her mind ?”

She smiled at the thought, and, as she smiled, another face rose suddenly before her—Dare’s, pale and serious, as it had been of late, with the wistful anxious eyes. *He*, at least, had meant a great deal, she thought with remorse. *He* had been in earnest, sufficiently in earnest to make himself very unhappy, and on her account.

Ruth had known for some time that Dare loved her ; but to-night that simple unobtrusive fact suddenly took larger propor-

tions, came boldly out of the shadow, and looked her in the face.

He loved her. Well, what then ?

She turned giddy, and leaned her head against the open shutter.

In the silence the words that had haunted her all the afternoon came back ; not loud as heretofore, but in a whisper, speaking to her heart, which had begun to beat fast and loud.

“ We should consider well what we are keeping back our strength for, if we refuse to put the whole of it into our work.”

What work was there for her to do ?

The giddiness and the whirl in her mind died down suddenly, like a great gust on the surface of a lake, and left it still and clear and cold.

The misery of the world and the inability to meet it had so often confused and weighed her down, that she had come back humbly of late to the only possibility with which it was in her power to deal, come back to the well-

worn groove of earnest determination to do as much as in her lay, close at hand, when she could find a field to labour in. And now she suddenly saw, or thought she saw, that she had found it. She had been very anxious as to whether Dare would do his duty, but till this moment it had never struck her that it might be *her* duty to help him.

She liked him; and he was poor—too poor to do much for the people who were dependent on him, the poor struggling people of Vandon. Their sullen, miserable faces rose up before her, and their crazy houses. Fever had broken out again in the cottages by the river. He needed help and encouragement, for he had a difficult time before him. And she had these to give, and money too. Could she do better with them? She knew Mr. Alwynn wished it. And as to herself? Was she never going to put self on one side? She had never liked any one very much—at least, not in that way—but she liked him.

The words came like a loud voice in the silence. She liked him. Well, what then?

She shut her eyes, but she only shut out the moon's pale photographs of the fields and woods. She could not shut out these stern besieging thoughts.

What was she holding back for? For some possible ideal romantic future; for the prince of a fairy story? No? Well, then, for what?

The moon went behind a cloud, and took all her photographs with her. The night had turned very cold.

"To-morrow," said Ruth to herself, rising slowly; "I am too tired to think now. To-morrow!"

And as she spoke the faint chime of the clock upon her table warned her that already it was to-morrow.

And soon, in a moment, as it seemed to her, before she had had time to think, it was again to-morrow, a wet, dim to-morrow,

and she was at Vandon, running up the wide stone steps in the starlight, under Dare's protecting umbrella, and allowing him to take her wraps from her before the hall fire.

The concert had gone off well. Ruth was pleased, Mr. Alwynn was pleased. Dare was in a state of repressed excitement, now flying into the drawing-room to see if there were a good fire, as it was a chilly evening; now rushing thence to the dining-room to satisfy himself that all the immense and elaborate preparations which he had enjoined on the cook had been made. Then, Ruth must be shown to her room. Who was to do it? He flew to find the housekeeper, and after repeated injunctions to the housemaid, whom he met in the passage, not to forget the hot water, took Mr. Alwynn off to his apartment.

The concert had begun, as concerts always seem to do, at the exact time at which it is usual to dine, so that it was late before the principal performers and Mr. Alwynn reached Vandon. It was later still before supper

came, but when it came it was splendid. Dare looked with anxious satisfaction over a soup tureen at the various spiced and glazed forms of indigestion, sufficient for a dozen people, which covered the table. It grieved him that Ruth, confronted by a spreading ham, and Mr. Alwynn, half hidden by a boulder of turkey, should have such moderate appetites. But at least she was there, under his roof, at his table. It was not surprising that he could eat nothing himself.

After supper, Mr. Alwynn, who combined the wisdom of the worldly serpent with the harmlessness of the clerical dove, fell—not too suddenly—asleep by the fire in the drawing-room, and Ruth and Dare went into the hall, where the piano was. Dare opened it and struck a few minor chords. Ruth sat down in a great carved arm-chair beside the fire.

The hall was only lighted by a few tall lamps high on pedestals against the walls,

which threw great profiles of the various busts upon the dim bas-reliefs of twining scroll-work ; and Dare, with his eyes fixed on Ruth, began to play.

There is in some music a strange appeal beyond the reach of words. Those mysterious sharps and flats, and major and minor chords, are an alphabet that in some occult combinations forms another higher language than that of speech, a language which, as we listen, thrills us to the heart.

It was an old piano, with an impediment in its speech, out of the yellow notes of which Ruth could have made nothing ; but in Dare's hands it spoke for him as he never could have spoken for himself.

His eyes never left her. He feared to look away, lest he should find the presence of that quiet graceful figure by his fireside had been a dream, and that he was alone again with the dim lamps, alone with Dante, and Cicero, and Seneca.

The firelight dwelt ruddily upon her grave,

clear-cut face and level brows, and upon the folds of her white gown. It touched the slender hands clasped lightly together on her knee, and drew sudden sparks and gleams out of the diamond pin at her throat.

His hands trembled on the keys, and as he looked his heart beat high and higher, loud and louder, till it drowned the rhythm of the music. And as he looked, her calm eyes met his.

In another moment he was on his knees beside her, her hands caught in his trembling clasp, and his head pressed down upon them.

"I know," he gasped, "it is no good. You have told me so once. You will tell me so again. I am not good enough. I am not worthy. But I love you; I love you!"

In moments of real feeling the old words hold their own against all modern newcomers. Dare repeated them over and over again in a paroxysm of overwhelming emotion which shook him from head to foot.

Something in his boyish attitude and in

his entire loss of self-control touched Ruth strangely. She knew he was five or six years her senior, but at the moment she felt as if she were much older than he, and a sudden vague wish passed through her mind that he had been nearer her in age; not quite so young.

“Well?” she said gently; and he felt her cool, passive hands tremble a little in his. Something in the tone of her voice made him raise his head, and meet her eyes looking down at him, earnestly, and with a great kindness in them.

A sudden eager light leapt into his face.

“Will you?” he whispered breathlessly, his hands tightening their hold of hers. “Will you?”

There was a moment's pause, in which the whole world seemed to stand quite still and wait for her answer.

“Yes,” she said at last, “I will.”

“I am glad I did it,” she said to herself

half an hour later, as she leaned her tired head against the carved oak chimney-piece in her bedroom, and absently traced with her finger the Latin inscription over the fireplace. "I like him very much. I am glad I did it."

CHAPTER XVI.

FOR many years nothing had given Mr. Alwynn such heartfelt pleasure as the news Ruth had to tell him, as he drove her back next morning to Slumberleigh, behind Mrs. Alwynn's long-tailed ponies.

It was a still September morning, with a faint pearl sky and half-veiled silver sun. Pale gleams of sunshine wandered across the busy harvest fields, and burnished the steel of the river.

Decisions of any kind rarely look their best after a sleepless night; but as Ruth saw the expression of happiness and relief that came into her uncle's face, when she told him what had happened, she felt again that she was glad—very glad.

“Oh, my dear! my dear!”—Mr. Alwynn was driving the ponies first against the bank, and then into the opposite ditch—“how glad I am; how thankful! I had almost hoped, certainly; I wished so much to think it possible; but then, one can never tell. Poor Dare! poor fellow! I used to be so sorry for him. And how much you will be able to do at Vandon among the people. It will be a different place. And it is such a relief to think that the poor old house will be looked after. It went to my heart to see the way it had been neglected. I ventured this morning, as I was down early, to move some of that dear old Worcester further back into the cabinet. They really were so near the edge, I could not bear to see them; and I found a Sèvres saucer, my dear, in the library, that belonged to one of those beautiful cups in the drawing-room. I hope it was not very wrong, but I had to put it among its relations. It was sitting with a Delf mug on it, poor thing. Dear me! I

little thought then— Really, I have never been so glad about anything before.”

After a little more conversation, and after Mr. Alwynn had been persuaded to give the reins to his niece, who was far more composed than himself, his mind reverted to his wife.

“ I think, my dear, until your engagement is more settled, till I have had a talk with Dare on the subject (which will be necessary before you write to your Uncle Francis), it would be as well not to refer to it before—in fact, not to mention it to Mrs. Alwynn. Your dear aunt’s warm heart and conversational bent make it almost impossible for her to refrain from speaking of anything that interests her ; and indeed, even if she does not say anything in so many words, I have observed that opinions are sometimes formed by others as to the subject on which she is silent, by her manner when any chance allusion is made to it.”

Ruth heartily agreed. She had been

dreading the searching catechism through which Mrs. Alwynn would certainly put her—the minute inquiries as to her dress, the hour, the place; whether it had been “standing up or sitting down;” all her questions of course interwoven with personal reminiscences of “how John had done it,” and her own emotion at the time.

It was with no small degree of relief at the postponement of that evil hour that Ruth entered the house. As she did so a faint sound reached her ear. It was that of a musical-box.

“Dear! dear!” said Mr. Alwynn, as he followed her. “It is a fine day. Your aunt must be ill.”

For the moment Ruth did not understand the connection of ideas in his mind, until she suddenly remembered the musical-box, which, Mrs. Alwynn had often told her, was “so nice and cheery on a wet day, or in time of illness.”

She hurriedly entered the drawing-room,

followed by Mr. Alwynn, where the first object that met her view was Mrs. Alwynn extended on the sofa, arrayed in what she called her tea-gown, a loose robe of blue cretonne, with a large vine-leaf pattern twining over it, which broke out into grapes at intervals. Ruth knew that garment well. It came on only when Mrs. Alwynn was suffering. She had worn it last during a period of entire mental prostration, which had succeeded all too soon an exciting discovery of mushrooms in the glebe. Mr. Alwynn's heart and Ruth's sank as they caught sight of it again.

With a dignity befitting the occasion, Mrs. Alwynn recounted in detail the various ways in which she had employed herself after their departure the previous evening, up to the exact moment when she slipped going upstairs, and sprained her ankle, in a blue and green manner that had quite alarmed the doctor when he had seen it, and compared with which Mrs. Thursby's

gathered finger in the spring was a mere bagatelle.

“Mrs. Thursby stayed in bed when her finger was bad,” said Mrs. Alwynn to Ruth, when Mr. Alwynn had condoled, and had made his escape to his study. “She always gives way so; but I never was like that. I was up all the same, my dear.”

“I hope it does not hurt very much,” said Ruth, anxious to be sympathetic, but succeeding only in being commonplace.

“It’s not only the pain,” said Mrs. Alwynn, in the gentle resigned voice which she always used when indisposed—the voice of one at peace with all the world, and ready to depart from a scene consequently so devoid of interest; “but to a person of my habits, Ruth—never a day without going into the larder, and always seeing after the servants as I do—first one duty and then another—and the chickens and all. It seems a strange thing that I should be laid aside.”

Mrs. Alwynn paused, as if she had not for

the nonce fathomed the ulterior reasons for this special move on the part of Providence, which had crippled her, while it left Ruth and Mrs. Thursby with the use of their limbs.

“However,” she continued, “I am not one to repine. Always cheery and busy, Ruth, that is my motto. And now, my dear, if you will wind up the musical-box, and then read me a little bit out of ‘Texts with Tender Twinings’” (the new floral manual which had lately superseded the “Pearls”), “after that we will start on one of my scrap-books, and you shall tell me all about your visit to Vandon.”

It was not the time Ruth would have chosen for a *tête-à-tête* with her aunt. She was longing to be alone, to think quietly over what had happened, and it was difficult to concentrate her attention on pink and yellow calico, and cut out coloured royal families, and foreign birds with a good grace. Happily Mrs. Alwynn, though always requiring attention, was quite content with the

half of what she required ; and, with the "Buffalo Girls," and the "Danube River" tinkling on the table, conversation was somewhat superfluous.

In the afternoon Dare came, but he was waylaid in the hall by Mr. Alwynn, and taken into the study before he could commit himself in Mrs. Alwynn's presence. Mrs. Thursby and Mabel also called to condole, and a little later Mrs. Smith of Greenacre, who had heard the news of the accident from the doctor. Altogether it was a delightful afternoon for Mrs. Alwynn, who assumed for the time an air of superiority over Mrs. Thursby to which that lady's well-known chronic ill-health seldom allowed her to lay claim.

Mrs. Alwynn and Mrs. Thursby had remained friends since they had both arrived together as brides at Slumberleigh, in spite of a difference of opinion which had at one time strained friendly relations to a painful degree, as to the propriety of wearing the

hair over the top of the ear. The hair question settled, a temporary difficulty, extending over a few years, had sprung up in its place, respecting what Mrs. Thursby called "family." Mrs. Alwynn's family was not her strong point, nor was its position strengthened by her assertion (unsupported by Mrs. Markham), that she was directly descended from Queen Elizabeth. Consequently, it was trying to Mrs. Thursby—who, as every one knows, was one of the brainless Copleys of Copley—that Mrs. Alwynn, who in the lottery of marriage had drawn an honourable, should take precedence of herself. To obviate this difficulty, Mrs. Thursby, with the ingenuity of her sex, had at one time introduced Mr. and Mrs. Alwynn as "our Rector," and "our Rector's wife," thus denying them their name altogether, for fear lest its connection with Lord Polesworth should be remembered, and the fact that Mr. Alwynn was his brother, and consequently an honourable, should transpire.

This peculiarity of etiquette entirely escaped Mr. Alwynn, but aroused feelings in the breast of his wife which might have brought about one of those deeply rooted feuds, which so often exist between the squire's and clergyman's families, if it had not been for the timely and serious illness in which Mrs. Thursby lost her health, and the principal part of the other subject of disagreement—her hair.

Then Queen Elizabeth and the honourable were alike forgotten. With her own hands Mrs. Alwynn made a certain jelly, which Mrs. Thursby praised in the highest manner, saying she only wished that it had been the habit in *her* family to learn to do anything so useful. Mrs. Thursby's new gowns were no longer kept a secret from Mrs. Alwynn, to be suddenly sprung upon her at a garden party, when, possibly in an old garment herself, she was least able to bear the shock. Bygones were bygones, and, greatly to the relief of the two husbands,

their respective wives made up their differences.

“And a very pleasant afternoon it has been,” said Mrs. Alwynn, when the Thursbys and Dare, who had been loth to go, had taken their departure. “Mrs. Thursby and Mabel, and Mrs. Smith and Mr. Dare. Four to tea. Quite a little party, wasn’t it, Ruth? And so informal and nice; and the buns came in as naturally as possible, which no one heard me whisper to James for. I think those little citron buns are nicer than a great cake like Mrs. Thursby’s; and hers are always so black and over-baked. That is why the cook sifts such a lot of sugar over them. I do think one should be real, and not try to cover up things. And Mr. Dare so pleasant. Quite sorry to go he seemed. I often wonder whether it will be you or Mabel in the end. He ought to be making up his mind. I expect I shall have a little joke with him about it before long. And such an interest he took in the

scrap-book. I asked him to come again to-morrow."

"I don't expect he will be able to do so," said Mr. Alwynn. "I rather think he will have to go to town on business."

Later in the evening, Mr. Alwynn told Ruth that in the course of his interview he had found that Dare had the very vaguest ideas as to the necessity of settlements; had evidently never given the subject a thought, and did not even know what he actually possessed.

Mr. Alwynn was secretly afraid of what Ruth's trustee, his brother, Lord Polesworth (now absent shooting in the Rocky Mountains), would say if, during his absence, their niece was allowed to engage herself without suitable provision; and he begged Ruth not "to do anything rash" in the way of speaking of her engagement, until Dare could, with the help of his lawyer, see his way to making some arrangement.

"I know he has no money," said Ruth

quietly ; “that is one of the reasons why I am going to marry him.”

Mr. Alwynn, to whom this seemed the most natural reason in the world, was not sure whether it would strike his brother with equal force. He had a suspicion that when Lord Polesworth’s attention should be turned from white goats and brown bears to the fact that his niece, who had means of her own, had been allowed to engage herself to a poor man, and that Mr. Alwynn had greatly encouraged the match, unpleasant questions might be asked.

“Francis will be back in November,” said Mr. Alwynn. “I think, Ruth, we had better wait till his return before we do anything definite.”

“Anything *more* definite, you mean,” said Ruth. “I have been very definite already, I think. I shall be glad to wait till he comes back, if you wish it, Uncle John. I shall try to do what you both advise. But at the same time I am of age ; and if my word is

worth anything, you know I have given that already."

Dare felt no call to go to London by the early train on the following morning, so he found himself at liberty to spend an hour at Slumberleigh Rectory on his way to the station, and by the advice of Mr. Alwynn went into the garden, where the sound of the musical-box reached the ear but in faint echoes, and where Ruth presently joined him.

In his heart Dare was secretly afraid of Ruth; though, as he often told himself, it was more than probable she was equally afraid of him. If that was so, she controlled her feelings wonderfully, for, as she came to meet him, nothing could have been more frankly kind, more friendly, or more composed than her manner towards him. He took her outstretched hand and kissed it. It was not quite the way in which he had pictured to himself that they would meet; but if his imagination had taken a somewhat bolder

flight in her absence, he felt now, as she stood before him, that it had taken that flight in vain. He kept her hand, and looked intently at her. She did not change colour, nor did that disappointing friendliness leave her steady eyes.

“She does not love me,” he said to himself. “It is strange, but she does not. But the day will come.”

“You are going to London, are you not?” asked Ruth, withdrawing her hand at last; and after hearing a detailed account of his difficulties and anxieties about money matters, and after taking an immense weight off his mind by telling him that they would have no influence in causing her to alter her decision, she sent him beaming and rejoicing on his way, quite a different person to the victim of anxiety and depression who had arrived at Slumberleigh an hour before.

Mrs. Alwynn was much annoyed at Dare’s entire want of heart in leaving the house without coming to see her, and during the

remainder of the morning she did not cease to comment on the differences that exist between what people really are and what they seem to be, until, in her satisfaction at recounting the accident to Evelyn Danvers, a new and sympathetic listener, she fortunately forgot the slight put upon her ankle earlier in the day. The complete enjoyment of her sufferings was, however, destined to sustain a severe shock the following morning.

She and Ruth were reading their letters, Mrs. Alwynn, of course, giving Ruth the benefit of the various statements respecting the weather which her correspondents had confided to her, when Mr. Alwynn came in from the study, an open letter in his hand. He was quite pink with pleasure.

“He has asked me to go and see them,” he said, “and they *are* small, and have green seals, all excepting one”—referring to the letter—“which has a big red seal in a tin box, attached by a tape. Ruth, I am perfectly *convinced* beforehand that those charters

are grants of land of the fourteenth or fifteenth century. Sir Charles mentions that they are in black letter, and only a few lines on each, but he says he won't describe them in full, as I must come and see them for myself. Dear me! how I shall enjoy arranging them for him, which he asks me to do. I had really become so anxious about them, that a few days ago I determined to set my mind at rest, and I wrote to him to ask for particulars, and that is his answer."

Mr. Alwynn put Charles's letter into her hand, and she glanced over it.

"Why, Uncle John, he asks Aunt Fanny as well; and—'if Miss Deyncourt is still with you, pleasure,' etc.—and *me*, too."

"When is it for?" asked Mrs. Alwynn, suddenly sitting bolt upright.

"Let me see. 'Black letter size about'—where is it? Here. 'Tuesday, the 25th, for three nights. Leaving home following week for some time. Excuse short notice,' etc. It is next week, Aunt Fanny."

“I shall not be able to go,” gasped Mrs. Alwynn, sinking back on her sofa, while something very like tears came into her eyes; “and I’ve never been there, Ruth. The Thursbys went once, in old Sir George’s time, and Mrs. Thursby always says it is the show place in the county, and that it is such a pity I have not seen it. And last autumn, when John went, I was in Devonshire, and never even heard of his going till I got home, or I’d have come back. Oh, Ruth! oh, dear!”

Mrs. Alwynn let her letters fall into her lap, and drew forth the coloured pocket-handkerchief which she wore, in imitation of Mabel Thursby, stuck into the bodice of her gown, and at the ominous appearance of which Mr. Alwynn suddenly recollected a duty in the study and retreated.

With an unerring instinct Ruth flew to the musical-box and set it going, and then knelt down by the prostrate figure of her aunt, and administered what sympathy and consolation

she could, to the "cheery" accompaniment of the "Buffalo Girls."

"Never mind, dear Aunt Fanny. Perhaps he will ask you again when you are better. There will be other opportunities."

"I always was unlucky," said Mrs. Alwynn faintly. "I had a swelled face up the Rhine on our honeymoon. Things always happen like that with me. At any rate"—after a pause—"there is *one* thing. We ought to try and look at the bright side. It is not as if we had not been asked. We have not been overlooked."

"No," said Ruth promptly; and in her own mind she registered a vow that in her future home she would never give the pain that being overlooked by the larger house can cause to the smaller house.

"And I will stay with you, Aunt Fanny," she went on cheerfully. "Uncle John can go by himself, and we will do just what we like while he is away, won't we?"

But at this Mrs. Alwynn demurred. She

was determined that if she played the *rôle* of a martyr she would do it well. She insisted that Ruth should accompany Mr. Alwynn. She secretly looked forward to telling Mabel that Ruth was going. She did not mind being left alone, she said. She desired, with a sigh of self-sacrifice, that Mr. Alwynn should accept for himself and his niece. She had not been brought up to consider herself, thank God. She had her faults, she knew. No one was more fully aware of them than herself; but she was not going to prevent others enjoying themselves because she herself was laid aside.

“And now, my dear,” she said, with a sudden return to mundane interests that succeeded rather unexpectedly to the celestial spirit of her previous remarks, “you must be thinking about your gowns. If I had been going, I should have had my ruby satin done up—so beautiful by candlelight. What have you to wear? That white lace tea-gown with the silver grey train is very nice; but you

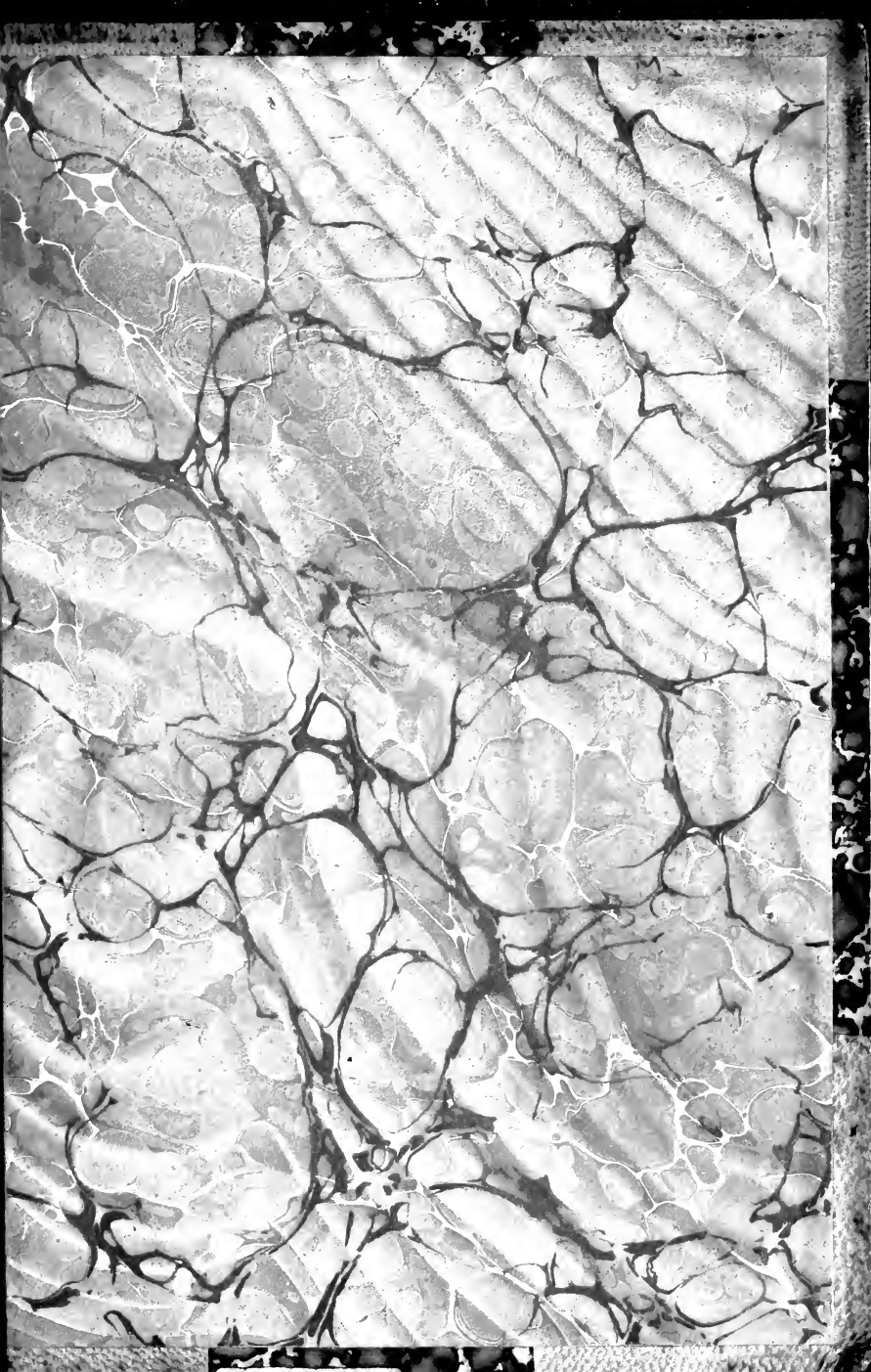
ought not to be in half mourning now. I like to see young people in colours. And then there is that gold-and-white brocade, Ruth, that you wore at the drawing-room last year. It is a beautiful dress, but rather too quiet. Could not you brighten it up with a few cherry-coloured bows about it, or a sash? I always think a sash is so becoming. If you were to bring it down, I dare say I could suggest something. And you must be well dressed, for though he only says 'friends,' you never can tell whom you may not meet at a place like that."

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