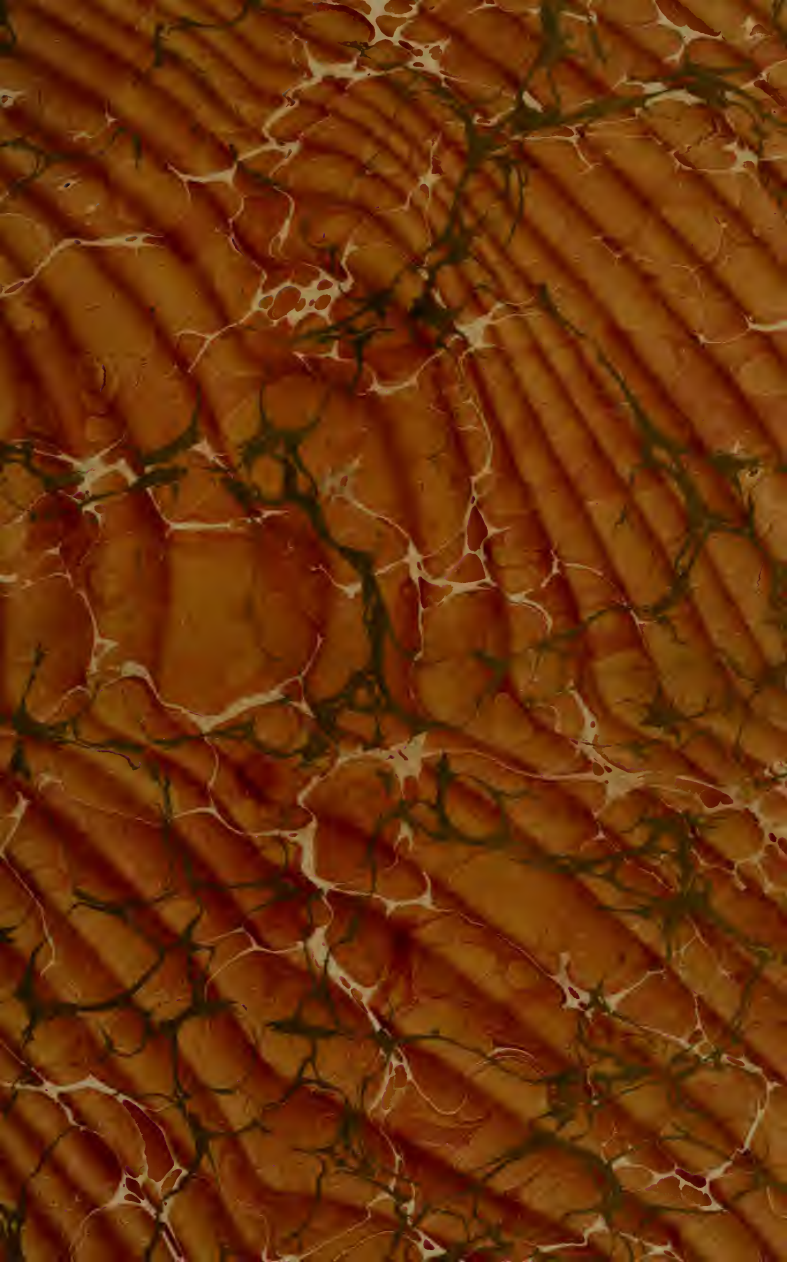


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SIR CHARLES DANVERS.

SIR CHARLES DANVERS.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"THE DANVERS JEWELS."

"Es ist eine alte Geschichte."

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



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SIR CHARLES DANVERS.

CHAPTER I.

THE last week of September found Charles back at Stoke Moreton to receive the "friends" of whom Mrs. Alwynn spoke. People whose partridges he had helped to kill were now to be gathered from the east and from the west to help to kill his. From the north also guests were coming, were leaving their mountains to—— But the remainder of the line is invidious. The Hope Actons had written to offer a visit at Stoke Moreton, on the strength of an old promise to Charles, a promise so old that he had forgotten it, until reminded, that next

time they were passing they would take his house on their way. They had offered their visit exactly at the same time for which he had just invited the Alwynns and Ruth. Charles felt that they were not quite the people whom he would have arranged to meet each other, but as Fate had so decreed it, he acquiesced calmly enough.

But when Lady Mary also wrote tenderly from Scarborough, to ask if she could be of any use in helping to entertain his guests, he felt it imperative to draw the line, and wrote a grateful effusion to his aunt, saying that he could not think of asking her to leave a place where he felt sure she was deriving spiritual and temporal benefit, in order to assist at so unprofitable a festivity as a shooting party. He mentioned casually that Lady Grace Lawrence, Miss Deyncourt, and Miss Wyndham were to be of the party, which details he imagined might have an interest for her amid her graver reflections.

The subject of Ruth's coming certainly

had a prominent place in his own graver reflections. For the last fortnight, as he went from house to house, he had been wondering how he could meet her again, and when Mr. Alwynn's letter concerning the charters was forwarded to him, a sudden inspiration made him then and there send the invitation which had arrived at Slumberleigh Rectory a few days before. He groaned in spirit as he wrote it, at the thought of Mrs. Alwynn disporting herself, dressed in the brightest colours, among his other guests; and it was with a feeling of thankfulness that he found Ruth and Mr. Alwynn were coming without her.

He had felt very little interest so far in the party, which, with the exception of the Hope Actons, had been long arranged, but now he found himself looking forward to it with actual impatience, and he returned home a day before the time, instead of an hour or two before his guests were expected, as was his wont.

The Wyndhams and Hope Actons, with Lady Grace in tow, were the first to appear upon the scene. Mr. Alwynn and Ruth arrived a few hours later, amid a dropping fire of young men and gun cases, who kept on turning up at intervals during the afternoon, and, according to the mysterious nocturnal habits of their kind, till late into the night.

If ever a man appears to advantage it is on his native hearth, and as Charles stood on his in the long hall, where it was the habit of the house to assemble before dinner, Ruth found that her attempts at conversation were rather thrown away upon Lady Grace, with whom she had been renewing an old acquaintance, and whose interest for the time being entirely centred in the carved coats of arms and heraldic designs with which the towering white stone chimney-piece was covered.

Lady Grace was one of those pretty, delicate creatures who remind one of a very

elaborate rosebud. There was an appearance of ultra refinement about her, a look of that refinement which is in itself a weakness, a poverty of blood, so to speak, the opposite and more pleasing, but equally unwholesome extreme of coarseness. She looked very pretty as, having left Ruth, she stood by Charles, passing her little pink hand over the lowest carvings, dim and worn with the heat of many generations of fires, and listened with rapt attention to his answers to her questions.

“And the hall is so beautiful,” she said, looking round with childlike curiosity at the walls covered with weapons, and with a long array of armour; and at the massive pillars of carved white stone which rose up out of the polished floor to meet the raftered ceiling. “It is so—so uncommon.”

Whatever Charles's other failings may have been, he was an admirable host. The weather was fine. What can be finer than September when she is in a good humour?

The two first days of Ruth's visit were unalloyed enjoyment. It seemed like a sudden return to the old life with Lady Deyncourt, when the round of country visits regularly succeeded the season in London. Of Mr. Alwynn she saw little or nothing. He was buried in the newly discovered charters. Of Charles she saw a good deal, more than at the time she was quite aware of, for he seemed to see a great deal of everybody, from Lady Grace to the shy man of the party, who at Stoke Moreton first conceived the idea that he was an acquisition to society. But whether Charles made the opportunities or not which came so ready to his hand, still he found time, amid the pressure of his shooting arrangements and his duties as host, to talk to Ruth.

One day there was cub hunting in the grey of the early morning, to which she and Miss Wyndham went with Charles and others of the party who could bear to get up betimes. Losing sight of the others after

a time, Ruth and Charles rode back alone together when the sun was high, walking their tired horses along the blackberried lanes, and down the long green rides cut in the yellowing bracken of the park.

“And so you are going to winter in Rome?” said Charles, who had the previous day, contrary to his wont, accepted an invitation to Slumberleigh Hall for the middle of October. “I sometimes go to Rome for a few weeks when the shooting is over. And are you glad or sorry at the prospect of leaving your Cranford?”

“Very sorry.”

“Why?”

“I have seen an entirely new phase of life at Slumberleigh.”

“I think I can guess what you mean,” said Charles gravely. “One does not often meet any one like Mr. Alwynn.”

“No. I was thinking of him. Until I came to Slumberleigh the lines had not fallen to me in very clerical places, so my

experience is limited ; but he seems to me to be the only clergyman I have known who does not force on one a form of religion that has been dead and buried for years."

"The clergy have much to answer for on that head," said Charles with bitterness. "I sometimes like and respect them as individuals, but I do not love them as a class. One ought to make allowance for the fact that they are tied and bound by the chain of their Thirty-nine Articles ; that at three-and-twenty they shut the doors deliberately on any new and possibly unorthodox idea ; and it is consequently unreasonable to expect from them any genuine freedom or originality of thought. I can forgive them their assumption of superiority, their inability to meet honest scepticism with anything like fairness, their continual bickering among themselves ; but I cannot forgive them the harm they are doing to religion, the discredit they are bringing upon it by their bigoted views and obsolete ideas. They busy themselves doing

good—that is the worst of it; they mean well, but they do not see that in the meanwhile their Church is being left unto them desolate; though perhaps, after all, the Church, having come to be what it is, that is the best thing that can happen.”

“You forget,” said Ruth, “that you are regarding the Church from the standpoint of the cultivated and intellectual class, for whom the Church has ceased to represent religion. But there are lots of people neither cultivated nor intellectual—women even of our own class are not so as a rule—to whom the Church, with its ritual and dogma, is a real help and comfort. If, as you say, it does not suit the more highly educated, I think you have no right to demand that it *should* suit what is, after all, a very small minority. It would be most unfair if it did.”

Charles did not answer. He had been looking at her, and thinking how few women could have disagreed with him as quietly and resolutely as this young girl riding at his

side, carefully avoiding chance rabbit holes as she spoke.

“There is, and there always will be, a certain number of people, not only among the clergy,” she went on, “who, as somebody says, ‘put the church clock back,’ and are unable to see that they cannot alter the time of day for all that; only they can and do prevent many well-intentioned people from trusting to it any longer. But there are others here and there whom a dogmatic form of religion has been quite unable to spoil, whose more simple turn of mind draws out of the very system that appears to you so lifeless and effete, a real faith, a personal possession which no one can take from them.”

Her eyes sparkled as she spoke, and Charles saw that she was thinking of Mr. Alwynn.

“He has got it,” he said slowly, “this something which we all want, and for the greater part never find. He has got it. To see and recognize it early is a great thing,”

he continued earnestly. "To disbelieve in it in early life, and cavil at all the caricatures and imitations, and only come to find out its reality comparatively later on is a great misfortune—a great misfortune."

She felt that he was speaking of himself, and they rode on in silence, each grave with a sense of mutual understanding and companionship. They forded the stream, and trotted up the little village street, the cottagers gazing admiringly after them till they disappeared within the great arched gateway. And Charles looked at his old house as they paced up the wide drive, and wondered whether it were indeed possible that the lonely years he had spent in it had come to an end at last—at last.

Ruth had noticed that he lost no opportunity of talking to her, and when she heard him conversing with Lady Grace, or plunging into fashionable slang with Miss Wyndham, found herself admiring the facility with which he adapted himself to different people.

The following afternoon, as she was writing in the library, she was amused to see that he found it incumbent on him to write too, even going so far as to produce a letter from Molly, whose correspondence he said he invariably answered by return.

“You seem very fond of giving Molly pleasure,” said Ruth.

“I am glad to see, Miss Deyncourt, that you are beginning to estimate me at my true worth.”

“You have it in your power just now to give a great pleasure,” said Ruth earnestly, laying down the pen which she had taken up.

“How?”

“It seems so absurd when it is put into words, but—by asking Mrs. Alwynn some time to stay here. She has always longed to see Stoke Moreton, because—well, because Mrs. Thursby has; and real, positive, actual tears were shed that she could not come when you asked us.”

“Is it possible?” said Charles. “It is the

first time that any letter of mine has caused emotion of that description."

"Ah! you don't know how important the smallest things appear if one lives in a little corner of the world where nothing ever happens. If Mrs. Alwynn had been able to come, her visit would have been an event which she would have remembered for years. I assure you, I myself, from having lived at Slumberleigh eight months, became quite excited at the prospect of so much dissipation."

And Ruth leaned back in her chair with a little laugh.

Charles looked narrowly at her, and his face fell.

"I am glad you told me," he said, after a moment's pause. "People generally mention these things about ten years afterwards, when there is probably no possibility of doing anything. Thank you."

Ruth was disconcerted by the sudden gravity of his tone, and almost regretted the impulse that had made her speak. She

forgot it, however, in the *tableaux vivants* which they were preparing for the evening, in which she and Charles illustrated the syllable *nun* to enthusiastic applause. Ruth represented the nun, engaged in conversation, over the lowest imaginable convent wall, with Charles, in all the glory of his cocked hat and deputy-lieutenant's uniform, who, while he held the nun's hand in one of his, pointed persuasively with the other towards an elaborately caparisoned war-horse, trembling beneath the joint weight of a yeomanry saddle, and a side saddle attached behind it, which considerably overlapped the charger's impromptu fur boa tail.

After the *tableaux* there was dancing in acting costume, at which the two men, who acted the war-horse between them, were the only persons to protest, Lady Grace being beautiful as an improvised Anne Boleyn, and the shy man resplendent in a fancy dress of Charles's.

When the third morning came, Ruth gave

a genuine sigh at the thought that it was the last day. Lady Grace, who was also leaving the following morning, may be presumed to have echoed it with far more sorrow. The Wyndhams were going that day, and disappeared down the drive, waving handkerchiefs, and carriage rugs, and hats on sticks, out of the carriage windows, as is the custom of really amusing people when taking leave.

In the afternoon, Lady Grace and Charles went off for a ride alone together, to see some ruin in which Lady Grace had manifested a sudden interest, the third horse, which had been brought round for another of the men, being sent back to the stables, his destined rider having decided, at the eleventh hour, to join the rest of the party in a little desultory rabbit shooting in the park, which he proceeded to do with much chuckling over his extraordinary penetration and tact.

The elder ladies went out driving, looking, as seen from an upper window, like four

poached eggs on a dish ; and, the coast being clear, Ruth, who had no love of driving, escaped with her paint box to the garden, where she was making a sketch of Stoke Moreton.

Some houses, like people, have dignity. Stoke Moreton, with ivy creeping up its mellow sandstone, and peeping into its long lines of mullioned windows, stood solemn and stately amid its level gardens ; the low sun bringing out every line of carved stone frieze and quaint architrave, firing all the western windows, and touching the tall heads of the hollyhocks and sunflowers, that stood in ordered regiments within their high walls of clipped box. And Ruth dabbed and looked, and dabbed again, until she suddenly found that if she put another stroke she would spoil all, and also that her hands were stiff with cold. After a few admiring glances at her work, she set off on a desultory journey round the gardens to get warm, and finally, seeing an oak door in the garden wall open,

wandered through it into the churchyard. The church door was open, too, and Ruth, after reading some of the epitaphs on the tombstones, went in.

It was a common little church enough, with a large mortuary chapel, where all the Danvers family reposed; ancient Danvers lying in armour with their mailed hands joined, besides their wives; more modern Danvers kneeling in bas-relief in coloured plaster and execrable taste in recesses. The last generations were there also; some of them anticipating the resurrection and feathered wings, but for the most part still asleep. Charles's mother was there, lying in white marble among her husband's people, with the child upon her arm which she had taken away with her.

And in the middle of the chapel was the last Sir Charles Danvers, whom his brother, Sir George, the father of the present owner, had succeeded. The evening sun shone full on the kneeling soldier figure, leaning on its

sword, and on the grave, clear cut face, which had a look of Charles. The long, beautifully modelled hands, clasped over the battered steel sword hilt, were like Charles's too. Ruth read the inscription on the low marble pedestal, relating how he had fallen in the taking of the Redan, and then looked again. And gradually a great feeling of pity rose in her heart for the family which had lived here for so many generations, and which seemed now so likely to die out. Providence does not seem to care much for old families, or to value long descent. Rather it seems to favour the new race, the Browns, and the Joneses, and the Robinsons, who yesterday were not, and who to-day elbow the old county families from the place which has known them from time immemorial.

“I suppose Molly will some day marry a Smith,” said Ruth to herself, “and then it will be all over. I don't think I will come and see her here when she is married.”

With which reflection she returned to the

house, and, after disturbing Mr. Alwynn, who was deep in a catalogue of the Danvers' manuscripts, in which it was his firm conviction that he should find some mention of the charters, she went into the library, and wondered which of the several thousands of books would interest her till the others came in.

The library was a large room, the walls of which were lined with books from the floor to the ceiling. In order to place the higher shelves within reach, a light balcony of polished oak ran round the four walls, about equi-distant from the floor and the ceiling. Ruth went up the tiny corkscrew staircase in the wall, which led to the balcony, and settling herself comfortably in the low, wide window seat, took out one volume after another of those that came within her reach. These shelves by the window where she was sitting had somehow a different look to the rest. Old books and new, white vellum and cardboard, were herded together without any

apparent order, and with no respect of bindings. Here a splendid morocco "Novum Organum" was pushed in beside a cheap and much worn edition of Marcus Aurelius; there Emerson and Plato and Shakespeare jostled each other on the same shelf, while just below "Don Quixote" was pressed into the uncongenial society of Carlyle on one side, and Confucius on the other. As she pulled out one book after another, she noticed that the greater part of them had Charles's name in them. Ruth's curiosity was at once aroused. No doubt this was the little corner in his great house in which he chose to read, and these were his favourite books which he had arranged so close to his hand. If we can judge our fellow-creatures at all, which is doubtful, it is by the books they read, and by those which, having read, they read again. She looked at the various volumes in the window-seat beside her with new interest, and opened the first one she took up. It was a collection of translations from the

Persian poets ; gentlemen of the name of Jemshíd, Sádi, and Hafiz, of whom she had never heard. As she turned over the pages, she heard the ringing of horses' hoofs, and looking out from her point of observation, saw Charles and Lady Grace cantering up the short wide approach, and clattering out of sight again behind the great stone archway. She turned back to her book, and was reading an ode here and there, wondering to see how the same thoughts that work within us to-day had lived with man so many hundred years ago, when her eye was caught by some writing on the margin of a page as she turned it over. A single sentence on the page was strongly underlined.

“ True self-knowledge is knowledge of God.”

Jemshíd was a wise man, Ruth thought, if he had found out that ; and then she read in Charles's clear handwriting in the margin,

“ With this compare ‘ Look within. Within is the fountain of good, and it will ever bubble up if thou wilt ever dig.’—Marcus Aurelius.”

At this moment Charles came into the library, and looked up to where she was sitting, half hidden from below by the thickness of the wall.

“What! studying?” he called gaily. “I saw you sitting in the window as I rode up. I might have known that if you were lost sight of for half an hour you would be found improving yourself in some exasperating way.” And he ran up the little stairs and came round the balcony towards her. “My own special books, I see. Eve, as usual, surreptitiously craving for a knowledge of good and evil. What have you got hold of?”

The remainder of the window seat was full of books, so, to obtain a better view of what she was reading, he knelt down by her, and looked at the open book on her knee.

Ruth did not attempt to close it. She felt guilty she hardly knew of what. After a moment's pause she said—

“I plead guilty. I was curious. I saw

these were your own particular shelves ; but I never can resist looking at the books people read.”

“ Will you be pleased to remember, in future, that in contemplating my character, Miss Deyncourt—a subject not unworthy of your attention—you are on private property. You are requested to keep on the gravel paths, and to look at the grounds I am disposed to show you. If, as is very possible, admiration seizes you, you are at liberty to express it. But there must be no going round to the back premises, no prying into corners, no trespassing where I have written up ‘ *No road.* ’ ”

Ruth smiled, and there was a gleam in her eyes which Charles well knew heralded a retort, when suddenly through the half-open door a silken rustle came, and Lady Hope Acton slowly entered the room, as if about to pass through it on her way to the hall.

Now, kneeling is by no means an attitude to be despised. In church, or in the moment

of presentation to majesty, it is appropriate, even essential; but it is dependent, like most things, upon circumstances and environment. No attitude, for instance, could be more suitable and natural to any one wishing to read the page on which a sitting fellow-creature was engaged. Charles had found it so. But as Lady Hope Acton sailed into the room he felt that, however conducive to study, it was not the attitude in which he would at that moment have chosen to be found. Ruth felt the same. It had seemed so natural a moment before, so hideously suggestive now.

Perhaps Lady Hope Acton would pass on through the other door, so widely, so invitingly open. Neither stirred, in the hope that she might do so. But in the centre of the room she stopped, and sighed; the slow crackling sigh of a stout woman in a too well-fitting silk gown.

Charles suddenly felt as if his muddy boots and cords were trying to catch her eye, as if

every book on the shelves were calling to her to look up.

For a second Ruth and Charles gazed down upon the top of Lady Hope Acton's head, the bald place on which showed dimly through her semi-transparent cap. She moved slightly, as if to go; but no, another step was drawing near. In another moment Lady Grace came in through the opposite door in her riding habit.

Ruth felt that it was now or never for a warning cough; but, as she glanced at Charles kneeling beside her, she could not give it. Surely they would pass out in another second. The thought of the two pairs of eyes which would be raised, and the expression in them, was intolerable.

“Grace,” said Lady Hope Acton with dreadful distinctness, advancing to meet her daughter, “has he spoken?”

“No,” said Lady Grace, with a little sob, “and”—with a sudden burst of tears—“oh, mamma, I don't think he ever will.”

Oh, to have coughed, to have sneezed, to have choked a moment earlier! Anything would have been better than this.

“Run upstairs this moment, then, and change your habit and bathe your eyes,” said Lady Hope Acton sharply. “You need not come down till dinner time. I will say you are tired.”

And then, to the overwhelming relief of those two miserable spectators, the mother and daughter left the room.

But to the momentary sensation of relief in Ruth's mind a rush of pity succeeded for the childlike grief and tears; and with and behind it, like one hurrying wave overtopping and bearing down its predecessor, came a burning indignation against the cause of that picturesque emotion.

It is indeed a lamentable peculiarity of our fallen nature that the moment of relief from the smart of anxiety is seldom marked by so complete a mental calmness and moderation as could be wished.

Ruth rose slowly, with the book still in her hand, and Charles got off his knees as best he could, and stood with one hand on the railing of the balcony, as if to steady himself. His usually pale face was crimson.

Ruth closed the book in silence, and with a dreadful precision put it back in its accustomed place. Then she turned and faced him, with the western light full upon her stern face, and another light of contempt and indignation burning in her direct eyes.

“Poor little girl,” she said, in a low distinct voice. “What a triumph to have succeeded in making her unhappy! She is very young, and she did not understand the rules of the game. Poor, foolish little girl!”

If he had been red before, he was pale enough now. He drew himself up, and met her direct gaze without flinching. He did not speak, and she left him standing in the window, and went slowly along the balcony and down the little staircase into the room below.

As she was about to leave the room he moved forward suddenly, and said—

“ Miss Deyncourt.”

Involuntarily she stopped short in obedience to the stern authority of the tone.

“ You are unjust.”

She did not answer, and left the room.

CHAPTER II.

“UNCLE JOHN,” said Ruth next morning, taking Mr. Alwynn aside after breakfast, “we are leaving by the early train, are we not?”

“No, my love, it is quite impossible. I have several papers to identify and rearrange.”

“We have stayed a day longer than we intended as it is. Most of the others go early. Do let us go too.”

“It is most natural, I am sure, my dear, that you should wish to get home,” said Mr. Alwynn, looking with sympathetic concern at his niece; “and why your aunt has not forwarded your letters I can’t imagine. But still, if we return by the midday train, Ruth,

you will have plenty of time to answer any letters that—ahem! seem to require immediate attention before the post goes; and I don't see my way to being ready earlier."

Ruth had not even been thinking of Dare and his letters; but she saw that by the early train she was not destined to depart, and watched the other guests take leave with an envious sigh. She was anxious to be gone. The last evening, after the episode in the library, had been interminably long. Already the morning, though breakfast was hardly over, seemed to have dragged itself out to days in length. A sense of constraint between two people who understand and amuse each other is very galling. Ruth had felt it so. All the previous evening Charles had hardly spoken to her, and had talked mainly to Lady Hope Acton, who was somewhat depressed, and another elder lady. A good night and a flat candlestick can be presented in a very distant manner, and as Ruth received hers from Charles that evening, and

met the grave, steady glance that was directed at her, she perceived that he had not forgiven her for what she had said.

She felt angry again at the idea that he should venture to treat her with a coldness which seemed to imply that she had been in the wrong. The worst of it was that she felt she was to blame; that she had no right whatever to criticise Charles and his actions. What concern were they of hers? How much more suitable, how much more eloquent a dignified silence would have been. She could not imagine now, as she thought it over, why she had been so unreasonably annoyed at the moment as to say what she had done. Yet the reason was not far to seek, if she had only known where to lay her hand on it. She was uneasy, impatient; she longed to get out of the house. And it was still early; only eleven. Eleven till twelve. Twelve till one. One till half-past. Two whole hours and a half to be got through before the Stoke Moreton omnibus would

bear her away. She looked round for a refuge during that weary age, and found it nearer than many poor souls do in time of need, namely, at her elbow, in the shape, the welcome shape of the shy man, almost the only remnant of the large party whose dispersion she had just been watching. Whenever Ruth thought of that shy man afterwards, which was not often, it was with a sincere hope that he had forgotten the forwardness of her behaviour on that particular morning. She wished to see the picture-gallery. She would of all things like a walk afterwards. No, she had not been as far as the beech avenue; but she would like to go. Should they look at the pictures first—now—no time like the present? How pleased he was! How proud! He felt that his shyness had gone for ever, that Miss Deyncourt would no doubt like to hear a few anecdotes of his college life, that a quiet man, who does not make himself cheap to start with, often wins in the end, that Miss Deyncourt had unusual

appreciation, not only for pictures, but for reserved and intricate characters that yet (here he ventured on a little joke, and laughed at it himself) had their lighter side. And in the long picture-gallery Ruth and he studied the old Masters, as they had seldom been studied before, with an intense and ignorant interest on the one hand, and an entire absence of mind on the other.

Charles, who had done a good deal of pacing up and down his room the night before, and had arrived at certain conclusions, passed through the gallery once, but did not stop. He looked grave and pre-occupied, and hardly answered a question of Mr. Conway's about one of the pictures.

Half-past eleven at last. A tall inlaid clock in the gallery mentioned the hour by one sedate stroke; the church clock told the village the time of day a second later. They had nearly finished the pictures. Never mind. She could take half an hour to put on her hat, and surely any beech avenue,

even on a dull day like this, might serve to while away the remaining hour before luncheon.

They had come to the last picture of the Danvers' collection, and Ruth was dwelling fondly on a very well-developed cow by Cuyp, as if she could hardly tear herself away from it, when she heard a step coming up the staircase from the hall, and presently Charles pushed open the carved folding doors which shut off the gallery from the rest of the house, and looked in. She was conscious that he was standing in the doorway, but new beauties in the cow, which had hitherto escaped her, engaged her whole attention at the moment, and no one can attend to two things at once.

Charles did not come any further; but standing in the doorway, he called to the shy man, who went to him, and the two talked together for a few moments. Ruth gazed upon the cow until it became so fixed upon the retina of her eye that when she

tried to admire an old Florentine cabinet near it, she still saw its portrait, and when in desperation she turned away to look out of the window, across the sky and sloping park the shadow of the cow hung like a portent.

A moment later Mr. Conway came hurrying back to her much perturbed, to say he had quite forgotten till this moment, had not in the least understood, in fact, etc., etc. Danvers' grey cob, that he had thoughts of buying, was waiting at the door for him to try—in fact, had been waiting some time. No idea upon his soul——

Ruth cut his apology short before he had done more than flounder well into it.

“You must go and try it at once,” she said with decision; and then she added, as Charles drew near, “I have changed my mind about going out. It looks as if it might turn to rain. I shall get through some arrears of letter-writing instead.”

Mr. Conway stammered and repeated himself, and finally rushed out of the gallery.

Ruth expected that Charles would accompany him, but he remained standing near the window, apparently engaged like herself in admiring the view.

“It struck me,” he said slowly, with his eyes half shut, “that Conway proved rather a broken reed just now.”

“He did,” said Ruth. She suddenly felt that she could understand what it was in Charles that exasperated Lady Mary so much.

He came a step nearer, and his manner altered.

“I sent him away,” he said, looking gravely at her, “because I wished to speak to you.”

Ruth did not answer or turn her head, though she felt he was watching her. Her eyes absently followed two young fallow deer in the park, cantering away in a series of hops on their long stiff legs.

“I cannot speak to you here,” said Charles, after a pause.

Ruth turned round.

“Silence is golden sometimes. I think quite enough has been said already.”

“Not by me. You expressed yourself with considerable frankness. I wish to follow your example.”

“You said I was unjust at the time. Surely that was sufficient.”

“So insufficient, that I am going to repeat it. I tell you again that you are unjust in not being willing to hear what I have to say. I have seen a good deal of harm done by misunderstandings, Miss Deyncourt. Pride is generally at the bottom of them. We are both suffering from a slight attack of that malady now. But I value your good opinion too much to hesitate if by any little sacrifice of my own pride I can still retain it. If, after your remarks yesterday, I can make the effort (and it *is* an effort) to ask you to hear something I wish to say, you, on your side, ought not to refuse to listen. It is not a question of liking; you *ought* not to refuse.”

He spoke in an authoritative tone, which

gave weight to his words, and in spite of herself she saw the truth of what he said. She was one of those rare women who, being convinced against their will, are *not* of the same opinion still. It was ignominious to have to give way; but after a moment's struggle with herself she surmounted her dislike to being overruled, together with a certain unreasoning tenacity of opinion natural to her sex, and said quietly—

“What do you wish me to do?”

Charles saw the momentary struggle, and honoured her for a quality which women seldom give men occasion to honour them for.

“Do you dislike walking?”

“No.”

“Then, if you will come out of doors, where there is less likelihood of interruption than in the house, I will wait for you here.”

She went silently down the picture-gallery, half astonished to find herself doing his bidding. She put on her walking things mechanically, and came back in a few

minutes to find him standing where she had left him. In silence they went downstairs, and through the piazza with its flowering orange trees, out into the gardens, where, on the stone balustrade, the peacocks were attitudinizing and conversing in the high key in which they always proclaim a change of weather and their innate vulgarity to the world. Charles led the way towards a little rushing brook which divided the gardens from the park.

“I think you must have had a very low opinion of me beforehand, to say what you did yesterday,” he remarked suddenly.

“I was angry,” said Ruth. “However true what I said may have been, I had no right to say it to—a comparative stranger. That is why I repeat that it would be better not to make matters worse by mentioning the subject again. It is sure to annoy us both. Let it rest.”

“Not yet,” said Charles dryly. “As a comparative stranger I want to know”—

stopping and facing her—"exactly what you mean by saying that she, Lady Grace, did not understand the rules of the game."

"I cannot put it in other words," said Ruth, her courage rising as she felt that a battle was imminent.

"Perhaps I can for you. Perhaps you meant to say that you believed I was in the habit of amusing myself at other people's expense; that—I see your difficulty in finding the right words—that it was my evil sport and pastime to—shall we say—raise expectations which it was not my intention to fulfil."

"It is disagreeably put," said Ruth, reddening a little; "but possibly I did mean something of that kind."

"And how have you arrived at such an uncharitable opinion of a comparative stranger?" asked Charles, quietly enough, but his light eyes flashing.

She did not answer.

"You are not a child, to echo the opinion

of others," he went on. "You look as if you judged for yourself. What have I done since I met you first, three months ago, to justify you in holding me in contempt?"

"I did not say I held you in contempt."

"You must do, though, if you think me capable of such meanness."

Silence again.

"You have pushed me into saying more than I meant," said Ruth at last; "at least you have said I mean a great deal more than I really do. To be honest, I think you have thoughtlessly given a good deal of pain. I dare say you did it unconsciously."

"Thank you. You are very charitable, but I cannot shield myself under the supposition that at eight and thirty I am a creature of impulse, unconscious of the meaning of my own actions."

"If that is the case," thought Ruth, "your behaviour to me has been inexcusable, especially the last few days; though, fortunately for myself, I was not deceived by it."

“If you persist in keeping silence,” said Charles, after waiting for her to speak, “any possibility of conversation is at an end.”

“I did not come out here for conversation,” replied Ruth. “I came, not by my own wish, to hear something you said you particularly desired to say. Do you not think the simplest thing, under the circumstances, would be—to say it?”

He gave a short laugh, and looked at her in sheer desperation. Did she know what she was pushing him into?

“I had not forgotten,” he said. “It was in my mind all the time; but now you have made it easy for me indeed by coming to my assistance in this way. I will make a fresh start.”

He compressed his lips, and seemed to pull himself together. Then he said, in a very level voice—

“Kindly give me your whole attention, Miss Deyncourt, so that I shall not be obliged to repeat anything. The deer are

charming, I know ; but you have seen deer before, and will no doubt again. I am sorry that I am obliged to speak to you about myself, but a little autobiography is unavoidable. Perhaps you know that about three years ago I succeeded my father. From being penniless, and head over ears in debt, I became suddenly a rich man ; not by my father's will, who entailed every acre of the estates here and elsewhere on Ralph, and left everything he could to him. I had thought of telling you what my best friends have never known, why I am not still crippled by debt. I had thought of telling you why at five and thirty I was still unmarried, for my debts were not the reason ; but I will not trouble you with that now. It is enough to say that I found myself in a position which, had I been a little younger, with rather a different past, I should have enjoyed more than I did. I was well received in English society when, after a lapse of several years, and a change of

fortune, I returned to it. If I had thought I was well received for myself, I should have been a fool. But I came back disillusioned. I saw the machinery. When you reflect on the vast and intricate machinery employed by mothers with grown-up daughters, you may imagine what I saw. In all honesty and sincerity I wished to marry; but in the ease with which I saw I could do so lay my chief difficulty. I did not want a new toy, but a companion. I suppose I still clung to one last illusion, that I might meet a woman whom I could love, and who would love me, and not my name or income. I could not find her, but I still believed in her. I went everywhere in the hope of meeting her, and if others have ever been disappointed in me, they have never known how disappointed I have been in them. For three years I looked for her everywhere; but I could not find her, and at last I gave her up. And then—I met Lady Grace Lawrence, and liked her. I had reason to believe she could be

disinterested. She came of good people—all Lawrences are good; she was simple and unspoilt, and she seemed to like me. When I look back I believe that I had decided to ask her to marry me, and that it was only by the merest chance that I left London without speaking to her. What prevented me I hardly know, unless it was a reluctance at the last moment to cast the die. I came down to Atherstone, harassed and anxious, tired of everything and everybody, and there," said Charles, with sudden passion, turning and looking full at Ruth, "there I met *you*."

The blood rushed to her face, and she hastily interposed.

"I don't see any necessity to bring my name in."

"Perhaps not," he returned, recovering himself instantly; "unfortunately, I do."

"You expect too much of my vanity," said Ruth, her voice trembling a little; "but in this instance I don't think you can turn it

to account. I beg you will leave me out of the question."

"I am sorry I cannot oblige you," he said grimly; "but you can't be left out. I only regret that you dislike being mentioned, because that is a mere nothing to what is coming."

She trusted that he did not perceive that the reason she made no reply was because she suddenly felt herself unable to articulate. Her heart was beating wildly, as that gentle, well-conducted organ had never beaten before. What was coming? Could this stern determined man be the same apathetic, sarcastic being whom she had hitherto known?

"From that time," he continued, "I became surer and surer, of what at first I hardly dared to hope, what it seemed presumption in me to hope, namely, that at last I had found what I had looked for in vain so long. I had to keep my engagement with the Hope Actons in Scotland; but I regretted it. I

stayed as short a time as I could. I did not ask them to come here. They offered themselves. I think, if I have been to blame, it has not been in so heartless a manner as you supposed ; and it appears to me Lady Hope Acton should not have come. This is my explanation. You can add the rest for yourself. Have I said enough to soften your harsh judgment of yesterday ?”

Ruth could not speak. The trees were behaving in the most curious manner, were whirling round, were swaying up and down. The beeches close in front were dancing quadrilles ; now ranged in two long rows, now setting to partners, now hurrying back to their places as she drew near.

“ Sit down,” said Charles’s voice gently ; “ you look tired.”

The trunk of a fallen tree suddenly appeared rising up to meet her out of a slight mist, and she sat down on it more precipitately than she could have wished. In a few seconds the trees returned to their places,

and the mist, which appeared to be very local, cleared away.

Charles was sitting on the trunk beside her, looking at her intently. The anger had gone out of his face, and had given place to a look of deep anxiety and suspense.

“I have not finished yet,” he said, and his voice had changed as much as his face. “There is still something more.”

“No, no,” said Ruth. “At least, if there is, don’t say it.”

“I think I would rather say it. You wish to save me pain, I see ; but I am quite prepared for what you are going to say. I did not intend to speak to you on the subject for a long time to come, but yesterday’s event has forced my hand. There must be no more misunderstandings between us. You intend to refuse me, I can see. All the same, I wish to tell you that I love you, and to ask you to be my wife.”

“I am afraid I cannot,” said Ruth almost inaudibly.

“No,” said Charles, looking straight before him, “I have asked you too soon. You are quite right. I did not expect anything different; I only wished you to know. But perhaps, some day——”

“Don’t!” said Ruth, clasping her hands tightly together. “You don’t know what you are saying. Nothing can make any difference, because—I am engaged.”

She dared not look at his face, but she saw his hand clench suddenly.

For an age neither spoke.

Then he turned his head slowly and looked at her. His face was grey even to the lips. With a strange swift pang at the heart, she saw how her few words had changed it.

“To whom?” he said at last, hardly above a whisper.

“To Mr. Dare.”

“Not that man who has come to live at Vandon?”

“Yes.”

Another long silence.

“When was it?”

“Ten days ago.”

“Ten days ago,” repeated Charles mechanically, and his face worked. “Ten days ago!”

“It is not given out yet,” said Ruth, hesitating, “because Mr. Alwynn does not wish it during Lord Polesworth’s absence. I never thought of any mistake being caused by not mentioning it. I would not have come here if I had had the least idea that——”

“You cannot mean to say that you had never seen that I—what I—felt for you?”

“Indeed I never thought of such a thing, until two minutes before you said it. I am very sorry I did not, but I imagined——”

“Let me hear what you imagined.”

“I noticed you talked to me a good deal; but I thought you did exactly the same to Lady Grace, and others.”

“You could not imagine that I talked to others—to any other woman in the world—as I did to you.”

“I supposed,” said Ruth simply, “that you talked gaily to Lady Grace because it suited her; and more gravely to me, because I am naturally grave. I thought at the time you were rather clever in adapting yourself to different people so easily; and I was glad that I understood your manner better than some of the others.”

“Better!” said Charles bitterly. “Better, when you thought that of me! No, you need not say anything. I was in fault, not you. I don’t know what right I had to imagine you understood me—you seemed to understand me—to fancy that we had anything in common, that in time——” He broke into a low wretched laugh. “And all the while you were engaged to another man. Good God! what a farce; what a miserable mistake from first to last!”

Ruth said nothing. It was indeed a miserable mistake.

He rose wearily to his feet.

“I was forgetting,” he said; “it is time to

go home." And they went back together in silence, which was more bearable than speech just then.

The peacocks were still pirouetting and minueting on the stone balustrade as they came back to the gardens. The gong began to sound as they entered the piazza.

To Ruth it was a dreadful meal. She tried to listen to Mr. Conway's account of the grey cob, or to the placid conversation of Mr. Alwynn about the beloved manuscripts. Fortunately the morning papers were full of a recent forgery in America, and a murder in London, which furnished topics when these were exhausted, and Charles used them to the utmost.

At last the carriage came. Mr. Alwynn and Mr. Conway simultaneously broke into incoherent ejaculations respecting the pleasure of their visit; Ruth's hand met Charles's for an embarrassed second; and a moment later they were whirling down the straight wide approach, between the columns of fantasti-

cally clipped hollies, leaving Charles standing in the doorway. He was still standing there when the carriage rolled under the arched gateway with its rampant stone lions. Ruth glanced back once as they turned into the road, at the stately old house, with its pointed gables and forests of chimneys cutting the grey sky line. She saw the owner turn slowly and go up the steps, and looked hastily away again.

“Poor Danvers!” said Mr. Alwynn cheerfully, also looking and putting Ruth’s thoughts into words. “He must be desperately lonely in that house all by himself; but I suppose he is not often there.”

And Mr. Alwynn, whose mind had been entirely relieved since Ruth’s engagement from the dark suspicion he had once harboured respecting Charles, proceeded to dilate upon the merits of the charters, and of the owner of the charters, until he began to think Ruth had a headache; and finding it to be the case, talked no more till they

reached, at the end of their little journey, the door of Slumberleigh Rectory.

“Is it very bad?” he asked kindly, as he helped her out of the carriage.

Ruth assented, fortunately with some faint vestige of truth, for her hat hurt her forehead.

“Then run up straight to your own room, and I will tell your aunt that you will come and have a chat with her later on; perhaps after tea, when the post will be gone.” Mr. Alwynn spoke in the whisper of stratagem.

Ruth was only too thankful to be allowed to slip on tiptoe to her own room, but she had not been there many minutes when a tap came to the door.

“There, my dear,” said Mr. Alwynn, putting his head in, and holding some letters towards her. “Your aunt ought to have forwarded them. I brought them up at once. And there is nearly an hour to post time, and she won’t expect you to come

down till then. I think the headache will be better now, eh?"

He nodded kindly at her, and closed the door again. Ruth sat down mechanically, and began to sort the packet he had put into her hands. The first three letters were in the same handwriting, Dare's large vague handwriting that ran from one end of the envelope to the other, and partly hid itself under the stamp.

She looked at them, but did not open them. A feeling of intense lassitude and fatigue had succeeded to the unconscious excitement of the morning. She could not read them now. They must wait with the others. Presently she could feel an interest in them; not now.

She leaned her head upon her hand, and a rush of pity swept away every other feeling as she recalled that last look at Stoke Moreton, and how Charles had turned so slowly and wearily to go indoors. There was an ache at her heart as she thought of

him, a sense of regret and loss. And he had loved her all the time!

“If I had only known?” she said to herself, pressing her hands against her forehead. “But how could I tell—how could I tell!”

She raised her head with a sudden movement, and began with nervous fingers to open Dare's letters, and read them carefully.

CHAPTER III.

IN the long evening that followed Ruth's departure from Stoke Moreton, Charles was alone for once in his own home. He was leaving again early on the morrow, but for the time he was alone, and heavy at heart. He sat for hours without stirring, looking into the fire. He had no power or will to control his thoughts. They wandered hither and thither, and up and down, never for a moment easing the dull miserable pain that lay beneath them all.

Fool! fool that he had been!

To have found her after all these years, and to have lost her without a stroke! To have let another take her, and such a man as Dare! To have such a fool's manner that he was thought to be in earnest when he

was least so; that now, when his whole future hung in the balance, retribution had overtaken him, and with bitter irony had mocked at his earnestness and made it of none effect. She had thought it was his natural manner to all! His cursed folly had lost her to him. If she had known, surely it would have been, it must have been different. At heart Charles was a very humble man, though it was not to be expected many would think so; but nevertheless he had a deep, ever deepening consciousness (common to the experience of the humblest once in a lifetime), that between him and Ruth that mysterious link of mutual understanding and sympathy existed, which cannot be accounted for, which eludes analysis, which yet makes, when the sex happens to be identical, the indissoluble friendship of a David and a Jonathan, a Karlos and a Posa; and where there is a difference of sex, brings about that rarest wonder of the world—a happy marriage.

Like cleaves to like. He knew she would

have loved him. She was his by right. The same law of attraction which had lifted them at once out of the dreary flats of ordinary acquaintanceship, would have drawn them ever close and closer together till they were knit in one. He knew, with a certainty that nothing could shake, that he could have made her love him, even as he loved her; unconsciously at first, slowly perhaps, for the current of strong natures, like that of deep rivers, is sometimes slow. Still the end would have been the same.

And he had lost her by his own act, by his own heedless folly; her want of vanity having lent a hand the while to put her beyond his reach for ever.

It was a bitter hour.

And as he sat late into the night beside the fire, that died down to dust and ashes before his absent eyes, ghosts of other heavy hours, ghosts of the past which he had long since buried out of his sight, came back and would not be denied.

To live much in the past is a want of faith in the Power that gives the present. Comparatively few men walk through their lives looking backwards. Women more frequently do so from a false estimate of life, fostered by romantic feeling in youth, which leads them, if the life of the affections is ended, resolutely to refuse to regard existence in any other maturer aspect, and to persist in wandering aimlessly forward, with eyes turned ever on the dim flowery paths of former days.

“ Let the dead past bury its dead.”

But there comes a time, when the grass has grown over those graves, when we may do well to go and look at them once more ; to stand once again in that solitary burial ground, “ where,” as an earnest man has said, “ are buried broken vows, worn-out hopes, joys blind and deaf, faiths betrayed or gone astray, lost, lost love ; silent spaces where only one mourner ever comes.”

And to the least retrospective of us our

dead past yet speaks at times, and speaks as one having authority.

Such a time had come for Charles now. From the open grave of his love for Ruth he turned to look at others by which he had stood long ago, in grief as sharp, but which yet in all its bitterness had never struck as deep as this.

Memory pointed back to a time twenty years ago, when he had hurried home through a long summer night to arrive at Stoke Moreton too late ; to find only the solemn shadow of the mother whom he had loved, and whom he had grieved ; too late to ask for forgiveness ; too late for anything but a wild passion of grief and remorse, and frantic self-accusation.

The scene shifted to ten years later. It was a sultry July evening, the evening of the day on which the woman whom he had loved for years had married his brother. He was standing on the deck of the steamer which was taking him from England, looking back

at the grey town dwindling against the tawny curtain of the sunset. In his brain was a wild clamour of wedding bells, and across the water, marking the pulse of the sea, came to his outward ears the slow tolling of a bell on a sunken rock near the harbour mouth.

It seemed to be tolling for the death of all that remained of good in him. In losing Evelyn, whom he had loved with all the idealism and reverence of a reckless man for a good woman, he believed, in the bitterness of his spirit, that he had lost all ; that he had been cut adrift from the last mooring to a better future, that nothing could hold him back now. And for a time it had been so, and he had drowned his trouble in a sea in which he well-nigh drowned himself as well.

Once more Memory pointed ; pointed across five dark years to an evening when he had sat as he was sitting now, alone by the wide stone hearth in the hall at Stoke Moreton, after his father's death, and after the reading of the will. He was the possessor of the old

home, which he had always passionately loved, from which he had been virtually banished so long. His father, who had never liked him, but who of late years had hated him, as men only hate their eldest sons, had left all in his power to his second son, had entailed every acre of the Stoke Moreton and other family properties upon him and his children. Charles could touch nothing, and over him hung a millstone of debt, from which there was now no escape. He sat with his head in his hands, the man whom his friends were envying on his accession to supposed wealth and position—ruined.

A few days later he was summoned to London by a man whom he had known for many years. He remembered well that last meeting with the stern old man whom he had found sitting in his armchair with death in his face. He had once or twice remonstrated with Charles in earlier days, and as he came into his presence now for the last time, and met his severe glance, he supposed,

with the callousness that comes from suffering which has reached its lowest depths, that he was about to rebuke him again.

“And so,” said General Marston sternly, “you have come into your kingdom; into what you deserve.”

“Yes,” said Charles. “If it is any pleasure to you to know that what you prophesied on several occasions has come true, you can enjoy it. I am ruined.”

“You fool!” said the sick man slowly. “To have come to five and thirty, and to have used up everything which makes life worth having. I am not speaking only of money. There is a bankruptcy in your face that money will never pay. And you had talent, and a good heart, and the making of a man in you once! I saw that when your father turned you adrift. I saw that when you were at your worst after your brother’s marriage. Yes, you need not start. I knew your secret, and kept it as well as you did yourself. I tried to stop you; but you went your own way.”

Charles was silent. It was true, and he knew it.

“And so you thought, I suppose, that if your father had made a just will you could have retrieved yourself?”

“I know I could,” said Charles firmly; “but he left the ——shire property to Ralph, and every shilling of his capital; and Ralph had my mother’s fortune already. I have Stoke Moreton and the place in Surrey, which he could not take from me, but everything is entailed, down to the trees in the park. I have nominally a large income; but I am in the hands of the Jews. I can’t settle with them as I expected, and they will squeeze me to the uttermost. However, as you say, I have the consolation of knowing I brought in on myself.”

“And if your father had acted justly, as you would call it, which I knew he never would, you would have run through everything in five years’ time.”

“No, I should not. I know I have been

a fool ; but there are two kinds of fools—the kind that sticks to folly all its life, and the kind that has its fling, and has done with it. I belong to the second kind. My father had no right to take my last chance from me. If he had left it me I should have used it.”

“You look tired of your fling,” said the elder man. “Very tired. And you think money would set you right, do you?” He looked critically at the worn, desperate face opposite him. “I made my will the other day,” he went on, his eyes still fixed on Charles. “I had not much to leave, and I have no near relations, so I divided it among various charitable institutions. I see no reason to alter my will. If one leaves money, however small the sum may be, one likes to think it has been left to some purpose, with some prospect of doing good. A few days ago I had a surprise. I fancy it was to be my last surprise in this world. I inherited from a distant relation, who died intestate, a large fortune. After being a poor man all

my days, wealth comes to me when I am on the point of going where money won't follow. Curious, isn't it? I am going to leave this second sum in the same spirit as the first, but in rather a different manner. I like to know what I am doing, so I sent for you. I am of opinion that the best thing I can do with it, is to set you on your legs again. What do you owe?"

Charles turned very red, and then very white.

"What do you owe?" repeated the sick man testily. "I am getting tired. How much is it?" He got out a cheque-book, and began filling it in. "Have you no tongue?" he said angrily, looking up. "Tell me the exact figure. Well? Keep nothing back."

"I won't be given the whole," said Charles with an oath. "Give me enough to settle the Jews, and I will do the rest out of my income. I won't get off scot free."

"Well, then, have your own way as usual,

and name the sum you want. There, take it," he said feebly, when Charles had mentioned with shame a certain hideous figure, "and go. I shall never know what you do with it, so you can play ducks and drakes with it if you like. But you won't like. You have burned your fingers too severely to play with fire again. You have turned over so many new leaves that now you have come to the last in the book. I have given you another chance, Charles; but one man can't do much to help another. The only person who can really help you is yourself. Give yourself a chance, too."

How memory brought back every word of that strange interview. Charles saw again the face of the dying man; heard again the stern, feeble voice, "Give yourself a chance."

He had given himself a chance. "Some natures, like comets, make strange orbits, and return from far." Charles had returned at last. The old man's investment had been a wise one. But as Charles looked back,

after three years, he saw that his friend had been right. His money debts had been the least part of what he owed. There were other long-standing accounts which he had paid in full during these three years, paid in the restless weariness and disappointment that underlay his life, in the loneliness in which he lived, in his contempt for all his former pursuits, which had left him at first devoid of any pursuits at all.

He had had, as was natural, very little happiness in his life, but all the bitterness of all his bitter past seemed as nothing to the agony of this moment. He had loved Evelyn with his imagination, but he loved Ruth with his whole heart and soul, and—he had lost her.

The night was far advanced. The dawn was already making faint bars over the tops of the shutters, was looking in at him as he sat motionless by his dim lamp and his dead fire. And, in spite of the growing dawn, it was a dark hour.

CHAPTER IV.

DARE returned to Vandon in the highest spirits, with an enormous emerald engagement ring in an inner waistcoat pocket. He put it on Ruth's third finger a few days later, under the ancient cedar on the terrace at Vandon, a spot which, he informed her (for he was not without poetic flights at times), his inner consciousness associated with all the love scenes of his ancestors that were no more.

He was stricken to the heart when, after duly admiring it, Ruth gently explained to him that she could not wear his ring at present, until her engagement was given out.

"Let it then be given out," he said im-

petuously. "Ah! why already is it not given out?"

She explained again, but it was difficult to make him understand, and she felt conscious that if he would have allowed her the temporary use of one hand to release a fly, which was losing all self-control inside her veil, she might have been more lucid. As it was, she at last made him realize the fact that until Lord Polesworth's return from America in November, no further step was to be taken.

"But all is right," he urged with pride. "I have seen my lawyer; I make a settlement. I raise money on the property to make a settlement. There is nothing I will not do. I care for nothing only to marry you."

Ruth led him to talk of other things. She was very gentle with him, always attentive, always ready to be interested; but any one less self-centred than Dare would have had a misgiving about her feeling for him. He

had none. Half his life he had spent in Paris, and, imbued with French ideas of betrothal and marriage, he thought her manner at once exceedingly becoming and natural. She was reserved, but reserve was charming. She did not care for him very much perhaps, as yet, but as much as she could care for any one. Most men think that if a woman does not attach herself to them she is by nature cold. Dare was no exception to the rule ; and though he would have preferred that there should be less constraint in their present intercourse, that she would be a little more shy, and a little less calm, still he was supremely happy and proud, and only longed to proclaim the fortunate state of his affairs to the world.

One thing about Ruth puzzled him very much, and with a strange misgiving she saw it did so. Her interest in the Vandon cottages, and the schools, and the new pump, had been most natural up to this time. It had served to bring them together. But

now the use of these things was past, and yet he observed, with incredulity at first and astonishment afterwards, that she clung to them more than ever.

What mattered it for the moment whether the pump was put up or not, or whether the cottages by the river were protected from the floods? Of course in time, for he had promised, a vague something would be done; but why in the golden season of love and plighted faith revert to prosaic subjects such as these?

Some men are quite unable to believe in any act of a woman being genuine. They always find out that it has something to do with them. If an angel came down from heaven to warn a man of this kind of wrath to come, he would think the real object of her journey was to make his acquaintance.

Ruth saw the incredulity in Dare's face when she questioned him, and her heart sank within her. It sank yet lower when she told him one day, with a faint smile, that she

knew he was not rich, and that she wanted him to let her help in the rebuilding of certain cottages, the plans of which he had brought over in the summer, but which had not yet been begun, apparently for want of funds.

“What you cannot do alone we can do together,” she said.

He agreed with effusion. He was surprised, flattered, delighted; but entirely puzzled.

The cottages were begun immediately. They were near the river, which divided the Slumberleigh and Vandon properties. Ruth often went to look at them. It did her good to see them rising, strong and firm, though hideous to behold, on higher ground than the poor dilapidated hovels at the water's edge, where fever was always breaking out, which yet made, as they supported each other in their crookedness, and leant over their own wavering reflections, such a picturesque sketch that it seemed a shame to supplant

them by such brand new red brick, such blue tiling, such dreadful little porches.

Ruth drew the old condemned cottages, with the long lines of pollarded marshy meadow, and the distant bridge and mill in the background, but it was a sketch she never cared to look at afterwards. She was constantly drawing now. There was a vague restlessness in her at this time that made her take refuge in the world of nature, where the mind can withdraw itself from itself for a time into a stronghold where misgiving and anxiety cannot corrupt, nor self break through and steal. In these days she shut out self steadfastly, and fixed her eyes firmly on the future, as she herself had made it with her own hands.

She had grown very grave of late. Dare's high spirits had the effect of depressing her more than she would allow, even to herself. She liked him. She told herself so every day, and it was a pleasure to her to see him so happy. But when she had accepted him

he was so diffident, so quiet, so anxious, that she had not realized that he would return to his previous happy self-confidence, his volubility, his grey hats, in fact his former gay self directly his mind was at ease and he had got what he wanted. She saw at once that the change was natural, but she found it difficult to keep pace with, and the effort to do so was a constant strain.

She had yet to learn that it is hard to live for those who live for self. Between a nature which struggles, however feebly, towards a higher life, and one whose sole object is gracefully and good-naturedly, but persistently to enjoy itself, there is a great gulf fixed, of which often neither are aware, until they attempt a close relationship with each other, when the chasm reveals itself with appalling clearness to the higher nature of the two.

Ruth was glad when a long-standing engagement to sing at a private concert in one place, and sell modern knickknacks in old

English costume at another, took her from Slumberleigh for a week. She looked forward to the dreary dissipation in store for her with positive gladness; and when the week had passed, and she was returning once more, she wished the stations would not fly so quickly past, that the train would not hurry itself so unnecessarily to bring her back to Slumberleigh.

As the little local line passed Stoke Moreton station she looked out for a moment, but leaned back hurriedly as she caught a glimpse of the Danvers' omnibus in the background, with its great black horses, and a footman with a bag standing on the platform. In another moment Mrs. Alwynn, followed by the footman, made a dart at Ruth's carriage, jumped in, seized the bag, repeated voluble thanks, pressed half her gaily dressed person out again through the window to ascertain that her boxes were put in the van, caught her veil in the ventilator as the train started, and finally precipitated

herself into a seat on her bag, as the motion destroyed her equilibrium.

“Well, Aunt Fanny!” said Ruth.

“Why, goodness gracious, my dear, if it isn't you! And, now I think of it, you were to come home to-day. Well, how oddly things fall out to be sure, me getting into your carriage like that. And you'll never guess, Ruth, though for that matter there's nothing so very astonishing about it, as I told Mrs. Thursby, you'll never guess where *I've* been visiting.”

Ruth remembered seeing the Danvers' omnibus at the station, and suddenly remembered too, a certain request which she had once made of Charles.

“Where can it have been?” she said, with a great show of curiosity.

“You will never guess,” said Mrs. Alwynn, in high glee. “I shall have to help you. You remember my sprained ankle? There! Now I have as good as told you.”

But Ruth would not spoil her aunt's

pleasure ; and after numerous guesses, Mrs. Alwynn had the delight of taking her completely by surprise, when at last she leaned forward and said, with a rustle of pride, emphasizing each word with a pat on Ruth's knee—

“ I've been to Stoke Moreton.”

“ How delightful ! ” ejaculated Ruth. “ How astonished I am ! Stoke Moreton ! ”

“ You may well say that,” said Mrs. Alwynn, nodding to her. “ Mrs. Thursby would not believe it at first, and afterwards she said she was afraid there would not be any party ; but there was, Ruth. There was a married couple, very nice people, of the name of Reynolds. I dare say, being London people, you may have known them. She had quite the London look about her, though not dressed low of an evening ; and he was a clergyman, who had overworked himself, and had come down to Stoke Moreton to rest, and had soup at luncheon. And there was another person besides, a Colonel Middleton,

a very clever man, who wrote a book that was printed, and had been in India, and was altogether most superior. We were three gentlemen and two ladies, but we had ices each night, Ruth, two kinds of ices; and the second night I wore my ruby satin, and the clergyman at Stoke Moreton, that nice young Mr. Brown, who comes to your uncle's chapter meetings, dined, with his sister, a very pleasing person indeed, Ruth, in black. In fact, it was a very pleasant little gathering, so nice and informal, and the footmen did not wait at luncheon, just put the pudding and the hot plates down to the fire; and Sir Charles so chatty and so full of his jokes, and I always like to hear him, though my scent of humour is not quite the same as his. Sir Charles has a feeling heart, Ruth. You should have heard Mr. Reynolds talk about him. But he looked very thin and pale, my dear, and he seemed to be always so tired, but still as pleasant as could be. And I told him he wanted a wife to look after him, and

I advised him to have an egg beaten up in ever such a little drop of brandy at eleven o'clock, and he said he would think about it, he did indeed, Ruth; so I just went quietly to the housekeeper and asked her to see about it, and a very sensible person she was, Ruth, been in the family twenty years, and thinks all the world of Sir Charles, and showed me the damask table cloths that were used for the prince's visit, and the white satin coverlet, embroidered with gold thistles, quite an heirloom, which had been worked by the ladies of the house when James I. slept there. Think of that, my dear!"

And so Mrs. Alwynn rambled on, recounting how Charles had shown her all the pictures himself, and the piazza where the orange and myrtle trees were, and how she and Mrs. Reynolds had gone for a drive together, "in a beautiful landau," etc., etc., till they reached home.

As a rule Ruth rather shrank from travel-

ling with Mrs. Alwynn, who always journeyed in her best clothes, "because you never know whom you may not meet." To stand on a platform with her was to be made conspicuous, and Ruth generally found herself unconsciously going into half mourning for the day, when she went anywhere by rail with her aunt. To-day Mrs. Alwynn was more gaily dressed than ever, but as Ruth looked at her beaming face she felt nothing but a strange pleasure in the fact that Charles had not forgotten the little request which later events had completely effaced from her own memory. He, it seemed, had remembered, and in spite of what had passed, had done what she asked him. She wished that she could have told him she was grateful. Alas! There were other things that she wished she could have told him; that she was sorry she had misjudged him; that she understood him better now. But what did it matter! What did it matter! She was going to marry Dare, and *he* was the person whom she must

try to understand for the remainder of her natural life. She thought a little wearily that she could understand *him* without trying.

CHAPTER V.

THE 18th of October had arrived. Slumberleigh Hall was filling. The pheasants, reprieved till then, supposed it was only for partridge shooting, and thinking no evil, ate Indian corn, and took no thought for the annual St. Bartholomew of their race.

Mabel Thursby had met Ruth out walking that day, and had informed her that Charles was to be one of the guns, also Dare, though, as she remembered to add, suspecting Dare admired Ruth, the latter was a bad shot, and was only asked out of neighbourly feeling.

After parting with Mabel, Ruth met, almost at her own gate, Ralph Danvers, who passed her on horseback, and then turned on recognizing her. Ralph's conversational powers

were not great, and though he walked his horse beside her, he chiefly contented himself with assenting to Ruth's remarks until she asked after Molly.

He at once whistled, and flicked a fly off his horse's neck.

"Sad business with Molly," he said; "and mother out for the day. Great grief in the nursery. Vic's dead!"

"Oh, poor Molly!"

"Died this morning. Fits. I say," with a sudden inspiration, "you wouldn't go over and cheer her up, would you? Mother's out. I'm out. Magistrates' meeting at D——."

Ruth said she had nothing to do, and would go over at once, and Ralph nodded kindly at her, and rode on. He liked her, and it never occurred to him that it could be anything but a privilege to minister to any need of Molly's. He jogged on more happily after his meeting with Ruth, and only remembered half an hour later that he had com-

pletely forgotten to order the dog-cart to meet Charles, who was coming to Atherstone for a night before he went on to kill the Slumberleigh pheasants the following morning.

Ruth set out at once over the pale stubble fields, glad of an object for a walk.

Deep distress reigned meanwhile in the nursery at Atherstone. Vic, the much-beloved, the stoat pursuer, the would-be church goer, Vic was dead, and Molly's soul refused comfort. In vain nurse conveyed a palpitating guinea pig into the nursery in a bird cage, on the narrow door of which remains of fur showed an unwilling entrance; Molly could derive no comfort from guinea pigs.

In vain was the new horse, with leather hoofs, with real hair, and a horsehair tail—in vain was that token of esteem from Uncle Charles brought out of its stable, and unevenly yoked with a dappled pony planted on a green oval lawn, into Molly's own hay

cart. Molly's woe was beyond the reach of hay carts, or horsehair tails, however realistic. Like Hezekiah, she turned her face to the nursery wall, on which trains and railroads were depicted; and even when cook herself rose up out of her kitchen to comfort her with material consolations, she refused the mockery of a gingerbread nut, which could not restore the friend with whom previous gingerbread nuts had always been divided.

Presently a step came along the passage, and Charles, who had found no one in the drawing-room, came in tired and dusty, and inclined to be annoyed at having had to walk up from the station.

Molly flew to him, and flung her arms tightly round his neck.

"Oh, Uncle Charles! Uncle Charles! Vic is dead!"

"I am so sorry, Molly," taking her on his knee.

Nurse and the nursery maid and cook

withdrew, leaving the two mourners alone together.

“He is *dead*, Uncle Charles. He was quite well, and eating Albert biscuits with the dolls this morning, and now——” The rest was too dreadful, and Molly burst into a flood of tears, and burrowed with her head against the faithful waistcoat of Uncle Charles—Uncle Charles, the friend, the consoler of all the ills that Molly had so far been heir to.

“Vic had a very happy life, Molly,” said Charles, pressing the little brown head against his cheek, and vaguely wondering what it would be like to have any one to turn to in time of trouble.

“I always kept trouble from him, except that time I shut him in the door,” gasped Molly. “I never took him out in a string, and he only wore his collar—that collar you gave him, that made him scratch so—on Sundays.”

“And he was not ill a long time. He did not suffer any pain.”

“No, Uncle Charles, not much; but though he did not say anything, his face looked worse than screaming, and he passed away very stiff in his hind legs. Oh!” (with a fresh outburst), “when cook told me that her sister that was in a decline had gone, I never thought,” (sob, sob!) “poor Vic would be the next.”

A step came along the passage, a firm light step that Charles knew, that made his heart beat violently.

The door opened and a familiar voice said—
“Molly! My poor Molly! I met father, and——”

Ruth stood in the doorway, and stopped short. A wave of colour passed over her face, and left it paler than usual.

Charles looked at her over the mop of Molly's brown head against his breast. Their grave eyes met, and each thought how ill the other looked.

“I did not know — I thought you were going to Slumberleigh to-day,” said Ruth.

“ I go to-morrow morning,” replied Charles.
“ I came here first.”

There was an awkward silence ; but Molly came to their relief by a sudden rush at Ruth, and a repetition of the details of the death-bed scene of poor Vic for her benefit, for which both were grateful.

“ You ought to be thinking where he is to be buried, Molly,” suggested Charles, when she had finished. “ Let us go into the garden and find a place.”

Molly revived somewhat at the prospect of a funeral, and, though Ruth was anxious to leave her with her uncle, insisted on her remaining for the ceremony. They went out together, Molly holding a hand of each, to choose a suitable spot in the garden. By the time the grave had been dug by Charles, Molly was sufficiently recovered to take a lively interest in the proceedings, and to insist on the attendance of the stable cat, in deep mourning, when the remains of poor Vic, arrayed in his best collar, were lowered into their long home.

By the time the last duties to the dead had been performed, and Charles, under Molly's direction, had planted a rose tree on the grave, while Ruth surrounded the little mound with white pebbles, Molly's tea-time had arrived, and that young lady allowed herself to be led away by the nursery maid, with the stable cat in a close embrace, resigned, and even cheerful at the remembrance of those creature comforts of cook's, which earlier in the day she had refused so peremptorily.

When Molly left them, Ruth and Charles walked together in silence to the garden gate which led to the footpath over the fields by which she had come. Neither had a word to say, who formerly had so much.

"Good-bye," she said, without looking at him.

He seemed intent on the hasp of the gate.

There was a moment's pause.

"I should like," said Ruth, hating herself for the formality of her tone, "to thank you

before I go for giving Mrs. Alwynn so much pleasure. She still talks of her visit to you. It was kind of you to remember it. So much seems to have happened since then, that I had not thought of it again."

At her last words Charles raised his eyes and looked at her with strange wistful intentness, but when Ruth had finished speaking he had no remark to make in answer; and as he stood bareheaded by the gate, twirling the hasp and looking, as a hasty glance told her, so worn and jaded in the sunshine, she said "Good-bye" again, and turned hastily away.

And all along the empty harvested fields, and all along the lanes, where the hips and haws grew red and stiff among the ruddy hedgerows, Ruth still saw Charles's grave worn face.

That night she saw it still, as she sat in her own room, and listened to the whisper of the rain upon the roof, and the touch of its myriad fingers on the window-panes.

“ I cannot bear to see him look like that. I cannot bear it,” she said suddenly, and the storm which had been gathering so long, the clouds of which had darkened the sky for so many days, broke at last, with a strong and mighty wind of swift emotion which carried all before it.

It was a relief to give way, to let the tempest do its worst, and remain passive. But when its force was spent at last, and it died away in gusts and flying showers, it left flood and wreckage and desolation behind. When Ruth raised her head and looked about her, all her landmarks were gone. There was a streaming glory in the heavens, but it shone on the ruin of all her little world below. She loved Charles, and she knew it. It seemed to her now as if, though she had not realized it, she must have loved him from the first; and with the knowledge came an overwhelming sense of utter misery that struck terror to her heart. She understood at last the meaning of the weariness and the

restless misgivings of these last weeks. If heretofore they had spoken in riddles, they spoke plainly now. Every other feeling in the world seemed to have been swept away by a passion, the overwhelming strength of which she regarded panic-stricken. She seemed to have been asleep all her life, to have stirred restlessly once or twice of late, and now to have waked to consciousness and agony. Love, with women like Ruth, is a great happiness or a great calamity. It is with them indeed for better, for worse.

Those whose feelings lie below the surface escape the hundred rubs and scratches which superficial natures are heir to; but it is the nerve which is not easily reached which when touched gives forth the sharpest pang. Nature, when she gives intensity of feeling, mercifully covers it well with a certain superficial coldness. Ruth had sometimes wondered why the incidents, the books, which called forth emotion in others, passed her by. The vehement passion which once or twice in her

life she had involuntarily awakened in others had met with no response from herself. The sight of the fire she had unwittingly kindled only made her shiver with cold. She believed herself to be cold—always a dangerous assumption on the part of a woman, and apt to prove a broken reed in emergency.

Charles knew her better than she knew herself. Her pride and unconscious humble-mindedness, her frankness with its underlying reserve, spoke of a strong nature, slow, perhaps, but earnest, constant, and, once roused, capable of deep attachment.

And now the common lot had befallen her, the common lot of man and womankind since Adam first met Eve in the Garden of Eden. Ruth was not exempt.

She loved Charles.

When the dawn came up pale and tearful to wake the birds, it found her still sitting by her window, sitting where she had sat all night, looking with blank eyes at nothing.

Creep into bed, Ruth, for already the sparrows are all waking, and their cheerful greetings to the new day add weariness to your weariness. Creep into bed, for soon the servants will be stirring, and before long Martha, who has slept all night, and thinks your lines have fallen to you in pleasant places and late hours, will bring the hot water.

CHAPTER VI.

RESERVED people pay dear for their reserve when they are in trouble, when the iron enters into their soul, and their eyes meet the eyes of the world tearless, unflinching, making no sign.

Enviably are those whose sorrows are only pen and ink deep, who take every one into their confidence, who are comforted by sympathy, and fly to those who will weep with them. There is an utter solitude, a silence in the grief of a proud, reserved nature which adds a frightful weight to its intensity; and when the night comes, and the chamber door is shut, who shall say what agonies of prayers and tears, what prostrations of despair pass like waves over the soul, to make the balance even?

As a rule, the kindest and best of people seldom notice any alteration of appearance or manner in one of their own family. A stranger points it out, if it ever is pointed out, which happily is not often, unless, of course, in cases where advice has been disregarded, and the first symptom of ill-health is jealously watched for, and triumphantly hailed, by those whose mission in life it is to say, "I told you so."

Mrs. Alwynn, whose own complaints were of so slight a nature that they had to be constantly referred to to give them any importance at all, was not likely to notice that Ruth's naturally pale complexion had become several degrees too pale during the last two days, or that she had dark rings under her eyes. Besides, only the day before, had not Mrs. Alwynn, in cutting out a child's shirt, cut out at the same time her best drawing-room table cloth as well, which calamity had naturally driven out of her mind every other subject for the time.

Ruth had proved unsympathetic, and Mrs. Alwynn had felt her to be so. The next day, also, when Mrs. Alwynn had begun to talk over what she and Ruth were to wear that evening at a dinner-party at Slumberleigh Hall, Ruth had again shown a decided want of interest, and was not even to be roused by the various conjectures of her aunt, though repeated over and over again, as to who would most probably take her in to dinner, who would be assigned to Mr. Alwynn, and whether Ruth would be taken in by a married man or a single one. As it was quite impossible absolutely to settle these interesting points beforehand, Mrs. Alwynn's mind had a vast field for conjecture opened to her, in which she disported herself at will, varying the entertainment for herself and Ruth by speculating as to who would sit on the other side of each of them; "for," as she justly observed, "everybody has two sides, my dear; and though, for my part, I can talk to anybody—Members of Parliament, or

bishops, or any one—still it is difficult for a young person; and if you feel dull, Ruth, you can always turn to the person on the other side with some easy little remark.”

Ruth rose and went to the window. It had rained all yesterday; it had been raining all the morning to-day, but it was fair now; nay, the sun was sending out long burnished shafts from the broken grey and blue of the sky. She was possessed by an unreasoning longing to get out of the house into the open air—anywhere, no matter where, beyond the reach of Mrs. Alwynn's voice. She had been fairly patient with her for many months, but during these two last wet days a sense of sudden miserable irritation would seize her on the slightest provocation, which filled her with remorse and compunction, but into which she would relapse at a moment's notice. Every morning since her arrival, nine months ago, had Mrs. Alwynn returned from her housekeeping with the same cheerful bustle, the same piece of information—“ Well, Ruth,

I've ordered dinner, my dear. First one duty, and then another!"

Why had that innocent and not unfamiliar phrase become so intolerable when she heard it again this morning? And when Mrs. Alwynn wound up the musical-box, and the "Buffalo Girls" tinkled on the ear to relieve the monotony of a wet morning, why should Ruth have struggled wildly for a moment with a sudden inclination to laugh and cry at the same time, which resulted in two large tears falling unexpectedly, to her surprise and shame, upon her book?

She shut the book, and recovering herself with an effort, listened patiently to Mrs. Alwynn's remarks, until, early in the afternoon, the sky cleared. Making some excuse about going to see her old nurse at the lodge at Arleigh, who was still ill, she at last effected her escape out of the room, and out of the house.

The air was fresh and clear, though cold. The familiar fields and beaded hedgerows,

the red land, new ploughed, where the plovers hovered, the grey broken sky above, soothed Ruth like the presence of a friend, as Nature, even in her commonest moods, has ministered to many an one who has loved her before Ruth's time.

Our human loves partake always of the nature of speculations. We have no security for our capital (which, fortunately, is seldom so large as we suppose), but the love of Nature is a sure investment, which she repays a thousandfold, which she repays most prodigally when the heart is bankrupt and full of bitterness, as Ruth's heart was that day. For in Nature, as Wordsworth says, "there is no bitterness," that worst sting of human grief. And as Ruth walked among the quiet fields, and up the yellow aisles of the autumn glades to Arleigh, Nature spoke of peace to her—not of joy or of happiness as in old days, for she never lies, as human comforters do, and these had gone out of her life; but of the peace that duty

steadfastly adhered to will bring at last ; the peace that after much turmoil will come in the end to those who, amid a babel of louder tongues, hear and obey the low-pitched voices of conscience and of principle.

For it never occurred to Ruth for a moment to throw over Dare and marry Charles. She had given her word to Dare, and her word was her bond. It was as much a matter of being true to herself as to him. It was very simple. There were no two ways about it in her mind. The idea of breaking off her engagement was not to be thought of. It would be dishonourable.

We often think that if we had been placed in the same difficulties which we see overwhelm others, we could have got out of them. Just so ; we might have squeezed, or wriggled, or crept out of a position from which another who would not stoop could not have escaped. People are differently constituted. Most persons with common sense can sink their

principles temporarily at a pinch ; but others there are who go through life prisoners on parole to their sense of honour or duty. If escape takes the form of a temptation, they do not escape. And Ruth, walking with bent head beneath the swaying trees, dreamed of no escape.

She soon reached the little lodge, the rusty gates of which barred the grass-grown drive to the shuttered, tenantless old house at a little distance. It was a small grey stone house of many gables, and low lines of windows, that if inhabited would have possessed but little charm, but which in its deserted state had a certain pathetic interest. The place had been to let for years, but no one had taken it ; no one was likely to take it in the disrepair which was now fast sliding into ruin.

The garden beds were almost grown over with weeds, but blots of nasturtium colour showed here and there among the ragged green, and a virginia creeper had done its

gorgeous red-and-yellow best to cheer the grey stone walls. But the place had a dreary appearance even in the present sunshine ; and, after looking at it for a moment, Ruth went indoors to see her old nurse. After sitting with her, and reading the usual favourite chapter in the big Bible, and answering the usual question of "any news of Master Raymond" in the usual way, Ruth got up to go, and the old woman asked her if she wanted the drawing-block which she had left with her some time ago, with an unfinished sketch on it of the stables. She got it out, and Ruth looked at it. It was a slight sketch of an octagonal building with wide arches all round it, roofing in a paved path, on which, in days gone by, it had evidently been the pernicious custom to exercise the horses, whose stalls and loose boxes formed the centre of the building. The stable had a certain quaintness, and the sketch was at that delightful point when no random stroke has as yet falsified the promise

that a finished drawing, however clever, so seldom fulfils.

Ruth took it up, and looked out of the window. The sun was blazing out, ashamed of his absence for so long. She might as well finish it now. She was glad to be out of the way of meeting any one, especially the shooters, whose guns she had heard in the nearer Slumberleigh coverts several times that afternoon. The Arleigh woods she knew were to be kept till later in the month. She took her block and paint-box, and picking her way along the choked gravel walk and down the side drive to the stables, sat down on the bench for chopping wood which had been left in the place to which she had previously dragged it, and set to work. She was sitting under one of the arches out of the wind, and an obsequious yellow cat came out of the door of one of the nearest horse-boxes in which wood was evidently stacked, and rubbed itself against her dress, with a reckless expenditure of hair.

As Ruth stopped a moment, bored but courteous, to return its well-meant attentions by friction behind the ears, she heard a slight crackling among the wood in the stable. Rats abounded in the place, and she was just about to recall the cat to its professional duties, when her own attention was also distracted. She started violently, and grasped the drawing-block in both hands.

Clear over the gravel, muffled but still distinct across the long wet grass, she could hear a firm step coming. Then it rang out sharply on the stone pavement. A tall man came suddenly round the corner, under the archway, and stood before her. It was Charles.

The yellow cat, which had a leaning towards the aristocracy, left Ruth, and picking its way daintily over the round stones towards him, rubbed off some more of its wardrobe against his heather shooting stockings.

“I hardly think it is worth while to say

anything except the truth," said Charles at last. "I have followed you here."

As Ruth could say nothing in reply, it was fortunate that at the moment she had nothing to say. She continued to mix a little pool of Prussian blue and Italian pink without looking up.

"I hurt my gun hand after luncheon, and had to stop shooting at Croxton corner. As I went back to Slumberleigh, across the fields below the Rectory, I thought I saw you in the distance, and followed you."

"Is your hand much hurt?"—with sudden anxiety.

"No," said Charles, reddening a little. "It will stop my shooting for a day or two, but that is all."

The colours were mixed again. Ruth, contrary to all previous conviction, added light red to the Italian pink. The sketch had gone rapidly from bad to worse, but the light red finished it off. It never, so to speak, held up its head again; but I believe

she has it still somewhere, put away in a locked drawer in tissue paper, as if it were very valuable.

“I did not come without a reason,” said Charles, after a long pause, speaking with difficulty. “It is no good beating about the bush. I want to speak to you again about what I told you three weeks ago. Have you forgotten what that was?”

Ruth shook her head. *She had not forgotten.* Her hand began to tremble, and he sat down beside her on the bench, and taking the brush out of her hand, laid it in its box.

“Ruth,” he said gently, “I have not been very happy during the last three weeks, but two days ago, when I saw you again, I thought you did not look as if you had been very happy either. Am I right? Are you happy in your engagement with——? Quite content? Quite satisfied? Still silent. Am I to have no answer?”

“Some questions have no answers,” said Ruth steadily, looking away from him. “At

least, the questions that ought not to be asked have none."

"I will not ask any more, then. Perhaps, as you say, I have no right. You won't tell me whether you are unhappy, but your face tells me so in spite of you. It told me so two days ago, and I have thought of it every hour of the day and night since."

She gathered herself together for a final effort to stop what she knew was coming, and said desperately—

"I don't know how it is. I don't mean it, and yet everything I say to you seems so harsh and unkind; but I think it would have been better not to come here, and I think it would be better, better for us both, if you would go away now."

Charles's face became set and very white. Then he put his fortune to the touch.

"You are right," he said. "I will go away—for good; I will never trouble you again, when you have told me that you do not love me."

The colour rushed into her face, and then died slowly away again, even out of the tightly compressed lips.

There was a long silence, in which he waited for a reply that did not come. At last she turned and looked him in the face. Who has said that light eyes cannot be impassioned? Her deep eyes, dark with the utter blankness of despair, fell before the intensity of his. He leant towards her, and with gentle strength put his arm round her, and drew her to him. His voice came in a broken whisper of passionate entreaty close to her ear.

“Ruth, I love you, and you love me. We belong to each other. We were made for each other. Life is not possible apart. It must be together, Ruth, always together, always——” and his voice broke down entirely.

Surely he was right. A love such as theirs overrode all petty barriers of every-day right and wrong, and was a law unto itself. Surely

it was vain to struggle against Fate, against the soft yet mighty current which was sweeping her away beyond all landmarks, beyond the sight of land itself, out towards an infinite sea.

And the eyes she loved looked into hers with an agony of entreaty, and the voice she loved spoke of love, spoke brokenly of unworthiness, and an unhappy past, and of a brighter future, a future with *her*.

Her brain reeled. Her reason had gone. Let her yield now. Surely, if only she could think, if the power to think had not deserted her, it was right to yield. The current was taking her ever swifter whither she knew not. A moment more and there would be no going back.

She began to tremble, and wrenching her hands out of his, pressed them before her eyes to shut out the sight of the earnest face so near her own. But she could not shut out his voice, and Charles's voice could be very gentle, very urgent.

But at the eleventh hour another voice broke in on his, and spoke as one having authority. Conscience, if accustomed to be disregarded on common occasions, will rarely come to the fore with any decision in emergency; but the weakest do not put him in a place of command all their lives without at least one result, that he has got the habit of speaking up and making himself attended to in time of need. He spoke now, urgently, imperatively. Her judgment, her reason were alike gone for the time, but when she had paced the solemn aisles of the woods an hour ago in possession of them, had she then even thought of doing what she was on the verge of doing now? What had happened during that hour to reverse the steadfast resolve which she had made then? What she had thought right an hour ago remained right now. What she would have put far from her as dishonourable then, remained dishonourable now, though she might be too insane to see it.

Terror seized her, as of one in a dream who is conscious of impending danger, and struggles to awake before it is too late. She started to her feet, and putting forcibly aside the hands that would have held her back, walked unsteadily towards the nearest pillar, and leaned against it, trembling violently.

“Do not tempt me,” she said hoarsely. “I cannot bear it.”

He came and stood beside her.

“I do not tempt you,” he said. “I want to save you and myself from a great calamity before it is too late.”

“It is too late already.”

“No,” said Charles, in a low voice of intense determination. “It is not—yet. It will be soon. It is still possible to go back. You are not married to him, and it is no longer right that you should marry him. You must give him up. There is no other way.”

“Yes,” said Ruth with vehemence.

“There is another way. You have made me forget it; but before you came I saw it clearly. I can’t think it out as I did then; but I know it is there. There is another way,” and her voice faltered; “to do what is right, and let everything else go.”

Charles saw for the first time, with a sudden frightful contraction of the heart, that her will was as strong as his own. He had staked everything on one desperate appeal to her feelings; he had carried the outworks, and now another adversary—her conscience—rose up between him and her.

“A marriage without love is a sin,” he said quietly. “If you had lived in the world as long as I have, and had seen what marriage without love means, and what it generally comes to in the end, you would know that I am speaking the truth. You have no right to marry Dare if you care for me. Hesitate, and it will be too late! Break off your engagement now. Do you suppose,” with sudden fire, “that we shall cease to love each

other, that I shall be able to cease to love you for the rest of my life because you are Dare's wife? What is done can't be undone. Our love for each other can't. It is no good shutting your eyes to that. Look the facts in the face, and don't deceive yourself into thinking that the most difficult course is necessarily the right one."

He turned from her, and sat down on the bench again, his chin in his hands, his haggard eyes fastened on her face. He had said his last word, and she felt that when she spoke it would be her last word too. Neither could bear much more.

"All you say sounds right—*at first*," she said, after a long silence, and as she spoke Charles's hands dropped from his face and clenched themselves together; "but I cannot go by what any one thinks unless I think so myself as well. I can't take other people's judgments. When God gave us our own, He did not mean us to shirk using it. What you say is right, but there is something which

after a little bit seems more right—at least, which seems so to me. I cannot look at the future. I can only see one thing distinctly, now in the present, and that is that I cannot break my word. I never have been able to see that a woman's word is less binding than a man's. When I said I would marry him, it was of my own free will. I knew what I was doing, and it was not only for his sake I did it. It is not as if he believed I cared for him very much. Then, perhaps—but he knows I don't, and—he is different from other men—he does not seem to mind. I knew at the time that I accepted him for the sake of other things, which are just the same now as they were then ; because he was poor and I had money ; because I felt sure he would never do much by himself, and I thought I could help him, and my money would help too ; because the people at Vandon are so wretched, and their cottages are tumbling down, and there is no one who lives among them and cares about them. I

can't make it clear, and I did hesitate; but at the time it seemed wrong to hesitate. If it seemed so right then, it cannot be all wrong now, even if it has become hard. I cannot give it all up. He is building cottages that I am to pay for, that I asked to pay for. He cannot. And he has promised so many people their houses shall be put in order, and they all believe him. And he can't do it. If I don't, it will not be done; and some of them are very old—and—and the winter is coming." Ruth's voice had become almost inaudible. "Oh, Charles! Charles!" she said brokenly. "I cannot bear to hurt you. God knows I love you. I think I shall always love you, though I shall try not. But I cannot go back now from what I have undertaken. I cannot break my word. I cannot do what is wrong, even for you. Oh, God! not even for you!"

She knelt down beside him, and took his clenched hands between her own; but he did not stir.

“Not even for you,” she whispered, while two hot tears fell upon his hands. In another moment she had risen swiftly to her feet, and had left him.

CHAPTER VII.

CHARLES sat quite still where Ruth had left him, looking straight in front of him. He had not thought for a moment of following her, of speaking to her again. Her decision was final, and he knew it. And now he also knew how much he had built upon the wild new hope of the last two days.

Presently a slight discreet cough broke upon his ear, apparently close at hand.

He started up, and wheeling round in the direction of the sound, called out in sudden anger, "Who is there?"

If there is a time when we feel that a fellow-creature is entirely out of harmony with ourselves, it is when we discover that he has overheard or overseen us at a moment

when we imagined we were alone, or—almost alone.

Charles was furious.

“Come out!” he said in a tone that would have made any ordinary creature stay as far *in* as it could. And hearing a slight crackling in the nearest horse-box, of which the door stood open, he shook the door violently.

“Come out,” he repeated, “this instant!”

“Stop that noise, then,” said a voice sharply from the inside, “and keep quiet. By ——, a violent temper, what a thing it is; always raising a dust, and kicking up a row, just when it’s least wanted.”

The voice made Charles start.

“Great God!” he said, “it’s not——?”

“Yes, it is,” was the reply; “and when you have taken a seat on the further end of that bench, and recovered your temper, I’ll show, but not before.”

Charles walked to the bench and sat down.

“You can come out,” he said in a carefully

lowered voice, in which there was contempt as well as anger.

Accordingly there was a little more crackling among the faggots, and a slight, shabbily dressed man came to the door, and peered warily out, shading his blinking eyes with his hand.

“If there is a thing I hate,” he said with a curious mixture of recklessness and anxiety, “it is a noise. Sit so that you face the left, will you, and I’ll look after the right, and if you see any one coming you may as well mention it. I am only at home to old friends.”

He took his hand from his eyes as they became more accustomed to the light, and showed a shrewd, dissipated face, that yet had a kind of ruined good look about it, and, what was more hateful to Charles than anything else, a decided resemblance to Ruth. Though he was shabby in the extreme, his clothes sat upon him as they always and only do sit upon a gentleman; and though his face

and voice showed that he had severed himself effectually from the class in which he had been born, a certain unsuitability remained between his appearance and his evidently disreputable circumstances. When Charles looked at him he was somehow reminded of a broken-down thoroughbred in a hansom cab.

“It is a quiet spot,” remarked Raymond Deyncourt, for he it was, standing in the doorway, his watchful eyes scanning the deserted courtyard and strip of green. “A retired and a peaceful spot. I’m sorry if my cough annoyed you, coming when it did, but I thought you seemed before to be engaged in conversation, which I felt a certain diffidence in interrupting.”

“So you listened, I suppose?”

“Yes, I listened. I did not hear as much as I could have wished, but it was your best manner, Danvers. You certainly have a gift, though you dropped your voice unnecessarily once or twice, I thought. If I had had

your talents I should not be here now. Eh? Dear me! you can swear still, can you? How refreshing. I fancied you had quite reformed."

"Why are you here now?" asked Charles sternly.

Raymond shrugged his shoulders.

"Why are you here?" continued Charles bitterly, "when you swore to me in July that if I would pay your passage out again to America you would let her alone in future? Why are you here, when I wrote to tell you that she had promised me she would never give you money again without advice? But I might have known you could break a promise as easily as make one. I might have known you would only keep it as long as it suited yourself."

"Well, now, I'm glad to hear you say that," said Raymond airily, "because it takes off any feeling of surprise I was afraid you might feel at seeing me back here. There's nothing like a good understanding between

friends. I'm precious hard up, I can tell you, or I should not have come; and when a fellow has got into as tight a place as I have, he has got to think of other things besides keeping promises. Have you seen to-day's papers?"—with sudden eagerness.

"Yes."

"Any news about the Frisco forgery case?" and Raymond leaned forward through the door, and spoke in a whisper.

"Nothing much," said Charles, trying to recollect. "Nothing new to-day, I think. You know they got one of them two days ago, followed him down to Birmingham, and took him in the train."

Raymond drew in his breath.

"I don't hold with trains," he said after a pause; "at least, not with passengers. I told him as much at the time. And the—the other one—Stephens? Any news of him?"

"Nothing more about him, as far as I can remember. They were both traced together

from Boston to London, but there they parted company. Stephens is at large still."

"Is he?" said Raymond. "By George, I'm glad to hear it. I hope he'll keep so, that's all. I'm glad I left that fool. He'd not my notions at all. We split two days ago, and I made tracks for the old diggings; got down as far as Tarbury under a tarpaulin in a goods train—there's some sense in a goods train—and then lay close by a weir of the canal, and got aboard a barge after dark. Nothing breaks a scent like a barge. And it went the right way for my business too, and travelled all night. I kept close all next day, and then struck across country for this place at night. If I hadn't known the lie of the land from a boy, when I used to spend the holidays with old Alwynn, I couldn't have done it, or if I'd been as dog lame as I was in July; but I was pushed for a time, and I footed it up here, and got in just before dawn. And not too soon either, for I'm cleaned out, and food is precious hard to

come by if you don't care to go shopping for it. I am only waiting till it's dark to go and get something from the old woman at the lodge. She looked after me before, but it wasn't so serious then as it is now."

"It will be penal servitude for life this time for—Stephens," said Charles.

"Yes," said Raymond thoughtfully. "It's playing deuced high. I knew that at the time, but I thought it was worth it. It was a beautiful thing, and there was a mint of money in it, if it had gone straight—a mint of money;" and he shook his head regretfully. "But the luck is bound to change in the end," he went on, after a moment of mournful retrospection. "You'll see, I shall make my pile yet, Danvers. One can't go on turning up tails all the time."

"You will turn them up once too often," said Charles, "and get your affairs wound up for you some day in a way you won't like. But I suppose it's no earthly use my saying anything."

“Not much,” replied the other. “I guess I’ve heard it all before. Don’t you remember how you held forth that night in the wood? You came out strong. I felt as if I were in church; but you forked out handsomely at the collection afterwards. I will say that for you.”

“And what are you going to do now you’ve got here?” interrupted Charles sharply.

“Lie by.”

“How long?”

“Perhaps a week, perhaps ten days. Can’t say.”

“And after that?”

“After that, some one, I don’t say who, but some one will have to provide me with the ‘ready’ to nip across to France. I have friends in Paris where I can manage to scratch along for a bit till things have blown over.”

Charles considered for a few moments, and then said—

“Are you going to dun your sister for

money again, or give her another fright by lying in wait for her? Of course, if you broke your word about coming back, you might break it about trying to get money out of her."

"I might," assented Raymond; "in fact, I was on the point of making my presence known to her, and suggesting a pecuniary advance, when you came up. I don't know at present what I shall do, as I let that opportunity slip. It just depends."

Charles considered again.

"It's a pity to trouble her, isn't it?" said Raymond, his shrewd eyes watching him, "and women are best out of money matters. Besides, if she has promised you she won't pay up without advice she'll stick to it. Nothing will turn her when she once settles on anything, if she is at all like what she used to be. She has got dollars of her own. You had better settle with me, and pay yourself back when you are married. Dear me! There's no occasion to look so murderous.

I suppose I'm at liberty to draw my own conclusions."

"You had better draw them a little more carefully in future," said Charles savagely. "Your sister is engaged to be married to a man without a sixpence."

"By George," said Raymond, "that won't suit my book at all. I'd rather"—with another glance at Charles—"I'd rather she'd marry a man with money."

If Charles was of the same opinion he did not express it. He remained silent for a few minutes, to give weight to his last remark, and then said slowly—

"So you see you won't get anything more from that quarter. You had better make the most you can out of me."

Raymond nodded.

"The most you will get, in fact, I may say *all* you will get from me, is enough ready money to carry you to Paris, and a cheque for twenty pounds to follow, when I hear you have arrived there."

“It’s mean,” said Raymond; “it’s cursed mean; and from a man like you too, whom I feel for as a brother. I’d rather try my luck with Ruth. She’s not married yet, any way.”

“You will do as you like,” said Charles, getting up. “If I find you have been trying your luck with her, as you call it, you won’t get a farthing from me afterwards. And you may remember, she can’t help you without consulting her friends. And your complaint is one that requires absolute quiet, or I’m very much mistaken.”

Raymond bit his finger, and looked irresolute.

“To-day is Wednesday,” said Charles; “on Saturday I shall come back here in the afternoon, and if you have come to my terms by that time you can cough after I do. I shall have the money on me. If you make any attempt to write or speak to your sister, I shall take care to hear of it, and you need not expect me on Saturday. That is the last remark I have to make, so good after-

noon;" and, without waiting for a reply, Charles walked away, conscious that Raymond would not dare either to call or run after him.

He walked slowly along the grass-grown road that led into the carriage-drive, and was about to let himself out of the grounds by a crazy gate, which rather took away from the usefulness of the large iron locked ones at the lodge, when he perceived an old man with a pail of water fumbling at it. He did not turn as Charles drew near, and even when the latter came up with him, and said "Good afternoon," he made no sign. Charles watched him groping for the hasp, and, when he had got the gate open, feel about for the pail of water, which when he found he struck against the gate post as he carried it through. Charles looked after the old man as he shambled off in the direction of the lodge.

"Blind and deaf! He'll tell no tales, at any rate," he said to himself. "Raymond is in luck there."

It had turned very cold; and, suddenly remembering that his absence might be noticed, he set off through the woods to Slumberleigh at a good pace. His nearest way took him through the churchyard and across the adjoining high-road, on the further side of which stood the little red-faced lodge, which belonged to the great new red-faced seat of the Thursbys at a short distance. He came rapidly round the corner of the old church tower, and was already swinging down the worn sandstone steps which led into the road, when he saw below him at the foot of the steps a little group of people standing talking. It was Mr. Alwynn, and Ruth, and Dare, who had evidently met them on his return from shooting, and who, standing at ease with one elegantly gaitered leg on the lowest step, and a cartridge-bag slung over his shoulder in a way that had aroused Charles's indignation earlier in the day, was recounting to them, with vivid action of the hands on an imaginary gun, his

own performances to right and left at some particularly hot corner.

Mr. Alwynn was listening with a benignant smile. Charles saw that Ruth was leaning heavily against the low stone wall. Before he had time to turn back, Mr. Alwynn had seen him, and had gone forward a step to meet him, holding out a welcoming hand. Charles was obliged to stop a moment while his hand was inquired after, and a new treatment, which Mr. Alwynn had found useful on a similar occasion, was enjoined upon him. As they stood together on the church steps, a fly, heavily laden with luggage, came slowly up the road towards them.

“What,” said Mr. Alwynn, “more visitors! I thought all the Slumberleigh party arrived yesterday.”

The fly plodded past the Slumberleigh lodge however, and as it reached the steps a shrill voice suddenly called to the driver to stop. As it came grinding to a standstill, the glass was hastily put down, and a little

woman with a very bold pair of black eyes, and a somewhat laced-in figure, got out and came towards them.

“Well, Mr. Dare!” she said, in a high distinct voice, with a strong American accent. “I guess you did not expect to see me riding up this way, or you’d have sent the carriage to bring your wife up from the station. But I’m not one to bear malice; so if you want a lift home to—what’s the name of your fine new place?—you can get in, and ride up along with me.”

Dare looked straight in front of him. No one spoke. Her quick eye glanced from one to another of the little group, and she gave a short constrained laugh.

“Well,” she said, “if you ain’t coming, you can stop with your friends. I’ve had a deal of travelling one way and another, and I’ll go on without you.” And, turning quickly away, she told the driver in the same distinct high key to go on to Vandon, and got into the fly again.

The grinning man chucked at the horse's bridle, and the fly rattled heavily away.

No one spoke as it drove away. Charles glanced once at Ruth ; but her set white face told him nothing. As the fly disappeared up the road, Dare moved a step forward. His face under his brown skin was ashen grey. He took off his cap, and extending it at arm's length, not towards the sky, but, like a good churchman, towards the church, outside of which, as he knew, his Maker was not to be found, he said solemnly—

“ I swear before God what she says is one
—great—*lie*.”

CHAPTER VIII.

IF conformity to type is indeed the one great mark towards which humanity should press, Mrs. Thursby may honestly be said to have attained to it. Everything she said or did had been said or done before, or she would never have thought of saying or doing it. Her whole life was a feeble imitation of the imitative lives of others ; in short, it was the life of the ordinary country gentlewoman, who lives on her husband's property, and who, as Augustus Hare says, "has never looked over the garden wall."

We do not mean to insinuate for a moment that the utmost energy and culture are not occasionally to be met with in the female portion of that interesting mass of our fellow-

creatures who swell the large volumes of the "Landed Gentry." Among their ranks are those who come boldly forward into the full glare of public life; and, conscious of a genius for enterprise, to which an unmarried condition perhaps affords ampler scope, and which a local paper is ready to immortalize, become secretaries of ladies' societies, patronesses of flower shows, breeders of choice poultry, or even associates of floral leagues of the highest political importance. That such women should and do exist among us, the conscious salt-cellars of otherwise flavourless communities, is a fact for which we cannot be too thankful; and if Mrs. Thursby was not one of these aspiring spirits, with a yearning after "the mystical better things," which one of the above pursuits alone can adequately satisfy, it was her misfortune and not her fault.

It was her nature, as we have said, servilely to copy others. Her conversation was all that she could remember of what she had

heard from others, her present dinner party, as regards food, was a cross between the two last dinner parties she had been to. The dessert, however, conspicuous by its absence, conformed strictly to a type which she had seen in a London house in June.

Her dinner party gave her complete satisfaction, which was fortunate, for to the greater number of the eighteen or twenty people who had been indiscriminately herded together to form it, it was (with the exception of Mrs. Alwynn) a dreary or at best an uninteresting ordeal; while to four people among the number, the four who had met last on the church steps, it was a period of slow torture, endured with varying degrees of patience by each, from the two soups in the beginning to the peaches and grapes at the long delayed and bitter end.

Ruth, whose self-possession never wholly deserted her, had reached a depth of exhausted stupor, in which the mind is perfectly oblivious of the impression it is producing on

others. By an unceasing effort she listened, and answered, and smiled at intervals, and looked exceedingly distinguished in the pale red gown which she had put on to please her aunt ; but the colour of which only intensified the unnatural pallor of her complexion. The two men whom she sat between found her a disappointing companion, cold and formal in manner. At any other time she would have been humiliated and astonished to hear herself make such cut-and-dried remarks, such little trite observations. She was sitting opposite Charles, and she vaguely wondered once or twice, when she saw him making others laugh, and heard snatches of the flippant talk which was with him, as she knew now, a sort of defensive armour, how he could manage to produce it ; while Charles, half wild with a mad surging hope that would not be kept down by any word of Dare's, looked across at her as often as he dared, and wondered, in his turn, at the tranquil dignity, the quiet ordered smile of the face

which a few hours ago he had seen shaken with emotion.

Her eyes met his for a moment. Were they the same eyes that but now had met his, half blind with tears? He felt still the touch of those tears upon his hand. He hastily looked away again, and plunged head-long into an answer to something Mabel was saying to him on her favourite subject of evolution. All well-brought-up young ladies have a subject nowadays, which makes their conversation the delightful thing it is; and Mabel, of course, was not behind the fashion.

“Yes,” Ruth heard Charles reply, “I believe with you we go through many lives, each being a higher state than the last, and nearer perfection. So a man passes gradually through all the various grades of the nobility, soaring from the lowly honourable upwards into the duke, and thence by an easy transition into an angel. Courtesy titles, of course, present a difficulty to the more thoughtful; but, as I am sure you will have found, to be

thoughtful always implies difficulty of some kind."

"It does, indeed," said Mabel, puzzled but not a little flattered. "I sometimes think one reads too much; one longs so for deep books—Korans, and things. I must confess"—with a sigh—"I can't interest myself in the usual young lady's library that other girls read."

"Can't you?" replied Charles. "Now, I can. I study that department of literature whenever I have the chance, and I have generally found that the most interesting part of a young lady's library is to be found in that portion of the bookshelf which lies between the rows of books and the wall. Don't you think so, Lady Carmian?" (to the lady on his other side). "I assure you I have made the most delightful discoveries of this description. Cheap editions of Ouida, Balzac's works, yellow backs of the most advanced order, will, as a rule, reward the inquirer, who otherwise might have had to

content himself with "The Heir of Redcliffe," the Lily Series, and Miss Strickland's 'Queens of England.'"

Charles's last speech had been made in a momentary silence, and directly it was finished every woman, old and young, except Lady Carmian and Ruth, simultaneously raised a disclaiming voice, which by its vehemence at once showed what an unfounded assertion Charles had made. Lady Carmian, a handsome young married woman, only smiled languidly, and, turning the bracelet on her arm, told Charles he was a cynic, and that for her own part, when in robust health, she liked what little she read "strong;" but in illness, or when Lord Carmian had been unusually trying, she always fell back on a milk-and-water diet. Mrs. Thursby, however, felt that Charles had struck a blow at the sanctity of home life, and (for she was one of those persons whose single talent is that of giving a personal turn to any remark) began a long monotonous recital of the books

she allowed her own daughters to read, and how they were kept, which proved the extensive range of her library, not in bookshelves, but in a sliding bookstand, which contracted or expanded at will.

Long before she had finished, however, the conversation at the other end of the table had drifted away to the topic of the season among sporting men, namely, the poachers, who, since their raid on Dare's property, had kept fairly quiet, but who were sure to start afresh now that the pheasant shooting had begun; and from thence to the recent forgery case in America, which was exciting every day greater attention in England, especially since one of the accomplices had been arrested the day before in Birmingham station, and the principal offender, though still at large, was, according to the papers, being traced "by means of a clue in the possession of the police."

Charles knew how little that sentence meant, but he found that it required an effort

to listen unmoved to the various conjectures as to the whereabouts of Stephens, in which Ruth, as the conversation became general, also joined, volunteering a suggestion that perhaps he might be lurking somewhere in the Slumberleigh woods, which were certainly very lonely in places, and where, as she said, she had been very much alarmed by a tramp in the summer.

Mrs. Thursby, like an echo, began from the other end of the table something vague about girls being allowed to walk alone, her own daughters, etc., and so the long dinner wore itself out. Dare was the only one of the little party who had met on the church steps who succumbed entirely. Mr. Alwynn, who looked at him and Ruth with pathetic interest from time to time, made laudable efforts, but Dare made none. He had taken in to dinner the younger Thursby girl, a meek creature, without form and void, not yet out, but trembling in a high muslin, on the verge, who kept her large and burning

hands clutched together under the tablecloth, and whose conversation was upon bees. Dare pleaded a gun headache, and hardly spoke. His eyes constantly wandered to the other end of the table, where, far away on the opposite side, half hidden by ferns and flowers, he could catch a glimpse of Ruth. After dinner he did not come into the drawing-room, but went off to the smoking-room, where he paced by himself, up and down, up and down, writhing under the torment of a horrible suspense.

Outside the moon shone clear and high, making a long picturesque shadow of the great prosaic house, upon the wide gravel drive. Dare leaned against the window sill and looked out. "Would she give him up?" he asked himself. Would she believe this vile calumny? Would she give him up? And as he stood the Alwynns' brougham came with two gleaming eyes along the drive and drew up before the door. He resolved to learn his fate at once. There had been

no possibility of a word with Ruth on the church steps. Before he had known where he was, he and Charles had been walking up to the Hall together, Charles discoursing lengthily on the impropriety of wire fencing in a hunting country. But now he must and would see her. He rushed downstairs into the hall, where young Thursby was wrapping Ruth in her white furs, while Mr. Thursby senior was encasing Mrs. Alwynn in a species of glorified ulster of red plush which she had lately acquired. Dare hastily drew Mr. Alwynn aside and spoke a few words to him. Mr. Alwynn turned to his wife, after one rueful glance at his thin shoes, and said—

“I will walk up. It is a fine night, and quite dry under foot.”

“And a very pleasant party it has been,” said Mrs. Alwynn as she and Ruth drove away together, “though Mrs. Thursby has not such a knack with her table as some. Not that I did not think the chrysanthemums and white china swans were nice, very nice ;

but, you see, as I told her, I had just been to Stoke Moreton, where things were very different. And you looked very well, my dear, though not so bright and chatty as Mabel; and Mrs. Thursby said she only hoped your waist was natural. The idea! And I saw Lady Carmian notice your gown particularly, and I heard her ask who you were, and Mrs. Thursby said—so like her—you were their clergyman's niece. And so, my dear, I was not going to have you spoken of like that, and a little later on I just went and sat down by Lady Carmian, just went across the room you know, as if I wanted to be nearer the music, and we got talking, and she was rather silent at first, but presently, when I began to tell her all about you, and who you were, she became quite interested, and asked such funny questions, and laughed, and we had quite a nice talk."

And so Mrs. Alwynn chatted on, and Ruth, happily hearing nothing, leaned back in her corner, and wondered whether the

evening were ever going to end. Even when she had bidden her aunt "Good night," and having previously told her maid not to sit up for her, found herself alone in her own room at last, even then it seemed that this interminable day was not quite over. She was standing by the dim fire, trying to gather up sufficient energy to undress, when a quiet step came cautiously along the passage, followed by a low tap at her door. She opened it noiselessly, and found Mr. Alwynn standing without.

"Ruth," he said, "Dare has walked up with me. He is in the most dreadful state. I am sure I don't know what to think. He has said nothing further to me, but he is bent on seeing you for a moment. It's very late, but still—could you? He's in the drawing-room now. My poor child, how ill you look! Shall I tell him you are too tired to-night to see any one?"

"I would rather see him," said Ruth, her voice trembling a little, and they went down-

stairs together. In the hall she hesitated a moment. She was going to learn her fate. Had her release come? Had it come at the eleventh hour? Her uncle looked at her with kind compassionate eyes, and hers fell before his as she thought how different her suspense was to what he imagined. Suddenly, and such demonstrations were very rare with her, she put her arms round his neck, and pressed her cheek against his.

“Oh, Uncle John, Uncle John!” she gasped, “it is not what you think.”

“I pray God it may not be what I suppose,” he said sadly, stroking her head. “One is too ready to think evil, I know. God forgive me if I have judged him harshly. But go in, my dear;” and he pushed her gently towards the drawing-room.

She went in and closed the door quietly behind her.

Dare was leaning against the mantelpiece, which was draped in Mrs. Alwynn’s best manner, with oriental hangings having bits

of glass woven in them. He was looking into the curtained fire, and did not turn when she entered. Even at that moment she noticed, as she went towards him, that his elbow had displaced the little family of china hares on a plush stand, which Mrs. Alwynn had lately added to her other treasures.

“I think you wished to see me,” she said as calmly as she could.

He faced suddenly round, his eyes wild, his face quivering, and, coming close up to her, caught her hand, and grasped it so tightly that the pain was almost more than she could bear.

“Are you going to give me up?” he asked hoarsely.

“I don’t know,” she said; “it depends on yourself, on what you are, and what you have been. You say she is not your wife?”

“I swear it.”

“You need not do so. Your word is enough.”

“I swear she is not my wife.”

“One question remains,” said Ruth firmly, a flame of colour mounting to her neck and face. “You say she is not your wife. Ought you to make her so?”

“No,” said Dare passionately. “I owe her nothing. She has no claim upon me. I swear——”

“Don’t swear. I said your word was enough.”

But Dare preferred to embellish his speech with divers weighty expressions, feeling that a simple affirmation would never carry so much conviction to his own mind, or consequently to another, as an oath.

A momentary silence followed.

“You believe what I say, Ruth?”

“Yes,” with an effort.

“And you won’t give me up because evil is spoken against me?”

“No.”

“And all is the same as before between us?”

“Yes.”

Dare burst into a torrent of gratitude, but she broke suddenly away from him, and went swiftly upstairs again to her own room.

The release had not come. She laid her head down upon the table, and Hope, which had ventured back to her for one moment, took his lamp and went quite away, leaving the world very dark.

There are turning points in life when a natural instinct is a surer guide than noble motive or high aspiration, and consequently the more thoughtful and introspective nature will sometimes fall just where a commonplace one would have passed in safety. Ruth had acted for the best. When for the first time in her life she had been brought into close contact with a life spent for others, its beauty had appealed to her with irresistible force, and she had willingly sacrificed herself to an ideal life of devotion to others.

“ But we are punished for our purest deeds,
And chasten'd for our holiest thoughts.”

And she saw now that if she had obeyed

that simple law of human nature which forbids a marriage in which love is not the primary consideration, if she had followed that simple humble path, she would never have reached the arid wilderness towards which her own guidance had led her.

For her wilful self-sacrifice had suddenly paled and dwindled down before her eyes into a hideous mistake—a mistake which yet had its roots so firmly knit into the past, that it was hopeless to think of pulling it up now. To abide by a mistake is sometimes all that an impetuous youth leaves an honourable middle age to do. Poor middle age, with its clear vision, that might do and be so much if it were not for the heavy burdens, grievous to be borne, which youth has bound upon its shoulders.

And worse than the dreary weight of personal unhappiness, harder to bear than the pang of disappointed love, was the aching sense of failure, of having misunderstood God's intention, and broken the purpose of

her life. For some natures the cup of life holds no bitterer drop than this.

Ruth dimly saw the future, the future which she had chosen, stretching out waste and barren before her. The dry air of the desert was on her face. Her feet were already on its sandy verge. And the iron of a great despair entered into her soul.

CHAPTER IX.

DARE left Slumberleigh Hall early the following morning, and drove up to the Rectory on his way to Vandon. After being closeted with Mr. Alwynn in the study for a short time, they both came out and drove away together. Ruth, invisible in her own room with a headache, her only means of defence against Mrs. Alwynn's society, heard the coming and the going, and was not far wrong in her surmise that Dare had come to beg Mr. Alwynn to accompany him to Vandon, being afraid to face alone the mysterious enemy intrenched there.

No conversation was possible in the dog-cart, with the groom on the back seat thirsting to hear any particulars of the news which

had spread like wildfire from Vandon throughout the whole village the previous afternoon, and which was already miraculously flying from house to house in Slumberleigh this morning, as things discreditable do fly among a Christian population, which perhaps "thinks no evil," but repeats it nevertheless.

There was not a servant in Dare's modest establishment who was not on the look out for him on his return. The gardener happened to be tying up a plant near the front door; the housemaids were watching unobserved from an upper casement; the portly form of Mrs. Smith, the housekeeper, was seen to glide from one of the unused bedroom windows; the butler must have been waiting in the hall, so prompt was his appearance when the dog-cart drew up before the door.

Another pair of keen black eyes was watching too, peering out through the chinks between the lowered Venetian blinds in the drawing-room; was observing Dare intently

as he got out, and then resting anxiously on his companion. Then the owner of the eyes slipped away from the window, and went back noiselessly to the fire.

Dare ordered the dog-cart to remain at the door, flung down his hat on the hall table, and, turning to the servant who was busying himself in folding his coat, said sharply—

“Where is the—the person who arrived here yesterday?”

The man replied that “she” was in the drawing-room. The drawing-room opened into the hall. Dare led the way, suppressed fury in his face, looking back to see whether Mr. Alwynn was following him. The two men went in together, and shut the door.

The enemy was intrenched and prepared for action.

Mrs. Dare, as we must perforce call her for lack of any other designation rather than for any right of hers to the title, was seated on a yellow brocade ottoman, drawn

up beside a roaring fire, her two smart little feet resting on the edge of the low brass fender, and a small work-table at her side, on which an elaborate medley of silks and wools was displayed. Her attitude was that of a person at home, aggressively at home. She was in the act of threading a needle when Dare and Mr. Alwynn came in, and she put down her work at once, carefully replacing the needle in safety, as she rose to receive them, and held out her hand, with a manner the assurance of which, if both men had not been too much frightened to notice it, was a little overdone.

Dare disregarded her gesture of welcome, and she sat down again, and returned to her work, with a laugh that was also a little overdone.

“What do you mean by coming here?” he said, his voice hoarse with a furious anger, which the sight of her seemed to have increased a hundredfold.

“Because it is my proper place,” she

replied, tossing her head, and drawing out a long thread of green silk; "because I have a right to come."

"You lie!" said Dare fiercely, showing his teeth.

"Lord, Alfred!" said Mrs. Dare contemptuously, "don't make a scene before strangers. We've had our tiffs before now, and shall have again, I suppose. It's the natur' of married people to fall out; but there's no call to carry on before friends. Push up that lounge nearer the fire. Won't the other gentleman," turning to Mr. Alwynn, "come and warm himself? I'm sure it's cold enough."

Mr. Alwynn, who was a man of peace, devoutly wished he were at home again in his own study.

"It is a cold morning," he said; "but we are not here to discuss the weather."

He stopped short. He had been hurried here so much against his will, and so entirely without an explanation, that he was not quite

sure what he had come to discuss, or how he could best support his friend.

“What do you want?” said Dare, in the same suppressed voice, without looking at her.

“My rights,” she said incisively; “and, what’s more, I mean to have ’em. I’ve not come over from America for nothing, I can tell you that; and I’ve not come on a visit neither. I’ve come to stay.”

“What are these rights you talk of?” asked Mr. Alwynn, signing to Dare to restrain himself.

“As his wife, sir. I am his wife, as I can prove. I didn’t come without my lines to show. I didn’t come on a speculation, to see if he’d a fancy to have me back. No, afore I set my foot down anywheres I look to see as it’s solid walking.”

“Show your proof,” said Mr. Alwynn.

The woman ostentatiously got out a red morocco letter case, and produced a paper which she handed to Mr. Alwynn.

It was an authorized copy of a marriage register, drawn out in the usual manner, between Alfred Dare, bachelor, English subject, and Ellen, widow of the late Jaspar Carroll, of Neosho City, Kansas, U.S.A. The marriage was dated seven years back.

The names of Dare and Carroll swam before Mr. Alwynn's eyes. He glanced at the paper, but he could not read it.

"Is this a forgery, Dare?" he asked, holding it towards him.

"No," said Dare, without looking at it; "it is right. But that is not all. Now," turning to the woman, who was watching him triumphantly, "show the other paper—the divorce."

"I made inquiries about that," she replied composedly. "I wasn't going to be fooled by that 'ere, so I made inquiries from one as knows. The divorce is all very well in America; but it don't count in England."

Dare's face turned livid. Mr. Alwynn's flushed a deep red. He sat with his eyes on

the ground, the paper in his hand trembling a little. Indignation against Dare, pity for him, anxiety not to judge him harshly, struggled for precedence in his kind heart, still beating tumultuously with the shock of Dare's first admission. He felt rather than saw him take the paper out of his hand.

"I shall keep this," Dare said, putting it in his pocket-book ; and then, turning to the woman again, he said, with an oath, "Will you go, or will you wait till you are turned out?"

"I'll wait," she replied undauntedly. "I like the place well enough."

She laughed and took up her work, and after looking at her for a moment, he flung out of the room, followed by Mr. Alwynn. The defeat was complete ; nay, it was a rout.

The dog-cart was still standing at the door. The butler was talking to the groom ; the gardener was training some new shoots of ivy against the stone balustrade.

Dare caught up his hat and gloves, and ordered that his portmanteau, which had been taken into the hall, should be put back into the dog-cart. As it was being carried down he looked at his watch.

“I can catch the midday express for London,” he said. “I can do it easily.”

Mr. Alwynn made no reply.

“Get in,” continued Dare feverishly; “the portmanteau is in.”

“I think I will walk home,” said Mr. Alwynn slowly. It gave him excruciating pain to say anything so severe as this; but he got out the words nevertheless.

Dare looked at him in astonishment.

“Get in,” he said again quickly. “I must speak to you. I will drive you home. I have something to say.”

Mr. Alwynn never refused to hear what any one had to say. He went slowly down the steps, and got into the cart, looking straight in front of him, as his custom was when disturbed in mind. Dare followed.

“ I shall not want you, James,” he said to the groom, his foot on the step.

At this moment the form of Mrs. Smith, the housekeeper, appeared through the hall door, clothed in all the awful majesty of an upper servant whose dignity has been outraged.

“ Sir,” she said, in a clear not to say a high voice, “ asking your pardon, sir, but am I, or am I not, to take my orders from—— ”

Goaded to frenzy, Dare poured forth a volley of horrible oaths, French and English, and seizing up the reins drove off at a furious rate.

The servants remained standing about the steps, watching the dog-cart whirl rapidly away.

“ He’s been to church with her,” said the gardener at last. “ I said all along she’d never have come, unless she had her lines to show. I han’t cut them white grapes she ordered yet ; but I may as well go and do it.”

“ Well,” said Mrs. Smith, “ grapes or no

grapes, I'll never give up the keys of the linen cupboards to the likes of her, and I'm not going to have any one poking about among my china. I've not been here twenty years to be asked for my lists in that way, and the winter curtains ordered out unbeknownst to me ;" and Mrs. Smith retreated to the fastnesses of the housekeeper's room, whither even the audacious enemy had not yet ventured to follow her.

Meanwhile, Mr. Alwynn and Dare drove at moderated speed along the road to Slumberleigh. For some time neither spoke.

"I beg your pardon," said Dare at last. "I lost my head. I became enraged. Before a clergyman and a lady, I know well, it is not permitted to swear."

"I can overlook that," said Mr. Alwynn ; "but," turning very red again, "other things I can't."

Dare began to flourish his whip, and become excited again.

"I will tell you all," he said with effusion

—“every word. You have a kind heart. I will confide in you.”

“I don't want confidences,” said Mr. Alwynn. “I want straightforward answers to a few simple questions.”

“I will give them, these answers. I keep nothing back from a friend.”

“Then, first. Did you marry that woman?”

“Yes,” said Dare, shrugging his shoulders. “I married her, and often afterwards, almost at once, I regretted it; but *que voulez-vous*, I was young. I had no experience. I was but twenty-one.”

Mr. Alwynn stared at him in astonishment at the ease with which [the admission was made.

“How long afterwards was it that you were divorced from her?”

“Two years. Two long years.”

“For what reason?”

“Temper. Ah! what a temper. Also because I left her for one year. It was in

Kansas, and in Kansas it is very easy to marry, and also to be divorced."

"It is a disgraceful story," said Mr. Alwynn in great indignation.

"Disgraceful!" echoed Dare excitedly. "It is more than disgraceful. It is abominable. You do not know all yet. I will tell you. I was young; I was but a boy. I go to America when I am twenty-one, to travel, to see the world. I make acquaintances. I get into a bad set, what you call undesirable. I fall in love. I walk into a net. She was pretty, a pretty widow, all love, all soul; without friends. I protect her. I marry her. I have a little money. I have five thousand pounds. She knew that. She spent it. I was a fool. In a year it was gone." Dare's face had become white with rage. "And then she told me why she married me. I became enraged. There was a quarrel, and I left her. I had no more money. She left me alone, and a year after we are divorced. I never see her or hear of

her again. I return to Europe. I live by my voice in Paris. It is five years ago. I have bought my experience. I put it from my mind. And now"—his hands trembled with anger—"now that she thinks I have money again, now, when in some way she hears how I have come to Vandon, she dares to come back and say she is my wife."

"Dare," said Mr. Alwynn sternly, "what excuse have you for never mentioning this before—before you became engaged to Ruth?"

"What!" burst out Dare, "tell Ruth! Tell *her!* *Quelle idée.* I would never speak to her of what might give her pain. I would keep all from her that would cause her one moment's grief. Besides," he added conclusively, "it is not always well to talk of what has gone before. It is not for her happiness or mine. She has been, one sees it well, brought up since a young child very strictly. About some things she has fixed ideas. If I had told her of these things

which are passed away and gone, she might not"—and Dare looked gravely at Mr. Alwynn—"she might not think so well of me."

This view of the case was quite a new one to Mr. Alwynn. He looked back at Dare with hopeless perplexity in his pained eyes. To one who throughout life has regarded the supremacy of certain truths and principles of action as fixed and recognized as a matter of course by all the world, however imperfectly obeyed by individuals, the discovery comes as a shock, which is at the moment overwhelming, when these same truths and principles are seen to be entirely set aside, and their very existence ignored by others.

Where there is no common ground on which to meet, speech is unavailing and mere waste of time. It is like shouting to a person at a distance whom it is impossible to approach. If he notices anything it will only be that, for some reasons of your own, you are making a disagreeable noise.

As Mr. Alwynn looked back at Dare his anger died away within him, and a dull pain of deep disappointment and sense of sudden loneliness took its place. Dare and he seemed many miles apart. He felt that it would be of no use to say anything; and so, being a man, he held his peace.

Dare continued talking volubly of how he would get a lawyer's opinion at once in London; of his certainty that the American wife had no claim upon him; of how he would go over to America, if necessary, to establish the validity of his divorce; but Mr. Alwynn heard little or nothing of what he said. He was thinking of Ruth with distress and self-upbraiding. He had been much to blame of course.

Dare's mention of her name recalled his attention.

"She is all goodness," he was saying. "She believes in me. She has promised again that she will marry me—since yesterday. I trust her as myself; but it is a grief which as

little as possible must trouble her. You will not say anything to her till I come back, till I return with proof that I am free, as I told her? You will say nothing?"

Dare had pulled up at the bottom of the drive to the Rectory.

"Very well," said Mr. Alwynn absently, getting slowly out. He seemed much shaken.

"I will be back perhaps to-night, perhaps to-morrow morning," called Dare after him.

But Mr. Alwynn did not answer.

Dare's business took him a shorter time than he expected, and the same night found him hurrying back by the last train to Slumberleigh. It was a wild night. He had watched the evening close in lurid and stormy across the chimnied wastes of the black country, until the darkness covered all the land, and wiped out even the last memory of the dead day from the western sky.

Who, travelling alone at night, has not watched the glimmer of light through cottage

windows as he hurries past ; has not followed with keenest interest for one brief second the shadow of one who moves within, and, imagination picturing a mysterious universal happiness gathered round those twinkling points of light, has not experienced a strange feeling of homelessness and loneliness ?

Dare sat very still in the solitude of the empty railway carriage, and watched the little fleeting, mocking lights with a heavy heart. They meant *homes*, and he should never have a home now. Once he saw a door open in a squalid line of low houses, and the figure of a man with a child in his arms stand outlined in the doorway against the ruddy light within. Dare felt an unreasoning interest in that man. He found himself thinking of him as the train hurried on, wondering whether his wife was there waiting for him, and whether he had other children besides the one he was carrying. And all the time, through his idle musings, he could hear one sentence ringing in his ears, the last that his

lawyer had said to him after the long consultation of the afternoon.

“I am sorry to tell you that you are incontestably a married man.”

Everything repeated it. The hoofs of the cab horse that took him to the station had hammered it out remorselessly all the way. The engine had caught it up, and repeated it with unvarying, endless iteration. The newspapers were full of it. When Dare turned to them in desperation he saw it written in large letters across the sham columns. There was nothing but that any where. It was the news of the day. Sick at heart, and giddy from want of food, he sat crouched up in the corner of his empty carriage, and vaguely wished the train would journey on for ever and ever, nervously dreading the time when he should have to get out and collect his wandering faculties once more.

The old lawyer had been very kind to the agitated, incoherent young man whose settle-

ments he was already engaged in drawing up. At first, indeed, it had seemed that the marriage would not be legally binding—the marriage and divorce having both taken place in Kansas, where the marriage laws are particularly lax—and he seemed inclined to be hopeful; but as he informed himself about the particulars of the divorce, his face became grave and graver. When at last Dare produced the copy of the marriage register, he shook his head.

“ ‘Alfred Dare, bachelor and English subject,’ ” he said. “ That ‘English subject’ makes a difficulty to start with. You had never, I believe, any intention of acquiring what in law we call an American domicil? and although the technicalities of this subject are somewhat complicated, I am afraid that in your case there is little, if any, doubt. The English courts are very jealous of any interference by foreigners with the status of an Englishman; and though a divorce legally granted by a competent tribunal for an

adequate cause might—I will not say would—be held binding everywhere, there can be no doubt that where in the eyes of our law the cause is *not* adequate, our courts would refuse to recognize it. Have you a copy of the register of divorce as well?”

“No.”

“It is unfortunate; but no doubt you can remember the grounds on which it was granted.”

“Incompatibility of temper, and she said I had deserted her. I had left her the year before. We both agreed to separate.”

The lawyer shook his head.

“What’s incompatibility?” he said. “What’s a year’s absence? Nothing in the eyes of an Englishman. Nothing in the law of this country.”

“But the divorce was granted. It was legal. There was no question,” said Dare eagerly. “I was divorced in the same State as where I married. I had lived there more than a year, which was all that was

necessary. No difficulty was made at the time."

"No. Marriage is slipped into and slipped out of again with gratifying facility in America, and Kansas is notorious for the laxity prevailing there as regards marriage and divorce. It will be advisable to take the opinion of counsel on the matter, but I can hold out very little hope that your divorce would hold good, even in America. You see, you are entered as a British subject on the marriage register, and I imagine these words must have been omitted in the divorce proceedings, or some difficulty would have been raised at the time, unless your residence in Kansas made it unnecessary. But even supposing by American law you are free, that will be of no avail in England, for by the law of England, which alone concerns you, I regret to be obliged to tell you that you are incontestably a married man."

And in spite of frantic reiterations, of wild protests on the part of Dare, as if the com-

passionate old man represented the English law, and could mould it at his pleasure, the lawyer's last word remained in substance the same, though repeated many times.

“Whether you are at liberty or not to marry again in America, I am hardly prepared to say. I will look into the subject and let you know; but in England I regret to repeat that you are a married man.”

Dare groaned in body and in spirit as the words came back to him; and his thoughts, shrinking from the despair and misery at home, wandered aimlessly away, anywhere, hither and thither, afraid to go back, afraid to face again the desolation that sat so grim and stern in solitary possession.

The train arrived at Slumberleigh at last, and he got out, and shivered as the driving wind swept across the platform. It surprised him that there was a wind, although at every station down the line he had seen people straining against it. He gave up his ticket mechanically, and walked aimlessly away

into the darkness, turning with momentary curiosity to watch the train hurry on again, a pillar of fire by night, as it had been a pillar of smoke by day.

He passed the blinking station inn, forgetting that he had put up his dog-cart there to await his return, and hardly knowing what he did, took from long habit the turn for Vandon.

It was a wild night. The wind was driving the clouds across the moon at a tremendous rate, and sweeping at each gust flights of spectre leaves from the swaying trees. It caught him in the open of the bare high-road, and would not let him go. It opposed him, and buffeted him at every turn; but he held listlessly on his way. His feet took him, and he let them take him whither they would. They led him stumbling along the dim road, the dust of which was just visible like a grey mist before him, until he reached the bridge by the mill. There his feet stopped of their own accord, and he went and leaned against the low stone wall, looking down at the

sudden glimpses of pale hurried water and trembling reed.

The moon came out full and strong in temporary victory, and made black shadows behind the idle mill wheel and open mill race, and black shadows, black as death, under the bridge itself. Dare leaned over the wall to watch the mysterious water and shadow run beneath. As he looked, he saw the reflection of a man in the water watching him. He shook his fist savagely at it, and it shook its fist amid a wavering of broken light and shadow back at him. But it did not go away; it remained watching him. There was something strange and unfamiliar about the river to-night. It had a voice, too, which allured and repelled him—a voice at the sound of which the grim despair within him stirred ominously at first, and then began slowly to rise up gaunt and terrible; began to move stealthily, but with ever-increasing swiftness through the deserted chambers of his heart.

No strong abiding principle was there to do battle with the enemy. The minor feelings, sensibilities, emotions, amiable impulses, those courtiers of our prosperous days, had all forsaken him and fled. Dare's house in his hour of need was left unto him desolate.

And the river spoke in a guilty whisper, which yet the quarrel of the wind and the trees could not drown, of deep places further down, where people were never found, people who—— But there were shallows, too, he remembered, shallow places among the stones where the trout were. If anybody were drowned, Dare thought, gazing down at the pale shifting moon in the water, he would be found there, perhaps, or at any rate, his hat—he took his hat off, and held it tightly clenched in both his hands—his hat would tell the tale.

CHAPTER X.

CHARLES left Slumberleigh Hall a few hours later than Dare had done, but only to go back to Atherstone. He could not leave the neighbourhood. This burning fever of suspense would be unbearable at any other place, and in any case he must return by Saturday, the day on which he had promised to meet Raymond. His hand was really slightly injured, and he made the most of it. He kept it bound up, telegraphed to put off his next shooting engagement on the strength of it, and returned to Atherstone, even though he was aware that Lady Mary had arrived there the day before, on her way home to her house in London.

Ralph and Evelyn were accustomed to

sudden and erratic movements on the part of Charles, and to Molly he was a sort of archangel, who might arrive out of space at any moment, untrammelled by such details as distance, trains, time, or tide. But to Lady Mary his arrival was a significant fact, and his impatient refusal to have his hand investigated was another. Her cold grey eyes watched him narrowly, and, conscious that they did so, he kept out of her way as much as possible, and devoted himself to Molly more than ever.

He was sailing a mixed fleet of tin ducks and fishes across the tank by the tool shed, under her supervision, on the afternoon of the day he had arrived, when Ralph came to find him in great excitement. His keeper had just received private notice from the Thursbys' keeper that a raid on the part of a large gang of poachers was expected that night in the parts of the Slumberleigh coverts that had not yet been shot over, and which adjoined Ralph's own land.

“Whereabout will that be?” said Charles inattentively, drawing his magnet slowly in front of the fleet.

“Where?” said Ralph excitedly, “why round by the old house, round by Arleigh, of course. Thursby and I have turned down hundreds of pheasants there. Don’t you remember the hot corner by the coppice last year, below the house, where we got forty at one place, and how the wind took them as they came over?”

“Near *Arleigh*?” repeated Charles, with sudden interest.

“Uncle Charles,” interposed Molly reproachfully, “don’t let all the ducks stick on to the magnet like that. I told you not before. Make it go on in front.”

But Charles’s attention had wandered from the ducks.

“Yes,” continued Ralph, “near Arleigh. There was a gang of poachers there last year, and the keepers dared not attack them they were so strong, though they

were shooting right and left. But we'll be even with them this year. My men are going, and I shall go with them. You had better come too, and see the fun. The more the better."

"Why should I go?" said Charles listlessly. "Am I my brother's keeper, or even his under keeper? Molly, don't splash your uncle's wardrobe. Besides, I expect it is a false alarm or a blind."

"False alarm!" retorted Ralph. "I tell you Thursby's head keeper, Shaw—you know Shaw—saw a man himself only last night in the Arleigh coverts; came upon him suddenly, reconnoitering, of course, for to-night, and would have collared him too if the moon had not gone in, and when it came out again he was gone."

"Of course, and he will warn off the rest to-night."

"Not a bit of it. He never saw Shaw. Shaw takes his oath he didn't see him. I'll lay any odds they will beat those coverts

to-night, and, by George ! we'll nail some of them, if we have an ounce of luck."

Ralph's sporting instinct, to which even the fleeting vision of a chance weasel never appealed in vain, was now thoroughly aroused, and even Charles shared somewhat in his excitement.

How could he warn Raymond to lie close ? The more he thought of it the more impossible it seemed. It was already late in the afternoon. He could not, for Raymond's sake, risk being seen hanging about in the woods near Arleigh for no apparent reason, and Raymond was not expecting to see him in any case for two days to come, and would probably be impossible to find. He could do nothing but wait till the evening came, when he might have some opportunity, if the night were only dark enough, of helping or warning him.

The night was dark enough when it came ; but it was unreliable. A tearing autumn wind drove armies of clouds across the moon,

only to sweep them away again at a moment's notice. The wind itself rose and fell, dropped and struggled up again like a furious wounded animal.

“It will drop at midnight,” said Ralph to Charles below his breath, as they walked in the darkness along the road towards Slumberleigh; “and the moon will come out when the wind goes. I have told Evans and Brooks to go by the fields, and meet us at the cross roads in the low woods. It is a good night for us. We don't want light yet awhile; and the more row the wind kicks up till we are in our places ready for them the better.”

They walked on in silence, nearly missing in the dark the turn for Slumberleigh, where the road branched off to Vandon.

“We must be close upon the river by this time,” said Ralph; “but I can't hear it for the wind.”

The moon came out suddenly, and showed close on their right the mill blocking out the

sky, and the dark sweep of the river below, between pale wastes of flooded meadow. Upon the bridge, leaning over the wall, stood the figure of a man, bareheaded, with his hat in his hands.

He could not see his face, but something in his attitude struck Charles with a sudden chill.

“By ——,” he said below his breath, plucking Ralph’s arm, “there’s mischief going on there!”

Ralph did not hear, and in another moment Charles was thankful he had not done so.

The man raised himself a little, and the light fell full on his white desperate face. He was feeling up and down the edge of the stone parapet with his hands. As he moved, Charles recognized him, and drew in his breath sharply.

“Who is that?” said Ralph, his obtuser faculties perceiving the man for the first time.

Charles made no answer, but began to

whistle loudly one of the tunes of the day. He saw Dare give a guilty start, and catching at the wall for support, lean heavily against it as he looked wildly down the road, where the shadow of the trees had so far served to screen the approach of Charles and Ralph, who now emerged into the light, or at least would have done so, if the moonlight had not been snatched away at that moment.

“Hullo, Dare!” said Ralph cheerfully through the darkness. “I saw you. What are you up to, standing on the bridge at midnight, with the clock striking the hour, and all that sort of thing; and what have you done with your hat? Dropped it into the water?”

Dare muttered something unintelligible, and peered suspiciously through the darkness at Charles.

The moon made a feint of coming out again, which came to nothing, but which gave Charles a moment's glimpse of Dare's convulsed face. And the grave penetrating

glance that met his own (so fixedly told Dare in that moment that Charles had guessed his business on the bridge. Both men were glad of the returning darkness, and of the presence of Ralph.

“Come along with us,” the latter was saying to Dare, explaining the errand on which they were bound; and Dare, stupefied with past emotion, and careless of what he did or where he went, agreed.

It was less trouble to agree than to find a reason for refusing. He mechanically put on his hat, which he had unconsciously crushed together a few minutes before, in a dreadful dream from which even now he had not thoroughly awaked. And still walking like a man in a dream, he set off with the other two.

“There was suicide in his face,” thought Charles, as he swung along beside his brother. “He would have done it if we had not come up. Good God! can it be that it is all over between him and Ruth!” The blood rushed

to his head, and his heart began to beat wildly. He walked on in silence, seeing nothing, hearing nothing. Raymond and the poachers were alike forgotten.

It was not until a couple of men joined them silently in the woods, and others presently rose up out of the darkness to whisper directions and sink down again, that Charles came to himself with a start, and pulled himself together.

The party had halted. It was pitch dark, but he was conscious of something towering up above him, black and lowering. It was the ruined house of Arleigh.

“You and Brooks wait here, and keep well under the lea of the house,” said Ralph in a whisper. “If the moon comes out get into the shadow of the wall. Don’t shout till you’re sure of them. Shaw is down by the stables. Dare and Evans, you both come on with me. Shaw’s got two men at the end of the glade, but it’s the nearest coverts he is keenest on, because they can get a horse and

cart up close to take the game, and get off sharp if they are surprised. They did last year. Don't stir if you hear wheels. Wait for them." And with this parting injunction Ralph disappeared noiselessly with Dare and the other keeper in the direction of the stables.

Ralph had been right. The wind was dropping. It came and went fitfully, returning as if from great distances, and hurrying past weak and impotent, leaving sudden silences behind. Charles and his companion, a strapping young under keeper, evidently anxious to distinguish himself, waited, listening intently in the intervals of silence. The ivy on the old house shivered and whispered over their heads, and against one of the shuttered windows near the ground some climbing plant, torn loose by the wind, tapped incessantly, as if calling to the ghosts within. Charles glanced ever and anon at the sky. It showed no trace of clearing—as yet. He was getting cramped with standing. He

wished he had gone on to the stables. His anxiety for Raymond was sharpened by this long inaction. He seemed to have been standing for ages. What were the others doing? Not a sound reached him between the lengthening pauses of the wind. His companion stood drawn up motionless beside him; and so they waited, straining eye and ear into the darkness, conscious that others were waiting and listening also.

At last in the distance came a faint sound of wheels. Charles and Brooks instinctively drew a long breath; and Charles for the first time believed the alarm of poachers had not been a false one after all. It was the faintest possible sound of wheels. It would hardly have been heard at all but for some newly broken stones over which it passed. Then, without coming nearer, it stopped.

Charles listened intently. The wind had dropped down dead at last, and in the stillness he felt as if he could have heard a

mouse stir miles away. But all was quiet. There was no sound but the tremulous whisper of the ivy. The spray near the window had ceased its tapping against the shutter, and was listening too. Slowly the moon came out, and looked on.

And then suddenly, from the direction of the stables, came a roar of men's voices, a sound of bursting and crashing through the underwood, a thundering of heavy feet, followed by a whirring of frightened birds into the air. Brooks leaned forward breathing hard, and tightening his newly moistened grip on his heavy knotted stick.

Another moment and a man's figure darted across the open, followed by a chorus of shouts, and Charles's heart turned sick within him. It was Raymond.

"Cut him off at the gate, Charles," roared Ralph from behind; "down to the left."

There was not a second for reflection. As Brooks rushed headlong forwards, Charles hurriedly interposed his stick between his

legs, and, leaving him to flounder, started off in pursuit.

“Down to your left,” cried a chorus of voices from behind, as he shot out of the shadow of the house; for Charles was some way ahead of the rest owing to his position.

He could hear Raymond crashing in front, then he saw him again for a moment in a strip of open, running as a man does who runs for his life, with a furious recklessness of all obstacles. Charles saw he was making for the rocky thickets below the house, where the uneven ground and the bracken would give him a better chance. Did he remember the deep sunken wall which, broken down in places, still separated the wilderness of the garden from the wilderness outside? Charles was lean and active, and he soon out-distanced the other pursuers, but a man is hard to overtake who has such reasons for not being overtaken as Raymond, and do what he would he could not get near him. He

bore down to the left, but Raymond seemed to know it, and edging away again, held for the woods a little higher up. Charles tacked, and then as he ran he saw that Raymond was making with headlong blindness through the shrubbery direct for the deep sunk wall which bounded the Arleigh grounds. Would he see it in the uncertain light? He must be close upon it now. He was running like a madman. As Charles looked he saw him pitch suddenly forward out of sight, and heard a heavy fall. If Charles ever ran in his life it was then. As he swiftly let himself drop over the wall, lower than Raymond had taken it, he saw Ralph and Dare, followed by the others, come streaming down the slope in the moonlight, spreading as they came. It was now or never. He rushed up the fosse under cover of the wall, and almost stumbled over a prostrate figure, which was helplessly trying to raise itself on its hands and knees.

“Danvers, it’s me,” gasped Raymond,

turning a white tortured face feebly towards him. "Don't let those devils get me."

"Keep still," panted Charles, pushing him down among the bracken. "Lie close under the wall, and make for the house again when its quiet;" and darting back under cover of the wall, to the place where he had dropped over it, he found Dare almost upon him, and rushed headlong down the steep rocky descent, roaring at the top of his voice, and calling wildly to the others. The pursuit swept away through the wood, down the hill, and up the sandy ascent on the other side; swept almost over the top of Charles, who had flung himself down, dead-beat and gasping for breath, at the bottom of the gully.

He heard the last of the heavy lumbering feet crash past him, and heard the shouting die away before he stiffly dragged himself up again, and began to struggle painfully back up the slippery hill-side, down which he had rushed with a whole regiment of loose and hopping stones ten minutes before. He

regained the wall at last, and crept back to the place where he had left Raymond. It was with a sigh of relief that he found that he was gone. No doubt he had got into safety somewhere, perhaps in the cottage itself, where no one would dream of looking for him. He stumbled along among the loose stones by the wall till he came to the place by the gate where it was broken down, and clambering up, for the gate was locked, made his way back through the shrubberies, and desolate remains of garden, towards the point near the house where Raymond had first broken covert. As he came round a clump of bushes his heart gave a great leap, and then sank within him.

Three men were standing in the middle of the lawn in the moonlight, gathered round something on the ground. Seized by a horrible misgiving, he hurried towards them. At a little distance a dog-cart was being slowly led over the grass-grown drive towards the house.

“What is it? Any one hurt?” he asked hoarsely, joining the little group; but as he looked he needed no answer. One glance told him that the prostrate, unconscious figure on the ground, with blood slowly oozing from the open mouth, was Raymond Deyncourt.

“Great God! the man’s dying,” he said, dropping on his knees beside him.

“He’s all right, sir; he’ll come to,” said a little brisk man in a complacent, peremptory tone. “It’s only the young chap”—pointing to the bashful but gratified Brooks—“as crooked him over the head a bit sharper than needful. Here, Esp”—to the grinning Slumberleigh policeman, whom Charles now recognized, “tell the lad to bring up the ’orse and trap over the grass. We shall have a business to shift him as it is.”

“Is he a poacher?” asked Charles. “He doesn’t look like it.”

“Lord! no, sir,” replied the little man, and Charles’s heart went straight down into his

boots and stayed there. "I'm come down from Birmingham after him. He's no poacher. The police have wanted him very special for some time for the Francisco forgery case."

CHAPTER XI.

CHARLES watched the detective and the policeman hoist Raymond into the dog-cart and drive away, supporting him between them. No doubt it had been the wheels of that dog-cart which they had heard in the distance. Then he turned to Brooks.

"How is it you remained behind?" he asked sharply.

Brooks's face fell, and he explained that just as he was starting in the pursuit he had caught his legs on "Sir Chawles sir's" stick, and "barked hisself."

"I remember," said Charles. "You got in my way. You should look out where you are going. You may as well go and find my stick."

The poor victim of duplicity departed rather crestfallen, and at this moment Dare came up.

“We have lost him,” he said, wiping his forehead. “I don’t know what has become of him.”

“He doubled back here,” said Charles. “I followed, but you all went on. The police have got him. He was not a poacher after all, so they said.”

“Ah!” said Dare. “They have him? I regret it. He ran well. I could wish he had escaped. I was in the doorway of a stable watching a long time, and all in a moment he rushed past me out of the door. The policeman was seeking within when he came out, but though he touched me I could not stop him. And now,” with sudden weariness as his excitement evaporated, “all is then over for the night? And the others? Where are they? Do we wait for them here?”

“We should wait some time if we did,”

replied Charles. "Ralph is certain to go on to the other coverts. He has poachers on the brain. Probably the rumour that they were coming here was only a blind, and they are doing a good business somewhere else. I am going home. I have had enough enjoyment for one evening. I should advise you to do the same."

Dare winced, and did not answer, and Charles suddenly remembered that there were circumstances which might make it difficult for him to go back to Vandon.

They walked away together in silence. Dare, who had been wildly excited, was beginning to feel the reaction. He was becoming giddy and faint with exhaustion and want of food. He had eaten nothing all day. They had not gone far when Charles saw that he stumbled at every other step.

"Look out," he said once, as Dare stumbled more heavily than usual, "you'll twist your ankle on these loose stones if you're not more careful."

“It is so dark,” said Dare faintly.

The moon was shining brightly at the moment, and as Charles turned to look at him in surprise, Dare staggered forward, and would have collapsed altogether if he had not caught him by the arm.

“Sit down,” he said authoritatively. “Here, not on me, man, on the bank. Always sit down when you can’t stand. You have had too much excitement. I felt the same after my first Christmas tree. You will be better directly.”

Charles spoke lightly, but he knew from what he had seen that Dare must have passed a miserable day. He had never liked him. It was impossible that he should have done so. But even his more active dislike of the last few months gave way to pity for him now, and he felt almost ashamed at the thought that his own happiness was only to be built on the ruin of poor Dare’s.

He made him swallow the contents of his flask, and as Dare choked and gasped himself

back into the fuller possession of his faculties, and experienced the benign influences of whisky, entertained at first unawares, his heart, always easily touched, warmed to the owner of the silver flask, and of the strong arm that was supporting him with an unwillingness he little dreamed of. His momentary jealousy of Charles in the summer had long since been forgotten. He felt towards him now, as Charles helped him up, and he proceeded slowly on his arm, as a friend and a brother.

Charles, entirely unconscious of the noble sentiments which he and his flask had inspired, looked narrowly at his companion, as they neared the turn for Atherstone, and said with some anxiety—

“Where are you going to-night?”

Dare made no answer. He had no idea where he was going.

Charles hesitated. He could not let him walk back alone to Vandon—over the bridge. It was long past midnight. Dare's evident

inability to think where to turn touched him.

“Can I be of any use to you?” he said earnestly. “Is there anything I can do? Perhaps, at present, you would rather not go to Vandon.”

“No, no,” said Dare, shuddering; “I will not go there.”

Charles felt more certain than ever that it would not be safe to leave him to his own devices, and his anxiety not to lose sight of him in his present state gave a kindness to his manner of which he was hardly aware.

“Come back to Atherstone with me,” he said. “I will explain it to Ralph when he comes in. It will be all right.”

Dare accepted the proposition with gratitude. It relieved him for the moment from coming to any decision. He thanked Charles with effusion, and then—his natural impulsiveness quickened by the quantity of raw spirits he had swallowed, by this mark of sympathy, by the moonlight, by Heaven knows what

that loosens the facile tongue of unreticence—then suddenly, without a moment's preparation, he began to pour forth his troubles into Charles's astonished and reluctant ears. It was vain to try to stop him, and, after the first moment of instinctive recoil, Charles was seized by a burning curiosity to know all where he already knew so much, to put an end to this racking suspense.

“And that is not the worst,” said Dare, when he had recounted how the woman he had seen on the church steps was in very deed the wife she claimed to be. “That is not the worst. I love another. We are affianced. We are as one. I bring sorrow upon her I love.”

“She knows, then?” asked Charles hoarsely, hating himself for being such a hypocrite, but unable to refrain from putting a leading question.

“She knows that some one—a person—is at Vandon,” replied Dare, “who calls herself my wife, but I tell her it is not true, and she,

all goodness, all heavenly calm, she trusts me, and once again she promises to marry me if I am free, as I tell her, as I swear to her."

Charles listened in astonishment. He saw Dare was speaking the truth, but that Ruth could have given such a promise was difficult to believe. He did not know, what Dare even had not at all realized, that she had given it in the belief that Dare, from his answers to her questions, had never been married to the woman at all, in the belief that she was a mere adventuress seeking to make money out of him by threatening a scandalous libel, and without the faintest suspicion that she was his divorced wife, whether legally or illegally divorced.

Dare had understood the promise to depend on the legality or illegality of that divorce, and told Charles so in all good faith. With an extraordinary effort of reticence he withheld the name of his affianced, and pressing Charles's arm, begged him to ask no more. And Charles, half sorry, half con-

temptuous, wholly ashamed of having allowed such a confidence to be forced upon him, marched on in silence, now divided between mortal anxiety for Raymond and pity for Dare, now striving to keep down a certain climbing rapturous emotion which would not be suppressed.

One of the servants had waited up for their return, and after getting Dare something to eat, Charles took him up to the room which had been prepared for himself, and then feeling he had done his duty by him, and that he was safe for the present, went back to smoke by the smoking-room fire till Ralph came in, which was not till several hours later. When he did at last return it was in triumph. He was dead-beat, voiceless, and footsore; but a sense of glory sustained him. Four poachers had been taken red-handed in the coverts furthest from Arleigh. The rumour about Arleigh had, of course, been a blind; but he, Ralph, thank Heaven, was not to be taken in in

such a hurry as all that! He could look after his interests as well as most men. In short, he was full of glorification to the brim, and it was only after hearing a hoarse and full account of the whole transaction several times over that Charles was able in a pause for breath to tell him that he had offered Dare a bed, as he was quite tired out, and was some distance from Vandon.

“All right. Quite right,” said Ralph, unheeding; “but you and he missed the best part of the whole thing. Great Scot! when I saw them come dodging round under the Black Rock and——” He was off again; and Charles doubted afterwards as he fell asleep in his armchair by the fire, whether Ralph, already slumbering peacefully opposite him, had paid the least attention to what he had told him, and would not have entirely forgotten it in the morning. And, in fact, he did, and it was not until Evelyn desired with dignity on the morrow, that another time unsuitable persons should not be brought at

midnight to *her* house, that he remembered what had happened.

Charles, who was present, immediately took the blame upon himself, but Evelyn was not to be appeased. By this time the whole neighbourhood was ringing with the news of the arrival of a foreign wife at Vandon, and Evelyn felt that Dare's presence in her blue bedroom, with crockery and crewel-work curtains to match, compromised that apartment and herself, and that he must incontinently depart out of it. It was in vain that Ralph and even Charles expostulated. She remained unmoved. It was not, she said, as if she had been unwilling to receive him in the first instance, as a possible Roman Catholic, though many might have blamed her for that, and perhaps she *had* been to blame; but she had never, no, never, had any one to stay that anybody could say anything about. (This was a solemn fact which it was impossible to deny.) Ralph might remember her own cousin, Willie Best, and

she had always liked Willie, had never been asked again after that time—Ralph chuckled—that time he knew of. She was very sorry, and she quite understood all Charles meant, and she quite saw the force of what he said; but she could not allow people to stay in the house who had foreign wives that had been kept secret. What was poor Willie, who had only—Ralph need not laugh; there was nothing to laugh at—what was Willie to this? She must be consistent. She could see Charles was very angry with her, but she could not encourage what was wrong, even if he was angry. In short, Dare must go.

But when it came to the point, it was found that Dare could not go. Nothing short of force would have turned the unwelcome guest out of the bed in the blue bedroom, from which he made no attempt to rise, and on which he lay worn out and feverish, in a stupor of sheer mental and physical exhaustion.

Charles and Ralph went and looked at

him rather ruefully, with masculine helplessness, and the end of it was that Evelyn, in no wise softened, for she was a good woman, had to give way, and a doctor was sent for.

“Send for the man in D——. Don’t have the Slumberleigh man,” said Charles; “it will only make more talk;” and the doctor from D—— was accordingly sent for.

He did not arrive till the afternoon, and after he had seen Dare, and given him a sleeping draught, and had talked reassuringly of a mental shock and a feverish temperament, he apologized for his delay in coming. He had been kept, he said, drawing on his gloves as he spoke, by a very serious case in the police-station at D——. A man had been arrested on suspicion the previous night, and he seemed to have sustained some fatal internal injury. He ought to have been taken to the infirmary at once; but it had been thought he was only shamming when first arrested, and once in the police-station he could not be moved, and—the doctor took

up his hat—he would probably hardly outlive the day.

“By the way,” he added, turning at the door, “he asked over and over again while I was with him to see you or Mr. Danvers. I’m sure I forget which, but I promised him I would mention it. Nearly slipped my memory, all the same. He said one of you had known him in his better days, at—Oxford, was it?”

“What name?” asked Charles.

“Stephens,” replied the doctor. “He seemed to think you would remember him.”

“Stephens,” said Charles reflectively. “Stephens! I once had a valet of that name, and a very good one he was, who left my service rather abruptly, taking with him numerous portable memorials of myself, including a set of diamond studs. I endeavoured at the time to keep up my acquaintance with him; but he took measures effectually to close it. In fact, I have never heard of him from that day to this.”

“That’s the man, no doubt,” replied the doctor. “He has—er—a sort of look about him as if he might have been in a gentleman’s service once; seen-better-days-sort of look, you know.”

Charles said he should be at D—— in the course of the afternoon, and would make a point of looking in at the police-station; and a quarter of an hour later he was driving as hard as he could tear in Ralph’s high dog-cart along the road to D——. It was a six-mile drive, and he slackened as he reached the straggling suburbs of the little town, lying before him in a dim mist of fine rain and smoke.

Arrived at the dismal building which he knew to be the police-station, he was shown into a small room hung round with papers, where the warden was writing, and desired, with an authority so evidently accustomed to obedience that it invariably insured it, to see the prisoner. The prisoner he said, at whose arrest he had been present, had ex-

pressed a wish to see him through the doctor ; and as the warden demurred for the space of one second, Charles mentioned that he was a magistrate and justice of the peace, and sternly desired the confused official to show him the way at once. That functionary, awed by the stately manner which none knew better than Charles when to assume, led the way down a narrow stone passage, past numerous doors behind one of which a banging sound, accompanied by alcoholic oaths, suggested the presence of a free-born Briton chafing under restraint.

“ I had him put upstairs, sir,” said the warden humbly. “ We didn’t know when he came in as it was a case for the infirmary ; but seeing he was wanted for a big thing, and poorly in his ’ealth, I giv’ him one of the superior cells, with a mattress and piller complete.”

The man was evidently afraid that Charles had come as a magistrate to give him a reprimand of some kind, for, as he led the

way up a narrow stone staircase, he continued to expatiate on the luxury of the "mattress and piller," on the superiority of the cell, and how a nurse had been sent for at once from the infirmary, when, owing to his own shrewdness, the prisoner was found to be "a hospital case."

"The doctor wouldn't have him moved," he said, opening a closed door in a long passage full of doors, the rest of which stood open. "It's not reg'lar to have him in here, sir, I know; but the doctor wouldn't have him moved."

Charles passed through the door, and found himself in a narrow whitewashed cell, with a bed at one side, over which an old woman in the dress of a hospital nurse was bending.

"You can come out, Martha," said the warden. "The gentleman's come to see 'im."

As the old woman disappeared curtseying, he lingered to say in a whisper.

"Do you know him, sir?"

“Yes,” said Charles, looking fixedly at the figure on the bed. “I remember him. I knew him years ago, in his better days. I dare say he will have something to tell me.”

“If it should be anything as requires a witness,” continued the man—“he’s said a deal already, and it’s all down in proper form—but if there’s anything more——”

“I will let you know,” said Charles, looking towards the door, and the warden took the hint and went out of it, closing it quietly.

Charles crossed the little room, and sitting down in the crazy chair beside the bed, laid his hand gently on the listless hand lying palm upwards on the rough grey counterpane.

“Raymond,” he said ; “it is I, Danvers.”

The hand trembled a little, and made a faint attempt to clasp his. Charles took the cold lifeless hand, and held it in his strong gentle grasp.

“It is Danvers,” he said again.

The sick man turned his head slowly on the pillow, and looked fixedly at him. Death's own colour, which imitation can never imitate, nor ignorance mistake, was stamped upon that rigid face.

"I'm done for," he said with a faint smile, which touched the lips but did not reach the solemn far-reaching eyes.

Charles could not speak.

"You said I should turn up tails once too often," continued Raymond, with slow halting utterance, "and I've done it. I knew it was all up when I pitched over that damned wall on to the stones. I felt I'd killed myself."

"How did they get you?" said Charles.

"I don't know," replied Raymond, closing his eyes wearily, as if the subject had ceased to interest him. "I think I tried to creep along under the wall towards the place where it is broken down, when I fancy some one came over long after the others, and knocked me on the head."

Charles reflected with sudden wrath that

Brooks no doubt had been the man, and how much worse than useless his manœuvre with the stick had been.

“ I did my best,” he said humbly.

“ Yes,” replied the other ; “ and I would not have forgotten it either if—if there had been any time to remember it in ; but there won’t be. I’ve owned up,” he continued in a laboured whisper. “ Stephens has made a full confession. You’ll have it in all the papers to-morrow. And while I was at it I piled on some more I never did, which will get friends over the water out of trouble. Tom Flavell did me a good turn once, and he’s been in hiding these two years for—well, it don’t much matter what, but I’ve shoved that in with the rest, though it was never in my line—never. He’ll be able to go home now.”

“ Have not you confessed under your own name ? ”

“ No,” replied Raymond, with a curious remnant of that pride of race at which it is the undisputed privilege of low birth and a

plebeian temperament to sneer. "I won't have my own name dragged in. I dropped it years ago. I've confessed as Stephens, and I'll die and be buried as Stephens. I'm not going to disgrace the family."

There was a constrained silence of some minutes.

"Would you like to see your sister?" asked Charles; but Raymond shook his head with feeble decision.

"That man!" he said suddenly after a long pause. "That man in the doorway! How did he come there?"

"There is no man in the doorway," said Charles reassuringly. "There is no one here but me."

"Last night," continued Raymond, "last night in the stables. I watched him stand in the doorway."

Charles remembered how Dare had said Raymond had bolted out past him.

"That was Dare," he said; "the man who was to have been your brother-in-law."

“Ah!” said Raymond with evident unconcern. “I thought I’d seen him before. But he’s altered. He’s grown into a man. So he is to marry Ruth, is he?”

“Not now. He was to have done, but a divorced wife from America has turned up. She arrived at Vandon the day before yesterday. It seems the divorce in America does not hold in England.”

Raymond started.

“The old fox,” he said with feeble energy. “Tracked him out, has she? We used to call them fox and goose when she married him. By ——, she squeezed every dollar out of him before she let him go, and now she’s got him again, has she? She always was a cool hand. The old fox,” he continued with contempt and admiration in his voice. “She’s playing a bold game, and the luck is on her side, but she’s no more his wife than I am, and she knows that perfectly well.”

“Do you mean that the divorce was——?”

“Divorce, bosh!” said Raymond, work-

ing himself up into a state of feeble excitement frightful to see. "I tell you she was never married to him legally. She called herself a widow when she married Dare, but she had a husband living, Jaspar Carroll, serving his time at Baton Rouge jail, down South, all the time. He died there a year afterwards, but hardly a soul knows it to this day; and those that do don't care about bringing themselves into public notice. They'll prefer hush-money, if they find out what she's up to now. The prison register would prove it directly. But Dare will never find it out. How should he?"

Raymond sank back speechless and panting. A strong shudder passed over him, and his breath seemed to fail.

"It's coming," he whispered hoarsely. "That lying doctor said I had several hours, and I feel it coming already."

"Danvers," he continued hurriedly, "are you still there?" Then, as Charles bent over him, "Closer; bend down. I want to

see your face. Keep your own counsel about Dare. There's no one to tell if you don't. He's not fit for Ruth. You can marry her now. I saw what I saw. She'll take you. And some day—some day, when you have been married a long time, tell her I'm dead; and tell her—about Flavell, and how I owned to it—but that I did not do it. I never sank so low as that." His voice had dropped to a whisper which died imperceptibly away.

"I will tell her," said Charles; and Raymond turned his face to the wall, and spoke no more.

The struggle had passed, and for the moment death held aloof, but his shadow was there, lying heavy on the deepening twilight, and darkening all the little room. Raymond seemed to have sunk into a stupor, and at last Charles rose silently and went out.

He was dimly conscious of meeting some one in the passage, of answering some question in the negative, and then he found him-

self gathering up the reins, and driving through the narrow lighted streets of D—— in the dusk, and so away down the long flat high-road to Atherstone.

A white mist had risen up to meet the darkness, and had shrouded all the land. In sweeps and curves along the fields a gleaming pallor lay of heavy dew upon the grass, and on the road the long lines of dim water in the ruts reflected the dim sky.

Carts lumbered past him in the darkness once or twice, the men in them peering back at his reckless driving ; and once a carriage with lamps came swiftly up the road towards him, and passed him with a flash, grazing his wheel. But he took no heed. Drive as quickly as he would through mist and darkness, a voice followed him, the voice of a pursuing devil close at his ear, whispering in the halting, feeble utterance of a dying man—

“Keep your own counsel about Dare. There is no one to tell if you don't.”

Charles shivered and set his teeth. High

on the hill among the trees the distant lights of Slumberleigh shone like glowworms through the mist. He looked at them with wild eyes. She was there, the woman who loved him, and whom he passionately loved. He could stretch forth his hand to take her if he would. His breath came hard and thick. A hand seemed clutching and tearing at his heart. And close at his ear the whisper came—

“There is no one to tell if you don’t.”

CHAPTER XII.

IT was close on dressing time when Charles came into the drawing-room, where Evelyn and Molly were building castles on the hearthrug in the ruddy firelight. After changing his damp clothes, he had gone to the smoking-room, but he had found Dare sitting there in a vast dressing-gown of Ralph's, in a state of such utter dejection, with his head in his hands, that he had silently retreated again before he had been perceived. He did not want to see Dare just now. He wished he were not in the house.

Quite oblivious of the fact that he was not in Evelyn's good graces, he went and sat by the drawing-room fire, and absently watched

Molly playing with her bricks. Presently, when the dressing-bell rang, Evelyn went away to dress, and Molly, tired of her castles, suggested that she might sit on his knee.

He let her climb up and wriggle and finally settle herself as it seemed good to her, but he did not speak; and so they sat in the firelight together, Molly's hand lovingly stroking his black velvet coat. But her talents lay in conversation, not in silence, and she soon broke it.

"You do look beautiful to-night, Uncle Charles."

"Do I?" without elation.

"Do you know, Uncle Charles, Ninny's sister, with the wart on her cheek, has been to tea? She's in the nursery now. Ninny says she's to have a bite of supper before she goes."

"You don't say so."

"And we had buttered toast to tea, and she said you were the most splendid gentleman she ever saw."

Charles did not answer. He did not even seem to have heard this interesting tribute to his personal appearance. Molly felt that something must be gravely amiss, and laying her soft cheek against his she whispered confidentially—

“Uncle Charles, are you uncomferable inside?”

There was a long pause.

“Yes, Molly,” at last, pressing her to him.

“Is it there?” said Molly sympathetically, laying her hand on the front portion of her amber sash.

“No, Molly; I only wish it were.”

“It’s not the little green pears, then,” said Molly with a sigh of experience, “because it’s always *just* there, *always*, with them. It was again yesterday. They’re nasty little pears”—with a touch of personal resentment.

Uncle Charles smiled at last, but it was not quite his usual smile.

“Miss Molly,” said a voice from the door, “your mamma has sent for you.”

“It’s not bedtime yet.”

“Your mamma says you are to come at once,” was the reply.

Molly, knowing from experience that an appeal to Charles was useless on these occasions, wriggled down from her perch rather reluctantly, and bade her uncle “Good night.”

“Perhaps it will be better to-morrow,” she said consolingly.

“Perhaps,” he said, nodding at her; and he took her little head between his hands, and kissed her. She rubbed his kiss off again, and walked gravely away. She could not be merry and ride in triumph upstairs on kind curveting Sarah’s willing back, while her friend was “uncomferable inside.” There was no galloping down the passage that night, no pleasantries with the sponge in Molly’s tub, no last caperings in light attire. Molly went silently to bed, and as on a previous occasion when in great anxiety about Vic, who had thoughtlessly gone out in the twilight for a stroll, and had forgotten

the lapse of time, she added a whispered clause to her little petitions which the ear of "Ninny" failed to catch.

Charles recognized, in the way Evelyn had taken Molly from him, that she was not yet appeased. It should be remembered, in order to do her justice, that a good woman's means of showing a proper resentment are so straitened and circumscribed by her conscience that she is obliged, from actual want of material, to resort occasionally to little acts of domestic tyranny, small in themselves as midge bites, but, fortunately for the cause of virtue, equally exasperating. Indeed, it is improbable that any really good woman would ever so far forget herself as to lose her temper, if she were once thoroughly aware how much more irritating in the long run a judicious course of those small persecutions may be made, which the tenderest conscience need not scruple to inflict.

Charles was unreasonably annoyed at having Molly taken from him. As he sat

by the fire alone, tired in mind and body, a hovering sense of cold, and an intense weariness of life took him; and a great longing came over him like a thirst—a longing for a little of the personal happiness which seemed to be the common lot of so many round him; for a home where he had now only a house; for love and warmth and companionship, and possibly some day a little Molly of his own, who would not be taken from him at the caprice of another.

The only barrier to the fulfilment of such a dream had been a conscientious scruple of Ruth's, to which at the time he had urged upon her that she did wrong to yield. That barrier was now broken down; but it ought never to have existed. Ruth and he belonged to each other by divine law, and she had no right to give herself to any one else to satisfy her own conscience. And now—all would be well. She was absolved from her promise. She had been wrong to persist in keeping it in his opinion; but at any rate

she was honourably released from it now. And she would marry him.

And that *second* promise, which she had made to Dare, that she would still marry him if he were free to marry?

Charles moved impatiently in his chair. From what exaggerated sense of duty she had made that promise he knew not; but he would save her from the effects of her own perverted judgment. He knew what Ruth's word meant, since he had tried to make her break it. He knew that she had promised to marry Dare if he were free. He knew that, having made that promise, she would keep it.

It would be mere sentimental folly on his part to say the word that would set Dare free. Even if the American woman were not his wife in the eye of the law, she had a moral claim upon him. The possibility of Ruth's still marrying Dare was too hideous to be thought of. If her judgment was so entirely perverted by a morbid conscientious fear of following her own inclination that she

could actually give Dare that promise, directly after the arrival of the adventuress, Charles would take the decision out of her hands. As she could not judge fairly for herself, he would judge for her, and save her from herself.

For her sake as much as for his own he resolved to say nothing. He had only to keep silence.

"There's no one to tell if you don't."

The door opened, and Charles gave a start as Dare came into the room. He was taken aback by the sudden rush of hatred that surged up within him at his appearance. It angered and shamed him, and Dare, much shattered but feebly cordial, found him very irresponsive and silent for the few minutes that remained before the dinner bell rang and the others came down.

It was not a pleasant meal. If Dare had been a shade less ill, he must have noticed the marked coldness of Evelyn's manner, and how Ralph good-naturedly endeavoured to

make up for it by double helpings of soup and fish, which he was quite unable to eat. Charles and Lady Mary were never congenial spirits at the best of times, and to-night was not the best. That lady, after feebly provoking the attack as usual, sustained some crushing defeats, mainly couched in the language of Scripture, which was, as she felt with Christian indignation, turning her own favourite weapon against herself, as possibly Charles thought she deserved, for putting such a weapon to so despicable a use.

“I really don’t know,” she said tremulously afterwards in the drawing-room, “what Charles will come to if he goes on like this. I don’t mind,” venomously, “his tone towards myself. That I do not regard; but his entire want of reverence for the Church and apostolic succession; his profane remarks about vestments; in short, his entire attitude towards religion gives me the gravest anxiety.”

In the dining-room the conversation

flagged, and Charles was beginning to wonder whether he could make some excuse and bolt, when a servant came in with a note for him. It was from the doctor in D——, and ran as follows:—

“DEAR SIR,

“I have just seen (6.30 p.m.) Stephens again. I found him in a state of the wildest excitement, and he implored me to send you word that he wanted to see you again. He seemed so sure that you would go if you knew he wished it, that I have commissioned Sergeant Brown’s boy to take this. He wished me to say ‘there was something more.’ If there is any further confession he desires to make, he has not much time to do it in. I did not expect he would have lasted till now. As it is, he is going fast. Indeed, I hardly think you will be in time to see him; but I promised to give you this message.

“Yours faithfully,

“R. WHITE.”

“I must go,” Charles said, throwing the note across to Ralph; “give the boy half a crown, will you? I suppose I may take Othello?” and before Ralph had mastered the contents of the note, and begun to fumble for a half-crown, Charles was saddling Othello himself, without waiting for the groom, and in a few minutes was clattering over the stones out of the yard.

There was just light enough to ride by, and he rode hard. What was it; what could it be that Raymond had still to tell him? He felt certain it had something to do with Ruth, and probably Dare. Should he arrive in time to hear it? There at last were the lights of D—— in front of him. Should he arrive in time? As he pulled up his steaming horse before the police-station his heart misgave him.

“Am I too late?” he asked of the man who came to the door.

He looked bewildered.

“Stephens? Is he dead?”

The man shook his head.

“They say he’s a’most gone.”

Charles threw the rein to him, and hurried indoors. He met some one coming out, the doctor probably he thought afterwards, who took him upstairs, and sent away the old woman who was in attendance.

“I can’t do anything more,” he said, opening the door for him. “Wanted elsewhere. Very good of you, I’m sure. Not much use, I’m afraid. Good night. I’ll tell the old woman to be about.”

A dim lamp was burning on the little corner cupboard near the door, and as Charles bent over the bed, he saw in a moment, even by that pale light, that he was too late.

Life was still there, if that feeble tossing could be called life; but all else was gone. Raymond’s feet were already on the boundary of the land where all things are forgotten; and at the sight of that dim country, memory, affrighted, had slipped away and left him.

Was it possible to recall him to himself even yet?

“Raymond,” he said, in a low distinct voice, “what is it you wish to say? Tell me quickly what it is.”

But the long agony of farewell between body and soul had begun, and the eyes that seemed to meet his with momentary recognition, only looked at him in anguish, seeking help and finding none, and wandered away again, vainly searching for that which was not to be found.

Charles could do nothing, but he had not the heart to leave him to struggle with death entirely alone, and so, in awed and helpless compassion, he sat by him through one long hour after another, waiting for the end which still delayed, his eyes wandering ever and anon from the bed to the high grated window, or idly spelling out the different names and disparaging remarks that previous occupants had scratched and scrawled over the white-washed walls.

And so the hours passed.

At last, all in a moment, the struggle ceased. The dying man vainly tried to raise himself to meet what was coming, and Charles put his strong arm round him and held him up. He knew that consciousness sometimes returns at the moment of death.

“Raymond,” he whispered earnestly. “Raymond.”

A tremor passed over the face. The lips moved. The homeless, lingering soul came back, and looked for the last time fixedly and searchingly at him out of the dying eyes, and then—seeing no help for it—went hurriedly on its way, leaving the lips parted to speak, leaving the deserted eyes vacant and terrible, until after a time Charles closed them.

He had gone without speaking. Whatever he had wished to say would remain unsaid for ever. Charles laid him down, and stood a long time looking at the set face. The likeness to Raymond seemed to be fading away under the touch of the Mighty Hand,

but the look of Ruth, the better look, remained.

At last he turned away and went out, stopping to wake the old nurse, heavily asleep in the passage. His horse was brought round for him from somewhere, and he mounted and rode away. He had no idea how long he had been there. It must have been many hours, but he had quite lost sight of time. It was still dark, but the morning could not be far off. He rode mechanically his horse, which knew the road, taking him at its own pace. The night was cold, but he did not feel it. All power of feeling anything seemed dried up within him. The last two days and nights of suspense and high strung emotion seemed to have left him incapable of any further sensation at present beyond that of an intense fatigue.

He rode slowly, and put up his horse with careful absence of mind. The eastern horizon was already growing pale and distinct as he found his way indoors through the

drawing-room window, the shutter of which had been left unhinged for him by Ralph, according to custom when either of them was out late. He went noiselessly up to his room, and sat down. After a time he started to find himself still sitting there; but he remained without stirring, too tired to move, his elbows on the table, his chin in his hands. He felt he could not sleep if he were to drag himself into bed. He might just as well stay where he was.

And as he sat watching the dawn his mind began to stir, to shake off its lethargy and stupor, to struggle into keener and keener consciousness.

There are times, often accompanying great physical prostration, when a veil seems to be lifted from our mental vision. As in the Mediterranean one may glance down suddenly on a calm day, and see in the blue depths with a strange surprise the seaweed and the rocks and the fretted sands below, so also in rare hours we see the hidden depths of the

soul, over which we have floated in heedless unconsciousness so long, and catch a glimpse of the hills and the valleys of those untravelled regions.

Charles sat very still with his chin in his hands. His mind did not work. It looked right down to the heart of things.

There is, perhaps, no time when mental vision is so clear, when the mind is so sane, as when death has come very near to us. There is a light which he brings with him, which he holds before the eyes of the dying, the stern light seldom seen, of reality, before which self-deception, and meanness, and that which maketh a lie, cower in their native deformity and slip away.

And death sheds at times a strange gleam from that same light upon the souls of those who stand within his shadow, and watch his kingdom coming. In an awful transfiguration, all things stand for what they are. Evil is seen to be evil, and good to be good. Right and wrong sunder more far apart,

and we cannot mistake them as we do at other times. The debateable land stretching between them—that favourite resort of undecided natures—disappears for a season, and offers no longer its false refuge. The mind is taken away from all artificial supports, and the knowledge comes home to the soul afresh, with strong conviction, that “truth is our only armour in all passages of life,” as with awed hearts we see it is the only armour in the hour of death, the only shield that we may bear away with us into the unknown country.

Charles shuddered involuntarily. His decision of the afternoon to keep secret what Raymond had told him was gradually but surely assuming a different aspect. What was it, after all, but a suppression of truth, a kind of lie? What was it but doing evil that good might come?

It was no use harping on the old string of consequences. He saw that he had resolved to commit a deliberate sin, to be false

to that great principle of life—right for the sake of right, truth for the love of truth—by which of late he had been trying to live. So far, it had not been difficult, for his nature was not one to do things by halves, but now——

Old voices out of the past, which he had thought long dead, rose out of forgotten graves to urge him on. What was he that he should stick at such a trifle? Why should a man with his past begin to split hairs?

And conscience said nothing, only pointed, only showed with a clearness that allowed of no mistake, that he had come to a place where two roads met.

Charles's heart suffered then "the nature of an insurrection." The old lawless powers that had once held sway, and had been forced back into servitude under the new rule of the last few years of responsibility and honour, broke loose, and spread like wildfire throughout the kingdom of his heart.

The struggle deepened to a battle fierce

and furious. His soul was rent with a frenzy of tumult, of victory and defeat ever changing sides, ever returning to the attack.

Can a kingdom divided against itself stand ?

He sat motionless, gazing with absent eyes in front of him.

And across the shock of battle, and above the turmoil of conflicting passions, Ruth's voice came to him. He saw the pale spiritual face, the deep eyes so full of love and anguish, and yet so steadfast with a great resolve. He heard again her last words, "I cannot do what is wrong, even for you."

He stretched out his hands suddenly.

"You would not, Ruth," he said half aloud ; "you would not. Neither will I do what I know to be wrong for you, so help me God ! not even for you."

The dawn was breaking, was breaking clear and cold, and infinitely far away ; was coming up through unfathomable depths and

distances, through gleaming caverns and fastnesses of light, like a new revelation fresh from God. But Charles did not see it, for his head was down on the table, and he was crying like a child.

CHAPTER XIII.

DARE was down early the following morning, much too early for the convenience of the housemaids, who were dusting the drawing-room when he appeared there. He was usually as late as any of the young and gilded unemployed who feel it incumbent on themselves to show by these public demonstrations their superiority to the rules and fixed hours of the working and thinking world, with whom, however, their fear of being identified is a groundless apprehension. But to-day Dare experienced a mournful satisfaction in being down so early. He felt the underlying pathos of such a marked departure from his usual habits. It was obvious that nothing but deep affliction or

cub-hunting could have been the cause, and the cub-hunting was over. The inference was not one that could be missed by the meanest capacity.

He took up the newspaper with a sigh, and settled himself in front of the blazing fire, which was still young and leaping, with the enthusiasm of dry sticks not quite gone out of it.

Charles heard Dare go down just as he finished dressing, for he was early too that morning. There was more than half an hour before breakfast time. He considered a moment, and then went downstairs. Some resolutions, once made, cannot be carried out too quickly.

As he passed through the hall he looked out. The mist of the night before had sought out every twig and leaflet, and had silvered it to meet the sun. The rime on the grass looked cool and tempting. Charles's head ached, and he went out for a moment and stood in the crisp still air. The rooks

were cawing high up. The face of the earth had not altered during the night. It shimmered and was glad, and smiled at his grave careworn face.

“Hallo!” called a voice; and Ralph’s head, with his hair sticking straight out on every side, was thrust out of a window. “I say, Charles, early bird you are!”

“Yes,” said Charles, looking up and leisurely going indoors again; “you are the first worm I have seen.”

He found Dare, as he expected, in the drawing-room, and proceeded at once to the business he had in hand.

“I am glad you are down early,” he said. “You are the very man I want.”

“Ah!” replied Dare, shaking his head, “when the heart is troubled there is no sleep, none. All the clocks are heard.”

“Possibly. I should not wonder if you heard another in the course of half an hour, which will mean breakfast. In the mean time——”

“I want no breakfast. A sole cup of——”

“In the mean time,” continued Charles, “I have some news for you.” And disregarding another interruption, he related as shortly as he could the story of Stephens’s recognition of him in the doorway, and the subsequent revelations in the prison concerning Dare’s marriage.

“Where is this man, this Stephens?” said Dare, jumping up. “I will go to him. I will hear from his own mouth. Where is he?”

“I don’t know,” replied Charles curtly. “It is a matter of opinion. He is dead.”

Dare looked bewildered, and then sank back with a gasp of disappointment into his chair.

Charles, whose temper was singularly irritable this morning, repeated with suppressed annoyance the greater part of what he had just said, and proved to Dare that the fact that Stephens was dead would in no way prevent the illegality of his marriage being proved.

When Dare had grasped the full significance of that fact he was quite overcome.

“Am I then,” he gasped—“is it true?—am I free—to marry?”

“Quite free.”

Dare burst into tears, and partially veiling with one hand the manly emotion that had overtaken him, he extended the other to Charles, who did not know what to do with it when he had got it, and dropped it as soon as he could. But Dare, like many people whose feelings are all on the surface, and who are rather proud of displaying them, was slow to notice what was passing in the minds of others.

He sprang to his feet, and began to pace rapidly up and down.

“I will go after breakfast—at once—immediately after breakfast, to Slumberleigh Rectory.”

“I suppose, in that case, Miss Deyncourt is the person whose name you would not mention the other day?”

“She is,” said Dare. “You are right. It is she. We are betrothed. I will fly to her after breakfast.”

“You know your own affairs best,” said Charles, whose temper had not been improved by the free display of Dare’s finer feelings, “but I am not sure you would not do well to fly to Vandon first. It is best to be off with the old love, I believe, before you are on with the new.”

“She must at once go away from Vandon,” said Dare, stopping short. “She is a scandal, the—the old one. But how to make her go away?”

It was in vain for Charles to repeat that Dare must turn her out. Dare had premonitory feelings that he was quite unequal to the task.

“I may tell her to go,” he said, raising his eyebrows. “I may be firm as the rock, but I know her well; she is more obstinate than me. She will not go.”

“She must,” said Charles with anger.

“Her presence compromises Miss Deyncourt. Can't you see that?”

Dare raised his eyebrows. A light seemed to break in on him.

“Any fool can see that,” said Charles, losing his temper.

Dare saw a great deal, many things beside that. He saw that if a friend, a trusted friend, were to manage her dismissal, it would be more easy for that friend than for one whose feelings at the moment might carry him away. In short, Charles was the friend who was evidently pointed out by Providence for that mission.

Charles considered a moment. He began to see that it would not be done without further delays and scandal unless he did it.

“She must and shall go at once, even if I have to do it,” he said at last, looking at Dare with unconcealed contempt. “It is not my affair, but I will go, and you will be so good as to put off the flying over to Slumberleigh till I come back. I shall not

return until she has left the house." And Charles marched out of the room, too indignant to trust himself a moment longer with the profusely grateful Dare.

"That man must go to-day," said Evelyn after breakfast to her husband, in the presence of Lady Mary and Charles. "While he was ill I overlooked his being in the house ; but I will not suffer him to remain now he is well."

"You remove him from all chances of improvement," said Charles, "if you take him away from Aunt Mary, who can snatch brands from the burning as we all know ; but I am going over to Vandon this morning, and if you wish it I will ask him if he would like me to order his dog-cart to come for him. I don't suppose he is very happy here, without so much as a tooth brush that he can call his own."

"You are going to Vandon ?" asked both ladies in one voice.

"Yes. I am going on purpose to dislodge

an impostor who has arrived there, who is actually believed by some people (who are not such exemplary Christians as ourselves, and ready to suppose the worst) to be his wife."

Lady Mary and Evelyn looked at each other in consternation, and Charles went off to see how Othello was after his night's work, and to order the dog-cart, Ralph calling after him in perfect good humour that "a fellow's brother got more out of a fellow's horses than a fellow did himself."

Dare waylaid Charles on his return from the stables, and linked his arm in his. He felt the most enthusiastic admiration for the tall reserved Englishman who had done him such signal service. He longed for an opportunity of showing his gratitude to him. It was perhaps just as well that he was not aware how very differently Charles regarded himself.

"You are just going?" Dare asked.

"In five minutes."

Charles let his arm hang straight down, but Dare kept it.

“Tell me, my friend, one thing.” Dare had evidently been turning over something in his mind. “This poor unfortunate, this Stephens, why did he not tell you all this the *first* time you went to see him in the afternoon?”

“He did.”

“What?” said Dare, looking hard at him. “He *did*, and you only tell me this morning! You let me go all through the night first. Why was this?”

Charles did not answer.

“I ask one thing more,” continued Dare. “Did you divine two nights ago, from what I said in a moment of confidence, that Miss Deyncourt was the—the——”

“Of course I did,” said Charles sharply. “You made it sufficiently obvious.”

“Ah!” said Dare. “Ah!” and he shut his eyes and nodded his head several times.

“Anything more you would like to know?”

asked Charles, inattentive and impatient, mainly occupied in trying to hide the nameless exasperation which invariably seized him when he looked at Dare, and to stifle the contemptuous voice which always whispered as he did so, "And you have given up Ruth to him—to *him!*"

"No, no, no," said Dare, shaking his head gently, and regarding him the while with infinite interest through his half-closed eyelids.

The dog-cart was coming round, and Charles hastily turned from him, and, getting in, drove quickly away. Whatever Dare said or did seemed to set his teeth on edge, and he lashed up the horse till he was out of sight of the house.

Dare, with arms picturesquely folded, stood looking after him with mixed feelings of emotion and admiration.

"One sees it well," he said to himself. "One sees now the reason of many things. He kept silent at first, but he was too good,

too noble. In the night he considered ; in the morning he told all. I wondered that he went to Vandon ; but he did it not for me. It was for her sake."

Dare's feelings were touched to the quick.

How beautiful ! how pathetic was this *dénouement* ! His former admiration for Charles was increased a thousandfold. *He also loved !* Ah ! (Dare felt he was becoming agitated). How sublime, how touching was his self-sacrifice in the cause of honour. He had been gradually working himself up to the highest pitch of pleasurable excitement and emotion ; and now, seeing Ralph the prosaic approaching, he fled precipitately into the house, caught up his hat and stick, hardly glancing at himself in the hall glass, and entirely forgetting his promise to Charles to remain at Atherstone till the latter returned from Vandon, followed the impulse of the moment, and struck across the fields in the direction of Slumberleigh.

Charles, meanwhile, drove on to Vandon.

The stable clock, still partially paralyzed from long disuse, was laboriously striking eleven as he drew up before the door. His resounding peal at the bell startled the household, and put the servants into a flutter of anxious expectation, while the sound made some one else, breakfasting late in the dining-room, pause with her cup midway to her lips and listen.

“There is a train which leaves Slumberleigh station for London, a little after twelve, is not there?” asked Charles with great distinctness of the butler as he entered the hall. He had observed as he came in that the dining-room door was ajar.

“There is, Sir Charles. Twelve fifteen.” replied the man, who recognized him instantly, for everybody knew Charles.

“I am here as Mr. Dare’s friend, at his wish. Tell Mr. Dare’s coachman to bring round his dog-cart to the door in good time to catch that train. Will it take luggage?”

“Yes, Sir Charles,” with respectful alacrity.

“Good. And when the dog-cart appears, you will see that the boxes are brought down belonging to the person who is staying here, who will leave by that train.”

“Yes, Sir Charles.”

“If the policeman from Slumberleigh should arrive while I am here, ask him to wait.”

“I will, Sir Charles.”

“I don't suppose,” thought Charles, “he will arrive, as I have not sent for him, but as the dining-room door happens to be ajar, it is just as well to add a few artistic touches.”

“Is this person in the drawing-room?” he continued aloud.

The man replied that she was in the dining-room, and Charles walked in unannounced, and closed the door behind him.

He had at times, when any action of importance was on hand, a certain cool decision of manner that seemed absolutely to ignore the possibility of opposition, which

formed a curious contrast with his usual careless demeanour.

“Good morning,” he said, advancing to the fire. “I have no doubt that my appearance at this early hour cannot be a surprise to you. You have, of course, anticipated some visit of this kind for the last few days. Pray finish your coffee. I am Sir Charles Danvers. I need hardly add that I am justice of the peace in this county, and that I am here officially on behalf of my friend, Mr. Dare.”

The little woman, who had risen, and had then sat down again at his entrance, eyed him steadily. There was a look in her dark bead-like eyes which showed Charles why Dare had been unable to face her. The look, determined, cunning, watchful, put him on his guard, and his manner became a shade more unconcerned.

“Any friend of my husband’s is welcome,” she said.

“There is no question for the moment

about your husband, though no doubt a subject of peculiar interest to yourself. I was speaking of Mr. Dare."

She rose to her feet, as if unable to sit while he was standing.

"Mr. Dare is my husband," she said, with a little gesture of defiance, tapping sharply on the table with the teaspoon she held in her hand.

Charles smiled blandly, and looked out of the window.

"There is evidently some misapprehension on that point," he observed, "which I am here to remove. Mr. Dare is at present unmarried."

"I am his wife," reiterated the woman, her colour rising under her rouge. "I am, and I won't go. He dared not come himself, a poor coward that he is, to turn his wife out of doors. He sent you; but it's no manner of use, so you may as well know it first as last. I tell you nothing shall induce me to stir from this house, from my 'ome, and you

needn't think you can come it over me with fine talk. I don't care a red cent what you say. I'll have my rights."

"I am here," said Charles, "to see that you get them, Mrs.—*Carroll*."

There was a pause. He did not look at her. He was occupied in taking a white thread off his coat.

"Carroll's dead," she said sharply.

"He is. And your regret at his loss was no doubt deepened by the unhappy circumstances in which it took place. He died in jail."

"Well, and if he did——"

"Died," continued Charles, suddenly fixing his keen glance upon her, "nearly a year after your so-called marriage with Mr. Dare."

"It's a lie," she said faintly, but she had turned very white.

"No, I *think* not. My information is on reliable authority. A slight exertion of memory on your part will no doubt recall the date of your bereavement."

“You can't prove it.”

“Excuse me. You have yourself kindly furnished us with a copy of the marriage register, with the date attached, without which I must own we might have been momentarily at a loss. I need now only apply for a copy of the register of the decease of Jasper Carroll, who, as you do not deny, died under personal restraint in jail; in Baton Rouge jail, in Louisiana, I have no doubt you intended to add.”

She glared at him in silence.

“Some dates acquire a peculiar interest when compared,” continued Charles, “but I will not detain you any longer with business details of this kind, as I have no doubt that you will wish to superintend your packing.”

“I won't go.”

“On the contrary, you will leave this house in half an hour. The dog-cart is ordered to take you to the station.”

“What if I refuse to go?”

“Extreme measures are always to be

regretted, especially with a lady," said Charles. "Nothing, in short, would be more repugnant to me; but I fear, as a magistrate, it would be my duty to——" And he shrugged his shoulders, wondering what on earth could be done for the moment if she persisted. "But," he continued, "motives of self-interest suggest the advisability of withdrawing, even if I were not here to enforce it. When I take into consideration the trouble and expense you have incurred in coming here, and the subsequent disappointment of the affections, a widow's affections, I feel justified in offering, though without my friend's permission, to pay your journey back to America, an offer which any further unpleasantness or delay would of course oblige me to retract."

She hesitated, and he saw his advantage and kept it.

"You have not much time to lose," he said, laying his watch on the table, "unless you would prefer the housekeeper to do your packing for you. No? I agree with you.

On a sea voyage especially one likes to know where one's things are. If I give you a cheque for your return journey, I shall of course expect you to sign a paper to the effect that you have no claim on Mr. Dare, that you never were his legal wife, and that you will not trouble him in future. You would like a few moments for reflection? Good. I will write out the form while you consider, as there is no time to be lost."

He looked about for writing materials, and finding only an ancient inkstand and pen, took a note from his pocket-book and tore a blank half sheet off it. His quiet deliberate movements awed her as he intended they should. She glanced first at him writing, then at the gold watch on the table between them, the hours of which were marked on the half hunting face by alternate diamonds and rubies, each stone being the memorial of a past success in shooting matches. The watch impressed her; to her practised eye it meant a very large sum of money, and she

knew the power of money; but the cool unconcerned manner of this tall, keen-eyed Englishman impressed her still more. As she looked at him he ceased writing, got out a cheque, and began to fill it in.

“What Christian name?” he asked suddenly.

“Ellen,” she replied, taken aback.

“Payable to order or bearer?”

“Bearer,” she said, confused by the way he took her decision for granted.

“Now,” he said authoritatively, “sign your name there;” and he pushed the form he had drawn up towards her. “I am sorry I cannot offer you a better pen.”

She took the pen mechanically and signed her name—*Ellen Carroll*. Charles’s light eyes gave a flash as she did it.

“Manner is everything,” he said to himself. “I believe the mention of that imaginary policeman may have helped, but a little stage effect did the business.”

“Thank you,” he said, taking the paper

and, after glancing at the signature, putting it in his pocket-book. "Allow me to give you this"—handing her the cheque. "And now I will ring for the housekeeper, for you will barely have time to make the arrangements for your journey. I can only allow you twenty minutes." He rang the bell as he spoke.

She started up, as if unaware how far she had yielded. A rush of angry colour flooded her face.

"I won't have that impertinent woman touching my things."

"That is as you like," said Charles, shrugging his shoulders; "but she will be in the room when you pack. It is my wish that she should be present." Then turning to the butler, who had already answered the bell, "Desire the housekeeper to go to Mrs. Carroll's rooms at once, and to give Mrs. Carroll any help she may require."

Mrs. Carroll looked from the butler to Charles with baffled hatred in her eyes. But

she knew the game was lost, and she walked out of the room and upstairs without another word, but with a bitter consciousness in her heart that she had not played her cards well, that though her downfall was unavoidable, she might have stood out for better terms for her departure. She hated Dare, as she threw her clothes together into her trunks, and she hated Mrs. Smith, who watched her do so with folded hands and with a lofty smile; but most of all she hated Charles, whose voice came up to the open window as he talked to Dare's coachman, already at the door, about splints and sore backs.

Charles felt a momentary pity for the little woman when she came down at last with compressed lips, casting lightning glances at the grinning servants in the background, whom she had bullied and hectored over in the manner of people unaccustomed to servants, and who were rejoicing in the ignominy of her downfall.

Her boxes were put in—not carefully.

Charles came forward and lifted his cap, but she would not look at him. Grasping a little hand-bag convulsively, she went down the steps, and got up unassisted into the dog-cart.

“You have left nothing behind, I hope?” said Charles civilly, for the sake of saying something.

“She have left nothing,” said Mrs. Smith, swimming forward with dignity, “and she have also took nothing. I have seen to that, Sir Charles.”

“Good-bye, then,” said Charles. “Right, coachman.”

Mrs. Carroll's eyes had been wandering upwards to the old house rising above her with its sunny windows and its pointed gables. Perhaps, after all the sordid shifts and schemes of her previous existence, she had imagined she might lead an easier and a more respectable life within those walls. Then she looked towards the long green terraces, the valley, and the forest beyond.

Her lip trembled, and turning suddenly she fixed her eyes with burning hatred on the man who had ousted her from this pleasant place.

Then the coachman whipped up his horse, the dog-cart spun over the smooth gravel between the lines of stiff, clipped yews, and she was gone.

CHAPTER XIV.

MR. ALWYNN had returned from his eventful morning call at Vandon very grave and silent. He shook his head when Ruth came to him in the study to ask what the result had been, and said Dare would tell her himself on his return from London, whither he had gone on business.

Ruth went back to the drawing-room. She had not strength or energy to try to escape from Mrs. Alwynn. Indeed, it was a relief not to be alone with her own thoughts, and to allow her exhausted mind to be towed along by Mrs. Alwynn's, the bent of whose mind resembled one of those mechanical toy animals which when wound up will run very fast in any direction, but if adroitly turned,

will hurry equally fast the opposite way. Ruth turned the toy at intervals, and the morning was dragged through, Mrs. Alwynn in the course of it exploring every realm—known to her—of human thought, now dipping into the future, and speculating on spring fashions, now commenting on the present, now dwelling fondly on the past, the gaily dressed, officer-adorned past of her youth.

There was a meal, and after that it was the afternoon. Ruth supposed that some time there would be another meal, and then it would be evening, but it was no good thinking of what was so far away. She brought her mind back to the present. Mrs. Alwynn had just finished a detailed account of a difference of opinion between herself and the curate's wife on the previous day.

“And she had not a word to say, my dear not a word, quite *hors de combat*, so I let the matter drop. And you remember that beautiful pig we killed last week? You

should have gone to look at it hanging up, Ruth, rolling in fat, it was. Well, it is better to give than to receive, so I shall send her one of the pork pies. And if you will get me one of those round baskets which I took the dolls down to the school-feast in—they are in the lowest shelf of the oak chest in the hall—I'll send it down to her at once."

Ruth fetched the basket and put it down by her aunt. Reminiscences of the school-feast still remained in it, in the shape of ends of ribbon and lace, and Mrs. Alwynn began to empty them out, talking all the time, when she suddenly stopped short with an exclamation of surprise.

"Goodness! Well, now! I'm sure. Ruth!"

"What is it, Aunt Fanny?"

"Why, my dear, if there isn't a letter for you under the odds and ends," holding it up and gazing resentfully at it; "and now I remember, a letter came for you on the morning of the school-feast, and I said to

John, 'I shan't forward it, because I shall see Ruth this afternoon,' and, dear me! I just popped it into the basket, for I thought you would like to have it, and, you know how busy I was, Ruth, that day, first one thing and then another, so much to think of—and—*there it is.*"

"I dare say it is of no importance," said Ruth, taking it from her, while Mrs. Alwynn, repeatedly wondering how such a thing could have happened to a person so careful as herself, went off with her basket to the cook.

When she returned in a few minutes, she found Ruth standing by the window, the letter open in her hand, her face without a vestige of colour.

"Why, Ruth," she said, actually noticing the alteration in her appearance; "is your head bad again?"

Ruth started violently.

"Yes—no. I mean—I think I will go out. The fresh air——"

She could not finish the sentence.

“And that tiresome letter? Did it want an answer?”

“None,” said Ruth, crushing it up unconsciously.

“Well, now,” said Mrs. Alwynn, “that’s a good thing, for I’m sure I shall never forget the way your uncle was in once, when I put a letter of his in my pocket to give him (it was a plum-coloured silk, Ruth, done with gold beads in front), and then—I went into mourning for my poor dear Uncle James, such an out of the common person he was, Ruth, and such a beautiful talker, and it was not till six months later, niece’s mourning you know, that I had the dress on again, and a business I had to meet it, for all my gowns seem to shrink when they are put by, and I put my hand in the pocket, and——”

But Ruth had disappeared.

Mrs. Alwynn was perfectly certain at last that something must be wrong with her niece. Earlier in the day she had had a headache. Reasoning by analogy, she decided

that Ruth must have eaten something at Mrs. Thursby's dinner-party which had disagreed with her. If any one was ill she always attributed it to indigestion. If Mr. Alwynn coughed, or if she read in the papers that royalty had been unavoidably prevented attending some function at which its presence had been expected, she instantly put down both mishaps to the same cause, and when Mrs. Alwynn had come to a conclusion it was not her habit to keep it to herself.

She told Lady Mary the exact state in which, reasoning always by analogy, she knew Ruth's health must be, when that lady drove over that afternoon in the hope of seeing Ruth, partly from curiosity, or rather a Christian anxiety respecting the welfare of others, and partly too from a real feeling of affection for Ruth herself. Mrs. Alwynn bored her intensely, but she sat on and on in the hope of Ruth's return, who had gone out, Mrs. Alwynn agreeing with every remark she made, and treating her with that pleased

deference of manner which some middle-class people, not otherwise vulgar, invariably drop into in the presence of rank ; a Sylla which is only one degree better than the Charybdis of would-be ease of manner into which others fall. If ever the enormous advantages of noble birth and ancient family, with all their attendant heirlooms and hereditary instincts of refinement, chivalrous feeling, and honour, become in future years a mark for scorn (as already they are a mark for the envy that calls itself scorn), it will be partly the fault of the vulgar adoration of the middle classes. Mrs. Alwynn being, as may possibly have already transpired in the course of this narrative, a middle-class woman herself, stuck to the hereditary instincts of *her* class with a vengeance, and when Ruth at last came in Lady Mary was thankful.

Her cold pale eyes lighted up a little as she greeted Ruth, and looked searchingly at her. She saw by the colourless lips and nervous contraction of the forehead, and by

the bright restless fever of the eyes, that had formerly been so calm and clear, that something was amiss—terribly amiss.

“I’ve been telling Lady Mary how poorly you’ve been, Ruth, ever since Mrs. Thursby’s dinner-party,” said Mrs. Alwynn, by way of opening the conversation.

But in spite of so auspicious a beginning the conversation flagged. Lady Mary made a few conventional remarks to Ruth, which she answered, and Mrs. Alwynn also; but there was a constraint which every moment threatened a silence. Lady Mary proceeded to comment on the poaching affray of the previous night, and the arrest of a man who had been seriously injured; but at her mention of the subject, Ruth became so silent, and Mrs. Alwynn so voluble, that she felt it was useless to stay any longer, and had to take her leave without a word with Ruth.

“Something is wrong with that girl,” she said to herself, as she drove back to Atherstone. “I know what it is. Charles has been

behaving in his usual manner, and as there is no one else to point out to him how infamous such conduct is, I shall have to do it myself. Shameful! That charming, interesting girl! And yet, and yet! There was a look in her face more like some great anxiety than disappointment. If she had had a disappointment, I do not think she would have let any one see it. Those Deyncourts are all too proud to show their feelings, though they have got them too somewhere. Perhaps on the whole, considering how excessively disagreeable and scriptural Charles can be, and what unexpected turns he can give to things, I had better say nothing to him at present."

The moment Lady Mary had left the house, Ruth hurried to her uncle's study. He was not there. He had not yet come in. She gave a gesture of despair, and flung herself down in the old leathern chair opposite to his own, on which many a one had sat who had come to him for help or consolation. All the buttons had been gradually

worn off that chair by restless or heavy visitors. Some had been lost, but others—the greater part, I am glad to say—Mr. Alwynn had found, and had deposited in a Sèvres cup on the mantelpiece, till the wet afternoon should come when he and his long packing needle should restore them to their home.

The room was very quiet. On the mantelpiece the little conscientious silver clock ticked, orderly, gently (till Ruth could hardly bear the sound), then hesitated, and struck a soft low tone. She started to her feet, and paced up and down, up and down. Would he never come in? She dared not go out to look for him for fear of missing him. Why did not he come back when she wanted him so terribly? She sat down again. She tried to be patient. It was no good. Would he never come?

She heard a sound, rushed out to meet him in the passage, and pulled him into the study.

“Uncle John,” she gasped, holding out a letter in her shaking hand. “That man who was taken up last night was—Raymond. He is in prison. He is ill. Let us go to him,” and she explained as best she could that a letter had only just been found written to her by Raymond in July, warning her he was in the neighbourhood of Arleigh, near the old nurse’s cottage, and that she might see him at any moment, and must have money in readiness. The instant she had read the letter she rushed up to Arleigh, to see her old nurse, and met her coming down in great agitation to tell her that Raymond, whom she had shielded once before under promise of secrecy, had been arrested the night before.

In a quarter of an hour Mr. Alwynn and Ruth were driving swiftly through the dusk in a close carriage in the direction of D——. On their way they met a dog-cart driving as quickly in the opposite direction, which grazed their wheel as it passed; and Ruth, looking

out, caught a glimpse, by the flash of their lamps, of Charles's face, with a look upon it so fierce and haggard that she shivered in nameless foreboding of evil, wondering what could have happened to make him look like that.

CHAPTER XV.

IT was still early on the following morning that Dare, forgetting, as we have seen, his promise to Charles, arrived at Slumberleigh Rectory—so early, that Mrs. Alwynn was still ordering dinner, or in other words, was dashing from larder to scullery, from kitchen to dairy, with her usual energy. He was shown into the empty drawing-room, where, after pacing up and down, he was reduced to the society of a photograph album, which in his present excited condition could do little to soothe the tumult of his mind. Not that any discredit should be thrown on Mrs. Alwynn's album, a gorgeous concern with a golden *Fanny* embossed on it, which afforded her infinite satisfaction, inside which her friends'

portraits appeared to the greatest advantage, surrounded by birds and nests and blossoms of the most vivid and life-like colouring. Mr. Alwynn was encompassed on every side by kingfishers and elaborate bone nests, while Ruth's clear-cut face looked out from among long-tailed tomtits, arranged one on each side of a nest crowded with eggs, on which a strong light had been thrown.

Dare was still looking at Ruth's photograph, when Mr. Alwynn came in.

"Do you wish to speak to Ruth?" he asked gravely.

"Now, at once." Dare was surprised that Mr. Alwynn, with whom he had been so open, should be so cold and unsympathetic in manner. The alteration and alienation of friends is certainly one of the saddest and most inexplicable experiences of this vale of tears.

"You will find her in the study," continued Mr. Alwynn. "She is expecting you. I have told her nothing, according to your

wish. I hope you will explain everything to her in full, that you will keep nothing back."

"I will explain," said Dare; and he went, trembling with excitement, into the study. Fired by Charles's example, he had made a sublime resolve as he skimmed across the fields, made it in a hurry, in a moment of ecstasy, as all his resolutions were made. He felt he had never acted such a noble part before. He only feared the agitation of the moment might prevent him doing himself justice.

Ruth rose as he came in, but did not speak. A swift spasm passed over her face, leaving it very stern, very fixed, as he had never seen it, as he had never thought of seeing it. An overwhelming suspense burned in the dark lustreless eyes which met his own. He felt awed.

"Well?" she said, pressing her hands together, and speaking in a low voice.

"Ruth," said Dare solemnly, laying his

outspread hand upon his breast and then extending it in the air, "I am free."

Ruth's eyes watched him like one in torture.

"How?" she said, speaking with difficulty. "You said you were free before."

"Ah!" replied Dare, raising his forefinger, "I said so, but it was an error. I go to Vandon, and she will not go away. I go to London to my lawyer, and he says she is my wife."

"You told me she was not."

"It was an error," repeated Dare. "I had formerly been a husband to her, but we had been divorced; it was finished, wound up, and I thought she was no more my wife. There is in the English law something extraordinary which I do not comprehend, which makes an American divorce to remain a marriage in England."

"Go on," said Ruth, shading her eyes with her hand.

"I come back to Vandon," continued Dare

in a suppressed voice, "I come back overwhelmed, broken down, crushed under feet; and then"—he was becoming dramatic, he felt the fire kindling—"I meet a friend, a noble heart, I confide in him. I tell all to Sir Charles Danvers"—Ruth's hand was trembling—"and last night he finds out by a chance that she was not a true widow when I marry her, that her first husband was yet alive, that I am free. This morning he tells me all, and I am here."

Ruth pressed her hands before her face, and fairly burst into tears.

He looked at her in astonishment. He was surprised that she had any feelings. Never having shown them to the public in general, like himself, he had supposed she was entirely devoid of them. She now appeared quite *émue*. She was sobbing passionately. Tears came into his own eyes as he watched her, and then a light dawned upon him for the second time that day. Those tears were not for him. He folded

his arms and waited. How suggestive in itself is a noble attitude!

After a few minutes Ruth overcame her tears with a great effort, and raising her head, looked at him, as if she expected him to speak. The suspense was gone out of her dimmed eyes, the tension of her face was relaxed.

“I am free,” repeated Dare, “and I have your promise that if I am free you will still marry me.”

Ruth looked up with a pained but resolute expression, and she would have spoken if he had not stopped her by a gesture.

“I have your promise,” he repeated. “I tell my friend, Sir Charles Danvers, I have it. He also loves. He does not tell me so; he is not open with me, as I with him, but I see his heart. And yet—figure to yourself—he has but to keep silence, and I must go away, I must give up all. I am still married—*Ou!*—while he—— But he is noble, he is sublime. He sacrifices love on the altar of

honour, of truth. He tells all to me, his rival. He shows me I am free. He thinks I do not know his heart. But it is not only he who can be noble." (Dare smote himself upon the breast.) "I also can lay my heart upon the altar. Ruth"—with great solemnity—"do you love him even as he loves you?"

There was a moment's pause.

"I do," she said firmly, "with my whole heart."

"I knew it. I divined it. I sacrifice myself. I give you back your promise. I say farewell, and voyage in the distance. I return no more to Vandon. There is no longer a home for me in England. I leave only behind with you the poor heart you have possessed so long!"

Dare was so much affected by the beauty of this last sentence that he could say no more, but even at that moment, as he glanced at Ruth to see what effect his eloquence had upon her, she looked so pallid and thin (her beauty was so entirely eclipsed), that the

sacrifice did not seem quite so overwhelming after all.

She struggled to speak, but words failed her.

He took her hands and kissed them, pressed them to his heart (it was a pity there was no one there to see), endeavoured to say something more, and then rushed out of the room.

She stood like one stunned after he had left her. She saw him a moment later cross the garden, and flee away across the fields. She knew she had seen that grey figure and jaunty grey hat for the last time; but she hardly thought of him. She felt she might be sorry for him presently, but not now.

The suspense was over. The sense of relief was too overwhelming to admit of any other feeling at first. She dropped on her knees beside the writing-table, and locked her hands together.

“*He told,*” she whispered to herself. “Thank God! Thank God!”

Two happy tears dropped on to Mr. Alwynn's old leather blotting-book, that worn cradle of many sermons.

Was this the same world? Was this the same sun which was shining in upon her? What new songs were the birds practising outside? A strange wonderful joy seemed to pervade the very air she breathed, to flood her inmost soul. She had faced her troubles fairly well, but at this new great happiness she did not dare to look; and with a sudden involuntary gesture she hid her face in her hands.

It would be rash to speculate too deeply on the nature of Dare's reflections as he hurried back to Atherstone; but perhaps, under the very real pang of parting with Ruth, he was sustained by a sense of the magnanimity of what, had he put it into words, he would have called his attitude, and possibly also by a lurking conviction, which had assisted his determination to resign her,

that life at Vandon, after the episode of the American wife's arrival, would be a social impossibility, especially to one anxious and suited to shine in society. Be that how it may, whatever had happened to influence him most of the chance emotion of the moment, it would be tolerably certain that in a few hours he would be sorry for what he had done. He was still, however, in a state of mental exaltation when he reached Atherstone, and began fumbling nervously with the garden gate. Charles, who had been stalking up and down the bowling-green, went slowly towards him.

“What on earth do you mean by going off in that way?” he asked coldly.

“Ah!” said Dare, perceiving him, “and she—the—is she gone?”

“Yes, half an hour ago. Your dog-cart has come back from taking her to the station, and is here now.”

Dare nodded his head several times, and stood looking at him.

“I have been to Slumberleigh,” he said.

“Yes, contrary to agreement.”

“My friend,” Dare said, seizing the friend’s limp, unresponsive hand and pressing it, “I know now why you keep silence last night. I reason with myself. I see you love her. Do not turn away. I have seen her. I have given her back her promise. I give her up to you whom she loves; and now—I go away, not to return.”

And then, in the full view of the Atherstone windows, of the butler, and of the dog-cart at the front door, Dare embraced him, kissing the blushing and disconcerted Charles on both cheeks. Then, in a moment, before the latter had recovered his self-possession, Dare had darted to the dog-cart, and was driving away.

Charles looked after him in mixed annoyance and astonishment, until he noticed the butler’s eye upon him, when he hastily retreated, with a heightened complexion, to the shrubberies.

CONCLUSION.

IT was the last day of October, about a week after a certain very quiet little funeral had taken place in the D—— cemetery. The death of Raymond Deyncourt had appeared in the papers a day or two afterwards, without mention of date or place, and it was generally supposed that it had taken place some considerable time previously, without the knowledge of his friends.

Charles had been sitting for a long time with Mr. Alwynn, and after he left the Rectory he took the path over the fields in the direction of the Slumberleigh woods.

The low sun was shining redly through a golden haze, was sending long burning shafts across the glade where Charles was pacing.

He sat down at last upon a fallen tree to wait for one who should presently come by that way.

It was a still clear afternoon, with the solemn stillness that speaks of coming change. Winter was at hand, and the woods were transfigured with a passing glory, like the faces of those who depart in peace when death draws nigh.

Far and wide in the forest the bracken was all aflame—aflame beneath the glowing trees. The great beeches had turned to bronze and ruddy gold, and had strewed the path with carpets glorious and rare, which the first wind would sweep away. Upon the limes the amber leaves still hung, faint yet loth to go, but the horse chestnut had already dropped its garment of green and yellow at its feet.

A young robin was singing at intervals in the silence, telling how the secrets of the nests had been laid bare, singing a requiem on the dying leaves and the widowed branches,

a song new to him, but with the old plaintive rapture in it that his fathers had been taught before him since the world began.

She came towards him down the yellow glade, through the sunshine and the shadow, with a spray of briony in her hand. Neither spoke. She put her hands into the hands that were held out for them, and their eyes met, grave and steadfast, with the light in them of an unalterable love. So long they had looked at each other across a gulf. So long they had stood apart. And now, at last—at last—they were together. He drew her close and closer yet. They had no words. There was no need of words. And in the silence of the hushed woods, and in the silence of a joy too deep for speech, the robin's song came sweet and sad.

“Charles!”

“Ruth!”

“I should like to tell you something.”

“And I should like to hear it.”

“I know what Raymond told you to conceal. I went to him just after you did. We passed you coming back. He did not know me at first. He thought I was you, and he kept repeating that you must keep your own counsel, and that unless you showed Mr. Dare’s marriage was illegal, he would never find it out. At last, when he suddenly recognized me, he seemed horror-struck, and the doctor came in and sent me away.”

Charles knew now why Raymond had sent for him the second time.

There was a long pause.

“Ruth, did you think I should tell?”

“I hoped and prayed you would, but I knew it would be hard, because I do believe you actually thought at the time I should still consider it my duty to marry Mr. Dare. I never should have done such a thing after what had happened. I was just going to tell him so when he began to give me up, and it evidently gave him so much pleasure to

renounce me nobly in your favour, that I let him have it his own way, as the result was the same. My great dread, until he came, was that you had not spoken. I had been expecting him all the previous evening. Oh, Charles, Charles! I waited and watched for his coming as I had never done before. Your silence was the only thing I feared, because it was the only thing that could have come between us."

"God forgive me. I meant at first to say nothing."

"Only at first," said Ruth gently; and they walked on in silence.

The sun had set. A slender moon had climbed unnoticed into the southern sky amid the shafts of paling fire which stretched out across the whole heaven from the burning fiery furnace in the west. Across the grey dim fields voices were calling the cattle home.

Charles spoke again at last in his usual tone.

"You quite understand, Ruth, though I

have not mentioned it so far, that you are engaged to marry me ? ”

“ I do. I will make a note of it if you wish. ”

“ It is unnecessary. I shall be happy, when I am at leisure, to remind you myself. Indeed, I may say I shall make a point of doing so. There does not happen to be any one else whom you feel it would be your duty to marry ? ”

“ I can't think of any one at the moment. Charles, you never *could* have believed I would marry *him*, after all ! ”

“ Indeed I did believe it. Don't I know the stubbornness of your heart ? You see, you are but young, and I make excuses for you ; but after you have been the object of my special and judicious training for a few years, I quite hope your judgment may improve considerably. ”

“ I trust it will, as I see from your remarks it will certainly be all we shall have to guide us both. ”

POSTSCRIPT.—Lady Mary would not allow even Providence any of the credit of Charles's engagement; she claimed the whole herself. She called Evelyn to witness that from the first it had been her work entirely. She only allowed Charles himself a very secondary part in the great event, to which she was apt to point in later years as the crowning work of a life devoted—under Church direction—to the temporal and spiritual welfare of her fellow-creatures; and Charles avers that a mention of it in the long list of her virtues will some day adorn the tombstone which she has long since ordered to be in readiness.

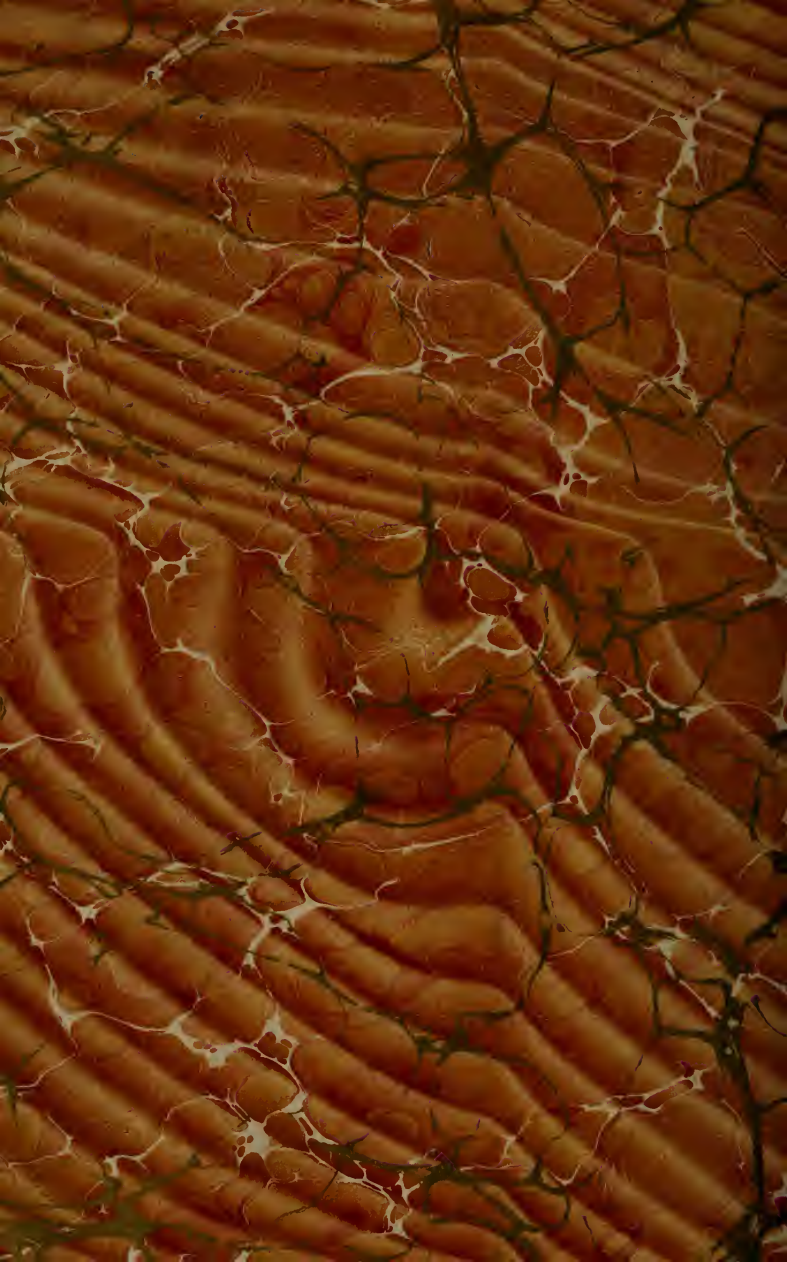
Molly was disconsolate for many days, but work, that panacea of grief, came to the rescue, and it was not long before she was secretly and busily engaged on a large kettle holder, with kettle and motto entwined, for Charles's exclusive use, without which she had been led to understand his establishment would be incomplete. When this work of art was finished, her feelings had become so

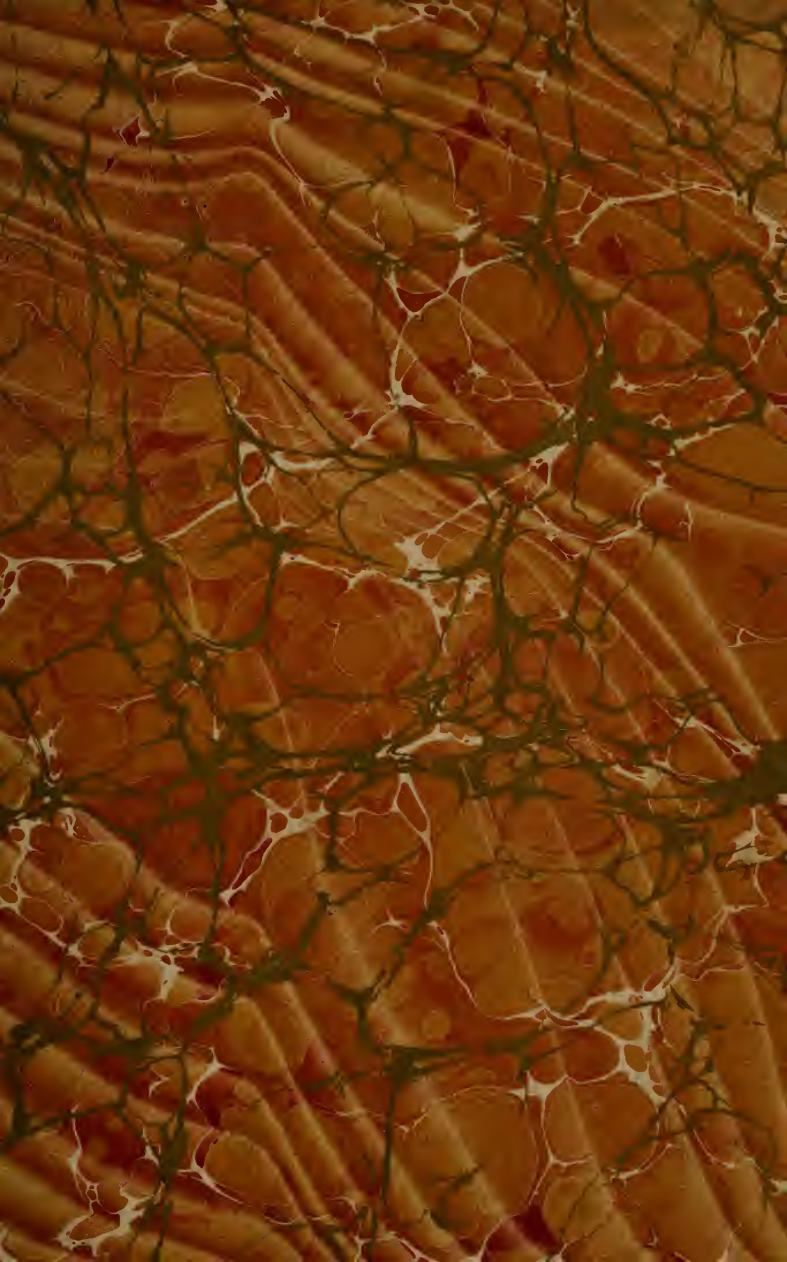
far modified towards Ruth that she consented to begin another very small and inferior one—merely a kettle on a red ground—for that interloper, but whether it was ever presented is not on record.

Vandon is to let. The grass has grown up again through the niches of the stone steps. The place looks wild and deserted. Mr. Alwynn comes sometimes, and looks up at its shuttered windows and trailing, neglected ivy, but not often, for it gives him a strange pang at the heart. And as he goes home the people come out of the dilapidated cottages and ask wistfully when the new squire is coming back.

But Mr. Alwynn does not know.

THE END.





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