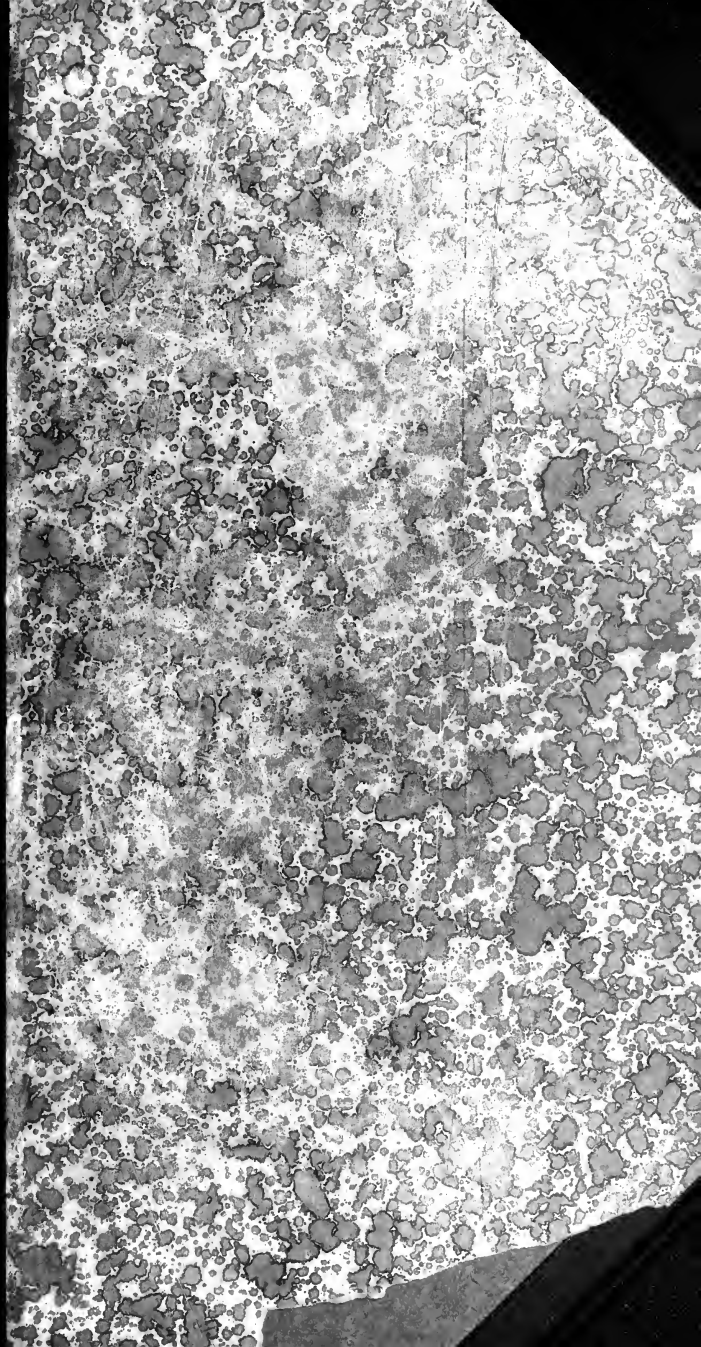




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THAT UNFORTUNATE MARRIAGE.

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THAT UNFORTUNATE MARRIAGE.

BY

FRANCES ELEANOR TROLLOPE,

AUTHOR OF

“AUNT MARGARET’S TROUBLE,” “A CHARMING FELLOW,”

“LIKE SHIPS UPON THE SEA,” ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



LONDON :

RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,

Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen.

1888.

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THAT UNFORTUNATE MARRIAGE.



CHAPTER I.

AUGUSTUS CHEFFINGTON had made an unfortunate marriage. That was admitted on all hands. When he was a Cornet in a cavalry regiment quartered in the ancient Cathedral City of Oldchester, he ran away with pretty Susan Dobbs, the daughter of his landlady. Augustus's friends and family—all the Cheffingtons, the Dormer-Smiths, the Castlecombes—deplored this rash step. It was never mentioned, either at the time or afterwards, without expressions of deep commiseration for him.

Nevertheless, from one point of view there were compensations. This unfortunate marriage was made responsible for a great many shortcomings, which would otherwise have been

attributed more directly to Augustus Cheffington himself. For example, it was said to account for his failure in his profession. He had chosen it chiefly because he very much liked the brilliant uniform of a certain crack regiment (it was in the days before competitive examinations); and he had no other aptitude for it than a showy seat on horseback, and a person well calculated to set off the works of the regimental tailor. But when years had passed, and he had remained undistinguished, his friends said, "What could one expect after Augustus's unfortunate marriage?"

After a time he sold out of the Army, and went to live on the Continent, where very shortly he had squandered nearly all his money, and fallen into shady paths of life; and again there was a chorus of "I told you so!" and a general sense that all this was due to the unfortunate marriage.

Finally, his wife died, leaving him with one little girl, the sole survivor of five children; and he came to England with the idea of securing some place which should be suited to his birth, his abilities, his habits, and his inclinations. No such place was found. Several

members of the Peerage were applied to, to exert their influence with "Government" on behalf of so well-connected a personage as Augustus Cheffington. But "Government" behaved very badly, "Government" was insensible to his claims. His claims, it is true, were not small. They required a maximum of remuneration for a minimum of labour. He was unable, also, to furnish any proofs of his fitness for one or two posts which happened to be vacant, except the undeniable fact of his cousinship with all the Cheffingtons and Castlecombes in England; and to this kind of qualification "Government," it appeared, attached no importance at all.

He paid a round of visits at country houses, and renewed his long-disused acquaintance with a score of more or less distant relations. But he was not popular. It has been observed that unsuccessful men very often are not popular. "Gus Cheffington has dropped out of the running," men said. "A fellow naturally gets forgotten when he has kept out of sight for years—and besides, he makes himself so deuced disagreeable! He's always grumbling."

This latter accusation was true. If England

had shown no maternal affection for her long-absent son, the son returned her hard-heartedness with interest. Indeed, in his case, it turned into active resentment. He got tired of country houses and town mansions where he was received but coolly. He was sarcastic and bitter on the failure of his connections to procure him a lucrative sinecure. He considered that the country was travelling downhill at break-neck speed, and, for his part, he did not feel inclined to move his little finger to impede that fatal course. Moreover, the black coffee was, nine times out of ten, utterly undrinkable. One day he shook the dust of England's inhospitable shores from off his feet, and returned to his shady haunts on the Continent—its irresponsibility, its *cafés*, its boulevards, and its billiards. And when he was fairly gone, all the Cheffingtons, and the Dormer-Smiths, and the Castlecombes were softened into sympathy; and with much shrugging of shoulders and shaking of heads declared that it was a heartrending spectacle to behold such a man as Augustus Cheffington ruined, crushed, eclipsed, destroyed by his unfortunate marriage.

When he went back to Belgium, he left

behind him at school in Brighton his little motherless girl Miranda, familiarly called May. The Honourable Mrs. Cheffington, Augustus's mother, had advised her son to give the little girl a first-rate education, so as to mitigate as far as possible one disastrous effect of the unfortunate marriage, which was, that May had a plebeian mother. Mrs. Cheffington, known throughout all the ramifications of the family as "the dowager," was a hard-featured, selfish old woman, with a black wig, a pale yellow skin, and frowning eyebrows. She lived on a pension which would cease at her death, and she was supposed by some of her relations to be making a purse. They thought it would turn out that the dowager had considerable savings to leave behind her; and they founded this supposition on her never giving away anything during her lifetime. Mrs. Dormer-Smith, Augustus Cheffington's sister, declared that her mother made one exception to her rule of refusing assistance to any of them. She believed that Augustus, who had always been her favourite child, profited by the dowager's indulgence, and managed to extract some money from her tightly-closed purse. And it certainly

was true that the old lady had paid May's school bills—so far as they had been paid at all.

But one day the Honourable Anne Miranda Cheffington took off her black wig for the last time, and relaxed her frowning eyebrows. The announcement of her death appeared in the first column of the *Times*, there was a brief obituary notice in a fashionable journal, and her place knew her no more.

Augustus hastened home to England on the receipt of a telegram from his sister. That is to say, he said he hastened; but he did not arrive in town until some hours after the funeral was over. Mr. Dormer-Smith was somewhat irritated by this tardiness, and observed to his wife that it was just like Augustus to keep out of the way while there was any trouble to be taken, and only arrive in time to be present at the reading of the will. Any expectations that Augustus might have founded on his mother's reluctance to give during her lifetime were quite disappointed. The dowager had no money to bequeath. She had spent nearly the last shilling of her quarter's income. In fact, there was not enough to cover the expenses of the funeral,

which were finally paid several months afterwards by Mr. Dormer-Smith.

It seemed almost superfluous, under the circumstances, to have made a will at all. But the will was there. The chief item in it was a quantity of yellow old lace, extremely dirty, and much in need of mending, which was solemnly bequeathed by Mrs. Cheffington to her daughter, Pauline Augusta Clarissa Dormer-Smith. It was set forth at some length how that the lace, being an heirloom of the Cheffingtons, should have descended in due course to the wife of the eldest son, or, failing that, to the eldest daughter of the eldest son; and how this tradition was disregarded in the present case by reason of peculiar and unprecedented family circumstances. This was the dowager's Parthian dart at the unfortunate marriage. There was little other property, except the dingy old furniture of Mrs. Cheffington's house at Richmond, and a few books, treating chiefly of fortification and gunnery, which had belonged to Lieutenant-General the Honourable Augustus Vane Cheffington, the dowager's long-deceased husband.

“What the—— What on earth my mother did with her money *I* can't conjecture!” ex-

claimed Augustus, staring out of the window of his brother-in-law's drawing-room the day after the funeral.

"She didn't give it to us, Augustus," returned Mrs. Dormer-Smith plaintively. "Even when my boy Cyril went to see her at the end of the holidays, just before returning to Harrow, she never tipped him. Once I think she gave him five shillings. But it's a long time ago; he was a little fellow in petticoats."

"Then what *did* she do with her money?" repeated Augustus, with an increasingly gloomy scowl at the gardens of the Kensington square on which his eyes rested.

"I believe that, with the exception of what she paid for May's schooling, she spent it on herself."

"Spent it on herself? That's impossible! It was a very good income indeed for a solitary woman, and she lived very quietly."

"You may get through a good deal of money even living quietly, when you don't deny yourself anything you can get. For instance, she never would drive one horse; she had been accustomed to a pair all her life."

Augustus checked an oath on his very lips,

and, instead of swearing according to his first impulse, observed with solemnity that he knew not how his mother had been able to reconcile such selfishness with her conscience, and hoped her last moments had not been troubled by remorse.

“Oh, I don't think mamma felt anything of that kind,” said Mrs. Dormer-Smith in her slow, gentle tones; “she was always complaining of other people's unreasonable expectations.”

The brother and sister fell silent for a while after this, each being immersed in private meditation. That very morning a circumstance had occurred which had put the last touch to Augustus's disappointment and exasperation. The Brighton schoolmistress had sent Miss Miranda Cheffington to London in the charge of a maid-servant, and the little girl had arrived at her aunt's house in a cab with her worldly possessions, namely, a small black trunk full of clothes, and a canary-bird in a cage. The schoolmistress wrote civilly, but firmly, to the effect that, after the lamented decease of the Honourable Mrs. Cheffington, she could not undertake to keep May any longer; feeling sure, by repeated experience, that all applica-

tions for payment made to Captain Cheffington would be in vain, and understanding that Mrs. Dormer-Smith declined to charge herself with her niece's education. Captain Cheffington had been violently angry, and had denounced the schoolmistress—Mrs. Drax—as an insolent, grasping, vulgar harpy. But Mrs. Drax was out of his reach, and there was May, thirteen years old, with a healthy appetite, and limbs rapidly outgrowing her clothes.

Augustus continued to glare moodily at the square for some minutes. His sister leaned her cheek on her hand, and looked at the fire. At length Augustus, composing his face to a less savage expression, turned away from the window, sat down opposite to his sister, and said, pensively—

“We must arrange something for May, Pauline.”

“You must, indeed, Augustus.”

“We ought to consider her future.”

“Yes; I think you ought, Augustus.”

“The girl is at a hobbledehoy age. It's a perplexing position. So difficult to know what to do with her.”

“There is no age at which it is so awkward

to dress a girl. I have sometimes regretted not having daughters; but upon my word there must be a dreadful amount of harass about their clothes between twelve and fifteen—or in some cases sixteen.”

“It’s impossible for me to have her with me in Brussels. The way I live—am obliged to live *malgré moi*—she’d upset all my arrangements and habits. In short, you can see for yourself, Pauline, that it would be out of the question.”

“No doubt it would be very bad for the girl.”

“Of course! That’s what I mean. Wouldn’t it be the best plan after all, Pauline, to leave her here with you? She could have private masters——”

Mrs. Dormer-Smith shook her head.

“At my expense, of course,” added Augustus. “I must screw and scrape and make some sacrifices no doubt, but——”

“It really won’t do, Augustus. I assure you it won’t do. Frederick will *not* have it. He talked to me after luncheon. It isn’t the least use.”

Mrs. Dormer-Smith continued plaintively to

shake her head as she spoke, and to look with gentle melancholy at the fire.

“H’m! Frederick is very kind. But let us discuss the thing in a friendly spirit. If I pay for her clothing and education, surely the expense of her board wouldn’t ruin you and Frederick!”

“No; but the butcher and the baker are the least part of the matter. It isn’t as if May were the daughter of one’s housekeeper or one’s governess. She is a Cheffington, you know. So many things are required for a girl with her connections; and as to your paying for her masters, of course we know you wouldn’t, Augustus.”

“Upon my soul you are civil and sisterly!”

“Well, I dare say you would mean to pay, but you wouldn’t. It would be sure to turn out so, don’t you know? Things always have been like that with you, Augustus.”

“Then what the devil do you think I’m to do?”

“Pray don’t be violent! I really cannot bear any display of violence. You should remember that it is scarcely a week since poor mamma was taken from us.”

“I don’t see what that has to do with it. Miranda hasn’t been taken from us; that’s the point.”

Mrs. Dormer-Smith making no answer, her brother continued, after a moment or two—

“You are fertile in objections, but you don’t seem to have any plan to suggest.”

“Well, an idea did occur to me. I don’t know whether you would like it.”

“Like it! Probably not. But I am used to sacrifice my inclinations.”

“Well, I thought that you might put May into a school in France or Germany, or somewhere, letting her give lessons in English in return for her board and so on. There are plenty of schools where they do that sort of thing. It wouldn’t so much matter abroad, because people wouldn’t know who she was. You might tide over a year or two in that way.”

Augustus got up from his chair. “My daughter a drudge in a Continental school?” he exclaimed indignantly.

“If you chose a place little frequented by English, I don’t think people would know.”

There was a short silence. Then Augustus

said angrily, "I'll take the girl back with me. She must share my home, such as it is. We will neither of us trouble you or Frederick much longer. I shall start for Ostend by the morning mail to-morrow." And he dashed out of the room emitting a muffled roll of oaths, and jarring the door in a way which made Mrs. Dormer-Smith clasp her forehead with both hands, and lean back shrinkingly in her chair.

But when the morrow came, Captain Cheffington and his daughter did not go to Ostend. When they had got out of sight of the Dormer-Smiths' house, he ordered the cabman to drive to the Great Western Railway Station, and started by an express train for Oldchester.

CHAPTER II.

AMONGST the minor grievances reckoned up by the deceased dowager as accruing from Augustus's unfortunate marriage was the fact that his wife had borne the plebeian name of Dobbs. One of her most frequent complaints against poor little May was that the child was "a thorough Dobbs." And when she was out of temper—which was very often—she would prefer this charge as indignantly as though Dobbs were synonymous with the most disgraceful epithets in the English language.

And yet the sound of it awoke very different associations in the city of Oldchester, where Augustus's mother-in-law had lived all her life. Mrs. Dobbs was the widow of a tradesman. The ironmonger's business, which her husband had carried on, had long passed into other hands; but his name still met the eyes of his

fellow-townsmen in the inscription, "J. Brown, late Dobbs," painted over the shop.

Oldchester is a city in which two streams of life run side by side, mingling but little with each other. At a certain point in the existence of Oldchester, its ancient course of civil and ecclesiastical history had received a new tributary—a strong and ever-growing current of commerce. Commerce built wide suburbs, with villa residences in various stages of "detachment" and "semi-detachment" from one another. Commerce strewed the pleasant country paths and lanes with coal-dust, and blackened the air with smoke. Commerce set up Art schools, founded hospitals (and furnished patients for them), multiplied railways for miles round, and scored all the new streets, and some of the old, with tramway lines. Commerce bought estates in the neighbourhood, was conveyed to public worship in splendid equipages, sent its sons to Eton, and married its daughters into the Peerage. But, for all that, the fame of Oldchester continued to rest on its character as a cathedral city. The old current surpassed the new one in length and dignity, if in nothing else. The gray cathedral towers rose up

majestically above the din and turmoil of forge and loom and factory, with a noble aspiration towards something above and beyond these; while the vibrations of their mellow chimes shed down sweet suggestions of peace and goodwill among the homes of the toilers.

Mrs. Dobbs particularly loved the sounds of the cathedral chimes; and she sat with closed eyes listening to them in the twilight of a certain autumn evening. Her house was in a narrow street, called Friar's Row, which turned out of the High Street. A monastery had once stood on the site of it, but all trace of the ancient conventual buildings had long since disappeared. The houses were solid brick dwellings, from one to two hundred years old. Mrs. Dobbs's husband had bequeathed her a long lease of that which she occupied. Most of the other houses in Friar's Row were used as offices or warehouses, the wealthier kind of tradespeople who once lived in them having migrated to the suburbs. On her husband's death some of Mrs. Dobbs's friends had urged her to remove to a newer and more cheerful part of the town, but she had resisted the suggestion with some contempt.

“I know what suits me,” she would say. “And that’s a knowledge the Lord doesn’t bestow on all and sundry. This house suits me. It’s weather-proof for one thing. And you needn’t be afraid of putting your foot through the floor if you walk a little heavy, as I do. When I go to see the Simpsons in that bandbox they call Laurel Villa, I daren’t lean my umbrella against the wall, for fear of bringing the whole concern down like a pack of cards.”

She might easily have increased her income by letting her house and removing to one in the suburbs; for its position was central, and the tenements in Friar’s Row were in great request for business purposes. But she resisted this temptation. There were reasons of a more impalpable kind than the solidity of its floors and roofs, which made Mrs. Dobbs constant to her old home. She had lived there all the days of her married life. Her daughter had been born there. Her husband had died there. The somewhat narrow and dingy street had in her eyes the familiar aspect of a friendly face. She loved to hear the rattle and bustle of the High Street, slightly softened by distance. Those

common sounds were full of voices from the past: the common sights around were associated with all the joys and sorrows of her life. Mrs. Dobbs never said anything to this effect, but she felt it. And so she stayed in Friar's Row.

The parlour in which she sat was comfortably and substantially furnished. A competent observer would have perceived evidences of permanence and respectability in the solid, old-fashioned chairs and tables, the prints after Morland on the walls, and the corner cupboard full of fine old china. The bookshelves which filled one end of the room contained the accumulations of successive generations. There was a square pianoforte with a pile of old music-books on the top of it; and a big family Bible in massive binding had a place of honour all to itself on a side-table covered with green baize. On this special autumn evening, owing to the hour, and partly to the narrowness of the street, which shut out some of the lingering daylight, the parlour was very dim. A red fire glowed in the grate, a large tabby cat blinked and purred on the hearthrug, and in a spacious easy-chair at one side of the fireplace

sat Mrs. Dobbs, listening with closed eyes to the cathedral chimes.

Presently the door was softly opened, and there came into the room Mrs. Dobbs's life-long friend and crony, Mr. Joseph Weatherhead. This person was her brother-in-law, and a childless widower. He had carried on the trade of bookseller and stationer in Birmingham for many years; but had sold his business on the death of his wife, and come to live in Oldchester, near the Dobbs's. Mr. Weatherhead was a tall, lean man, with a benevolent, bald forehead, and mild eyes. The only remarkable feature in his face was the nose, which was large, slightly aquiline, brownish red in colour, and protruded from his face at a peculiar angle. The forehead above, and the chin below, sloped away from it rather rapidly. The nose had thus a singularly inquisitive air of being eagerly in the van, as though it thrust itself forward in quest of news.

As he closed the door behind him, Mrs. Dobbs opened her eyes.

"I thought you were asleep, Sarah," said Mr. Weatherhead.

"Asleep!" ejaculated Mrs. Dobbs, with all

the indignation which that accusation is so apt mysteriously to excite. "Nothing of the kind! I was listening to the chimes. They always make me think——"

"Of poor Susy," interrupted Mr. Weatherhead, nodding. "Ah! And so they do me. Poor Susy! How pretty she was!"

"She had better have been less pretty for her own happiness. The great misfortune of her life wouldn't have happened but for her pretty face."

Mr. Weatherhead nodded again, and sat down opposite to Mrs. Dobbs in a corresponding arm-chair to her own. He then took from his pocket a black leather case, and from the case a meerschaum pipe, which he proceeded to fill and light and smoke.

"What an infatuation!" sighed Mrs. Dobbs, pursuing her own meditations. "To think of Susy throwing herself away on that extravagant, selfish, good-for-nothing fellow without any principles to speak of, when she might have had an honest tradesman in a first-rate way of business! She had only to pick and choose."

"Humph! Honest tradesmen are not as

plentiful as blackberries, though," observed Mr. Weatherhead, reflectively.

Mrs. Dobbs ignored this parenthesis, and went on: "It was a bad day for me and mine when he first came swaggering into this house."

From which speech it will be seen that the Dobbs side of the family coincided with the Cheffingtons in considering Augustus's to have been an unfortunate marriage; only each party arrived at the same conclusion by a different road.

"Have you heard from him lately, Sarah?" asked Mr. Weatherhead, after a pause.

"From my precious son-in-law? Not I!"

"Oh!"

"Not a word from him till he wants something. You may take your oath of that, Jo Weatherhead."

"Oh, I thought you might have heard from him, because——"

"Well?" (very sharply).

"Well, because I see something has been putting old times into your head; and I thought it might be that."

"Something been putting old times into my

head? I should like to know when they're out of my head! Much you know about it!"

Mr. Weatherhead apparently did know something about it; for after another long silence, during which he puffed at his pipe and stared into the fire, Mrs. Dobbs justified his penetration by saying—

"The truth is, I *have* been turning things over in my mind a good deal since yesterday."

Mr. Weatherhead was too wary to expose himself to another snub, so he merely nodded two or three times in an oracular manner.

"I'm worried out of my mind about that child. She went off yesterday as bright and happy as possible, and looking so pretty and genteel—fit for any company in the land."

"Ah! She went off, you say, to——?"

"To the Hadlows'. She is to stay there over Sunday."

"Oh! But I don't quite see——"

"Go on! What is it that you don't quite see?"

"I don't quite see what there is to worry you in that. The Hadlows are very good sort of people."

"I should think they *were* very good sort of

people! Canon Hadlow is one of the best men in Oldchester; or in all England, for the matter of that. And he's a gentleman to the marrow of his bones. But what sort of a position has my granddaughter among the Hadlows and their belongings?"

"A very nice position, I should say."

"A very nice position!" exclaimed Mrs. Dobbs, who seemed determined to repeat all poor Mr. Weatherhead's speeches in a tone of disdainful irony. "That's so like you, Jo! *She* thinks it a very nice position, too, poor lamb. She knows nothing of the world, bless her innocent heart. And, for all her seventeen years, she is the merest child in some things. But you might know better. You are not seventeen years old, Jo Weatherhead."

"Certainly not," assented he emphatically.

"The fact of the matter is that, whether by good luck or bad luck, May does not belong to my sphere or my class. She's a Cheffington. She has the ways of a lady, and the education of a lady, and she has a right to the position of a lady. If that father of hers gives her nothing else he might give her that; and he shall, if I can make him."

“Perhaps it might have been better, after all, if you had not sent the child back to her old school, but just brought her up here, under your own eye, in a plain sort of way. It would have been better for *you*, anyhow.”

“I don’t know that.”

“Why, you’d have been spared a good many sacrifices. There’s not another woman in England would have done what you’ve done, Sarah.”

“Nonsense; there are plenty of women in England as big fools as me. Even that wooden old figurehead of a dowager—Lord forgive me, she’s dead and gone!—had the grace to pay the child’s schooling as long as she lived.”

“She!” exclaimed Jo Weatherhead, firing up suddenly, and tapping his meerschaum sharply against the hob. “That’s a very different pair of shoes. She could afford it a precious sight better than you. What did *she* ever deprive herself of? I say there’s not another woman in England would have done what you’ve done, and it’s no good your contradicting.”

“There, bless the man! Don’t let us quarrel about it.”

“But I shall quarrel about it, unless you give

in. Here's the case fairly put :—A young spark runs away with your only daughter, and pretty well breaks your heart. He takes her wandering about into foreign parts, and you only get news of her now and then, and never good news. He's too fine a gentleman to do a stroke of work for his family, but as soon as he has run through his bit of money he's not too fine a gentleman to fall into disreputable ways of life, nor yet to let who will look after his motherless little girl, and feed, and clothe, and educate her. When his own mother dies—leaving two quarters' school-bills unpaid, which you have to settle, by-the-by—the rest of the family, including his own sister, refuse to advance a sixpence to save the child from the workhouse.”

“I say, Jo, that's putting it a little too strong, my friend! There was no talk of the workhouse.”

“Let me finish summing up the case. I say they wouldn't spend sixpence to save that child from *starvation*—there, now! When the dowager is dead, and the rest of them button up their breeches' pockets, and the schoolmistress sends away the poor little girl because she can't afford to keep her and teach her for nothing, what

does my gentleman do? Does he try in any one way to do his duty by his only child? Not he. He coolly shuffles off all trouble and responsibility on other folks' shoulders. He hasn't taken any notice of you for years, except writing once to borrow fifty pounds——”

“Which he didn't get, Jo.”

“Which he didn't get because an over-ruling Providence had ordained that you shouldn't have it to lend him. Well, after years of silence and neglect, he turns up in Oldchester one fine morning, and walks into your house bringing his little girl ‘on a visit to her dear grandmother.’ Talk of brass! What sort of a material do you suppose that man's features are composed of?”

“Gutta percha, very likely,” returned Mrs. Dobbs, who now sat resting her head against the cushions of her chair, and listening to Mr. Weatherhead's eloquence with a half-humorous resignation; “that's a good, tough, elastic kind of stuff.”

“Tough! He had need have some toughness of countenance to come into this house as he did. And that's not the end. He swaggers about Oldchester for a week or two, using your

house as an inn, neither more nor less—except that there's no bill;—and then one day he starts off for the Continent, leaving little May here, and promising to send for her as soon as he gets settled. From that day to this, and it's four years ago, you have had the child on your hands, and her precious father has never contributed one shilling towards her support. You sent the child back to school. You pinched, and saved, and denied yourself many little comforts to keep her there. You have never let her feel or guess that she has been a burthen on you in your old age. And I say again, Sarah Dobbs, that, considering all the circumstances of the case, there's not another woman in England would have done what you've done. No, nor in Europe!”

“Well, having come to that, I hope you've finished, Jo Weatherhead.”

“I hope I have,” returned Mr. Weatherhead, mopping his flushed face with a very large red pocket-handkerchief. “I hope I have, for the present. But if you attempt to contradict a word of what I have been saying, I'll begin again and go still further!”

“There, there, then that's settled. But I am

thinking of the future. Supposing I died to-morrow, what's to become of May? I have nothing to leave her. My bit of property goes back to Dobbs's family, and all right and fair, too. I've nothing to say against my husband's will. But people like the Hadlows, who invite May, and make much of her, have no idea that she has no one to look to but me. I don't say they'd give her the cold shoulder if they did know it; but it would make a difference. As it is, they talk to her about her aunt, Mrs. Dormer-Smith, and her cousin, Lord This, and her connection, Lady T'other, and a kind of a—what shall I say?—a sort of atmosphere of high folks hangs about her. She's Miss Miranda Cheffington, with fifty relations in the peerage. If she was known only as the grandchild of Mrs. Dobbs, the ironmonger's widow, she would seem mightily changed in a good many eyes. Sometimes it comes over me as if I was letting May go on under false pretences."

"Why, she *has* got fifty relations in the peerage, hasn't she?"

"A hundred, for all I know. But folks are not aware that her father's family take no notice of her. She hardly knows it herself."

“But her aunt, Mrs. Dormer-Smith, writes to her, doesn't she?”

“Oh, a line once in a blue moon, to say she's glad to hear May is well, and to complain of the great expense of living in London.”

“The selfish meanness of that woman is beyond belief.”

“Well—I don't know, Jo. She's a poor creature, certainly. But I feel more a sort of pity for her than anything else.”

“*Do* you? It's only out of contradiction, then.”

“Not altogether,” said Mrs. Dobbs, laughing good-humouredly. “I made her out pretty well that time I took May up to London before she went back to school.”

“Ah! I remember. You tried if the aunt would do anything to help.”

“Yes, I tried. It was right to try. But I very soon saw that there was nothing to be hoped for from that quarter. Mrs. Dormer-Smith has been brought up to live for the world and the world's ways. To be sure her world is a funny, artificial little affair compared with God Almighty's: pretty much as though one should take a teaspoonful of Epsom salts for the

sea. But, at any rate, I do believe she sincerely thinks it ought to be worshipped and bowed down to. It's no use to tell such a woman that she could do without this or that useless finery, and spend the money better. She'll answer you with tears in her eyes that it's *impossible*; and, what's more, she'll believe it. Why, if some Tomnoddy or other, belonging to what she calls "the best people," was to ordain to-morrow that nobody should eat his dinner unless he was waited on by a man with a long pigtail, that poor creature would know no peace, nor her meat would have no relish until a man with a pigtail stood behind her chair. That's Mrs. Dormer-Smith, Jo Weatherhead."

Mr. Weatherhead drew up his lips into the form of a round O, as his manner was when considering any matter of interest, and appeared to meditate a reply. But the reply was never spoken; for a brisk ring at the street door gave a new turn to his thoughts and those of his sister-in-law.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mrs. Dobbs, putting up her hands to settle her cap, and stretching out her feet with a sudden movement which made the old tabby on the hearthrug arch her

back indignantly. "Why, that must be the Simpsons! I didn't think it was so late. Just light the candles, will you, Jo? I hope Martha has remembered the roasted potatoes."

CHAPTER III.

THE Simpsons were old friends of Mrs. Dobbs. Mr. Simpson was organist of the largest parish church in Oldchester, where his father had been organist before him. To this circumstance he owed his singular Christian name. The elder Simpson, whose musical enthusiasm had run all into one channel, insisted on naming his son Sebastian Bach. Some men would have felt this to be a disadvantage for the profession of organist and music-teacher, as involving a suggestion of ridicule. But Mr. Sebastian Bach Simpson was not apt to be diffident about any distinguishing characteristic of his own. His wife had been a governess, and still gave daily lessons in sundry respectable Oldchester families. By an arrangement begun during her late husband's lifetime, this couple came every Saturday evening to sup with Mrs. Dobbs,

and to play a game of whist for penny points before the meal.

The two guests entered the parlour just as Mr. Weatherhead was lighting the candles.

“Dear me,” exclaimed Mrs. Simpson, “are we too early? I had no idea! Surely the choir practice was not over earlier than usual, Bassy?”

She was a large stout woman of forty, with a pink-and-white complexion and filmy brown curls; and she wore spectacles. She had once been very slim and pretty, and still retained a certain girlishness of demeanour. It has been said that a man is as old as he feels, and a woman as old as she looks. Mrs. Simpson had innocently usurped the masculine privilege; and, not feeling herself to be either wiser or less trivial than she was at eighteen, had never thought of trying to bring her manners into harmony with her appearance. Her husband was a short, dark man, with quick black eyes, and thick, stubby, black hair. His voice was singularly rasping and dissonant, which seemed an unfortunate incongruity in a professor of music. Such as he was, however, his wife had a great admiration for him, and considered his

talents to be remarkable. Her marriage, she was fond of saying, had been a love-match, and she had never got beyond the romantic stage of her attachment.

“Good evening, Mrs. Dobbs,” said the organist, advancing to shake hands, and taking no notice of his wife’s inquiry.

“How are you, Weatherhead? I suppose you were napping—having forty winks in the twilight, eh?”

“No, Mr. Weatherhead and I were chatting,” said Mrs. Dobbs.

“Chatting in this kind of blind man’s holiday, were you? I should have thought you could hardly see to talk!”

“See to talk! Oh, Bassy, what an expression! You do say the drollest things!” exclaimed Mrs. Simpson with a giggle. “Doesn’t he, Mrs. Dobbs? Did you ever hear——?”

Mrs. Dobbs, for all reply, hospitably stirred the fire until it blazed, helped Mrs. Simpson to remove her bonnet and cloak, and placed her in a chair near her own. Mr. Simpson took his accustomed seat, and the four persons drew round the fire, whilst Martha, Mrs. Dobbs’s middle-aged servant, set out a little card-table,

and disposed the candles on it in two old-fashioned, spindle-shanked, silver candlesticks. It was all done according to long-established custom, which was seldom deviated from in any particular.

“And how are you, dear Mrs. Dobbs?” asked Mrs. Simpson, taking her hostess’s hand between both her own. “And dear May—where’s May?”

“May has been away from home on a visit since yesterday morning. She won’t come back before Monday.”

“And may one ask where she is? It is not, I presume, a Mystery of Udolpho!”

“She is at the Hadlows’.”

“The Hadlows’? Canon Hadlow’s?” cried Mrs. Simpson, clasping her hands with a gesture of amazement. Then she added rather inconsistently, “Well, I’m not surprised. I know they have lately taken a great deal of notice of her. Miss Hadlow and she having been at school together, of course created an intimacy which—ah, the friendships of early youth, where they *are* genuine, have a warmth, a charm——”

“*Now*, Amelia!” interposed her husband’s

rasping voice. (This ejaculation was his habitual manner of recalling Mrs. Simpson's attention to the matter in hand, whatever it might be ; for the good lady's mind was discursive.) "If you'll be kind enough to leave off your nonsense, we can begin our game. Come and cut for partners."

An earnest whist player would have been outraged by the performances of the four persons who met weekly in Mrs. Dobbs's parlour. They chatted, they misdealt, they even revoked sometimes ; and they overlooked each other's misdemeanours with unscrupulous laxity. In a word, they regarded the noble game of whist merely as a means and not as an end, and were scandalously bent on amusing themselves regardless of Hoyle. The only one of the party who had any pretensions to play tolerably was Mr. Weatherhead. But even his attention was always to be diverted from his cards by a new piece of gossip. And perhaps it was as well that he did not take the game too much to heart—especially on the present occasion ; for the fair Amelia fell to his lot as a partner, and her performances with the cards were calculated to drive a zealous player into a nervous fever.

The first hand or two proceeded in decorous silence. But by degrees the players began to talk, throwing out first detached sentences, and at last boldly entering into general conversation.

“Bassy had a great deal of trouble with the choir this evening,” said Mrs. Simpson plaintively. “The sopranos were *so* inattentive! And inattention is so particularly—oh dear, I beg pardon, I *have* a diamond! Well, it does not much matter, for we couldn’t have made the odd trick in any case.”

“A nice business at Sheffield with those Trades Unions,” said Mr. Weatherhead. “Some severe measures ought to be taken; but they won’t be. That’s what your precious Liberalism comes to!—Your lead, Simpson.”

“Nonsense about Liberalism, Jo Weatherhead,” replied Mrs. Dobbs. “I believe you’d like to accuse the Liberals of the bad weather. There!—Did you ever see such a hand? One trump! and that fell. Mrs. Simpson playing out her knave misled me.”

“Oh, if you reckon on Amelia’s having any sufficient motive for playing one card more than another——” exclaimed Amelia’s husband.

“Have you heard, Mrs. Dobbs, that Mr. Bransby is getting better?”

“What Bransby is that?” asked Mr. Weatherhead, thrusting his head forward inquiringly.

“Cadell and Bransby, Solicitors to the Dean and Chapter.”

“Oh-o! He has been ill, then?”

“Very ill. But I hear he was pronounced out of danger on Wednesday.”

“Is it not good news?” cried Mrs. Simpson. “Such a misfortune for his young family! I mean if he had died, you know.”

“But I suppose he’s a warm man, isn’t he? Cadell and Bransby—it’s a fine business, isn’t it?” asked Mr. Weatherhead.

“It had need be,” rejoined the organist, “to maintain that tribe of boys and girls, and an extravagant young wife into the bargain.”

“Oh, Bassy, but they are such pretty children! And Mrs. Bransby is so truly elegant and interesting. All her bonnets come from Paris, I am told. And indeed there is a certain style—— Eh? You *don’t* mean to say that spades are trumps? What a disappointment! I thought I had all four honours.”

This ingenuous speech might have called

forth some remonstrance from Mrs. Simpson's partner, but that the latter was too much interested in the subject of the Bransbys to attend to it.

"The eldest son is provided for by his mother's fortune, isn't he?" he inquired.

"Well—'provided for;' I don't know that it is very much. But it was all tightly settled. Otherwise Bransby's second marriage would have been a greater misfortune for the young man than it is," replied the organist.

"I don't see that it is any misfortune at all," observed Mrs. Dobbs. "Theodore Bransby is quite well enough off for a young fellow. And why shouldn't his father marry again if he liked it?"

"He is an extremely gentlemanlike young man, is Mr. Theodore Bransby," said Mrs. Simpson. "I have been imparting daily instruction to the younger children, and I saw him rather frequently when he was at home during the University vacation. He is now reading for the Bar, you know, and I believe—Was that *your* knave, Mr. Weatherhead? Really! Then I have thrown away my queen. However," smiling amiably, "one can but take

the trick. I believe that Mr. Theodore Bransby means to go into Parliament later. There is really something of the statesman about him already, *I* think—a way of buttoning his coat to the chin, don't you know?"

"Is Theodore Bransby in Oldchester now?" asked Mrs. Dobbs, sorting her cards.

"Oh yes," replied Mr. Simpson. "I wonder you didn't know, for he is a great deal at Canon Hadlow's. They say he's making up to Miss Hadlow."

"O-ho! But there's Mrs. Hadlow's nephew, young Rivers," put in Mr. Weatherhead. "*He's* supposed to be dangling after his cousin, isn't he?"

"I should think young Rivers had better dangle after an employment that will give him bread and cheese. Miss Constance Hadlow won't have a penny."

"Oh, Bassy, but where there's real affection mercenary considerations must give way. True love—true love is above all!" As she uttered these words with great fervour, Mrs. Simpson flourished her arm enthusiastically, and in so doing swept off the table several coins which had served as counters to register her opponent's

score. The silver discs rolled swiftly away into various inaccessible corners of the room, with the perversity usually observed in such cases. Fortunately the game had just come to an end, and Martha had announced that the supper was ready. This circumstance, and the fact that her husband was a winner, spared Mrs. Simpson a sharp reprimand.

Mr. Simpson uttered, indeed, a few sarcastic croaks. “*Now, Amelia! There you go! Always up to some nonsense or other.*” But he watched Mr. Weatherhead and Martha as they crawled about on hands and knees to recover the missing shillings and sixpences, with considerable equanimity; merely observing that Amelia ought to be ashamed of herself for giving so much trouble.

When the supper was set on the table, three of the party, at least, were in high good humour, and disposed to enjoy it. Mr. Simpson had won, and was content. Mr. Weatherhead paid his losses without a murmur, conscious, no doubt, that they were due as much to his own wandering attention as to his partner's aberrations. As for Mrs. Simpson, the sweetness of her disposition was proof against far more

souring circumstances than having spoiled Jo Weatherhead's game. She was not the least out of humour with him. Mrs. Dobbs alone was a little more silent and a little less genial than usual. The talk that evening with her old friend had awakened painful thoughts of the past and anxieties for the future. She very rarely mentioned her son-in-law's name, even to Mr. Weatherhead, who was thoroughly in her confidence; and, whenever she did speak of him, the result was invariably to irritate and depress her. However, her hospitable instincts roused her to shake off her cares in some degree, and to make her friends welcome to the fare set before them.

When the more substantial part of the supper was disposed of, and a jug of hot punch steamed on the board, Mrs. Simpson, delicately tapping with her teaspoon on the edge of her tumbler, observed, with an air at once penetrating and amiable—

“Well, I'm sure it will be very gratifying to Mrs. Dormer-Smith when she hears that dear May has been invited to the Hadlows'.”

“H'm! I don't think Mrs. Dormer-Smith will lose her wits with joy,” answered Mrs. Dobbs drily.

“No? Oh, but surely——! She *must* feel it agreeable that her niece should be noticed by persons of such eminent gentility.”

Mrs. Dobbs would have dismissed the subject with a smile and a shake of the head, avoiding, as she always did, any discussion or even mention of her son-in-law's family; but Mr. Simpson interposed magisterially—

“If Mrs. Dormer-Smith isn't gratified, it must be because she is ignorant of the position held by Canon Hadlow's family in Oldchester.”

Mrs. Dobbs faced about upon this, and said bluntly, “My dear good man, all the best society of Oldchester put together would seem mighty small beer to Mrs. Dormer-Smith.”

“Oh, really!” returned Mr. Simpson, mortified and incredulous. “Such a very fine lady, is she? Well, ‘Dormer-Smith’ doesn't *sound* very aristocratic; but it may be, of course.”

“Mrs. Dormer-Smith *is* a fine lady, and accustomed to mix with still finer ladies. It's no use shutting one's eyes to facts. If we won't look at them, we only bump up against them, because they're there, all the same. As to opinions, that's different. I suppose I needn't say anything about mine at this time of day.

I'm a staunch Radical—always was, and always will be."

"Pooh, pooh! Call yourself a Radical!" said Mr. Weatherhead, laughing his peculiar laugh, which consisted of a series of guttural *ho, ho, ho's*. "You're convicted out of your own mouth of not being one. Whoever heard of a Radical that cared about facts?"

Mrs. Simpson put out her hand, and tapped him on the shoulder. "Now, now; that's very naughty of you," she exclaimed. "Politics are strictly forbidden on Saturday evenings by the ancient statutes of our society. Isn't it so, Mr. Dobbs? I appeal to the chair." And she threatened Mr. Weatherhead playfully with her forefinger, at the same time casting an arch look through her spectacles. Glasses are not favourable to any effective play of the eyes, and usually screen the most expressive of glances behind a ghastly glitter, void of all speculation. But of this consideration Mrs. Simpson was habitually oblivious. Then, by way of turning the conversation into more agreeable channels, she continued, "And, *à propos* of May, dear Mrs. Dobbs, when did you last hear from her papa?"

This simple inquiry startled the company into

absolute silence for a few moments. Mrs. Dobbs's resolute reserve on the subject of her son-in-law was so well known that none of her friends for several years past had ventured to mention him to her. Some refrained because they did not wish to hurt her; and many because they were afraid she might hurt them: for Mrs. Dobbs's uncompromising frankness of speech and force of character made her a hard hitter, when she did hit. But the specific levity of Mrs. Simpson's mind gave her a certain immunity from hard retorts—the immunity of a fly from a cannon ball. On the present occasion, however, she received no rebuke; for greatly to Jo Weatherhead's surprise, and somewhat to Mr. Simpson's, Mrs. Dobbs, after a brief pause, answered—

“I have not heard lately from Captain Cheffington. He is a bad correspondent. But we shall soon be obliged to communicate with each other. May is seventeen, and various arrangements will have to be made about her future.”

“Goodness!” exclaimed Mrs. Simpson, clasping her hands. “You don't mean to say that May isn't to remain with you?”

“That will depend on what is agreed on in the family. May must take her place in the world as Miss Cheffington, you know, and not as my grand-daughter.”

The Simpsons exchanged a glance of surprise. This was the first time they had heard Mrs. Dobbs assume any such position for her grand-child. Sebastian was inclined to resist her doing so now. But something in Mrs. Dobbs's manner checked him from expressing this feeling. It is generally found easier to criticize our friends' shortcomings when we are free from the disturbing element of their presence. The short remainder of the evening was passed in talking of other things. But on their way home Mr. and Mrs. Simpson discussed this new turn of affairs with some eagerness.

The organist considered that the notion of the Hadlows not being good enough company for the Dormer-Smiths was preposterous; and he feared that Mrs. Dobbs was giving herself airs. In reply to his wife's observations that Mrs. Dobbs was a “dear old soul,” he pointed out that, dear and good though she might be, yet her husband had kept an ironmonger's shop, and publicly sold hardware therein behind his

counter, to the knowledge of all Oldchester. This retort depended for its cogency on the understanding of an ellipsis; which, however, Mrs. Simpson was perfectly able to supply, for she answered immediately—

“Oh, I’m sure, Bassy, Mrs. Dobbs would never undervalue your position as a professional man. She knows very well that the Arts rank superior to trade.”

On the other hand, when Mrs. Simpson proceeded to opine that if May were taken up by her father’s family she would become quite a grand personage, Mr. Simpson declared, with a good deal of heat, that for his part he thought Mrs. Dobbs quite as good any day as the Cheffingtons, about whom nothing certain was known in Oldchester except that they were shabby in their dealings and “stuck-up” in their pretensions.

Mr. Weatherhead lingered behind the organist and his wife, to say a word to Mrs. Dobbs after their departure.

“I can tell you one thing, Sarah; what you said about May will be all over Oldchester by Monday.”

“So I guess.”

“O-ho! Then you mean it to be talked about?”

“I mean it to be known that May is to take her place in the world as Miss Cheffington.”

“But *is* she? That’s more than you can say, Sarah.”

“I shall have a try for it, Jo.”

Now whenever Mrs. Dobbs had said in that emphatic manner that she would “have a try” for anything, that thing, so far as Jo Weatherhead’s experience went, had infallibly come to pass. But with all his faith in his old friend, he could not help doubting her success in the present case. He was eagerly curious to know how she intended to proceed; but Mrs. Dobbs refused to say any more on the subject, delaring that she must think things over quietly.

“I don’t see it,” said Mr. Weatherhead to himself, poking forward his nose, and pursing up his lips as he walked homeward. “Sarah Dobbs is a wonderful woman, but even she can’t gather grapes from thorns. And in respect of justice or generosity—not to mention common honesty—I’m afraid all the Cheffingtons are rather thorny.”

CHAPTER IV.

AMONG other features peculiar to itself, Oldchester possesses a quadrangular building with an inner cloister, commonly called College Quad. It is in the immediate neighbourhood of the cathedral, and is divided into small tenements inhabited by clergy forming part of the cathedral body. At the back of the houses on the south side of the quadrangle, pleasant gardens slope down towards the river Wend. The cloister is a very beautiful piece of Gothic work, with fretted roof and springing pillars. Peace and quiet reign within it. In summer there comes a sleepy sound of rooks from the Bishop's garden close at hand ; and, towards sunrise and sunset, the chirp of innumerable sparrows mingled with the richer notes of thrush, blackbird, and nightingale in their season. At certain times of the day, too, the stillness is broken by the

thrilling freshness of children's voices, as the scholars of the ancient Grammar School scatter themselves over the Cathedral Green, shouting and calling in the shrill silvery treble of boyhood. But these sounds are softened and subdued by distance and thick masonry before they penetrate within the precincts of College Quad. In autumn and winter there is a chill dampness on the greenish-gray paving-stones of the cloister, and the rain drips heavily from carven capitals into the resounding court. The very order and cleanliness of the place—its decorous, clerical, smooth-shaven air—seem sometimes under a watery sky, and when the winds are moaning and complaining, or thrumming like ghostly fingers on the fine resonant Gothic fretwork, to fill the mind with melancholy.

A rich contrasting note is seldom wanting:—firelight and the glimpse of a crimson curtain seen through lozenge-shaped window-panes; or an open door sending out a gush of warmth and spicy smells from the kitchen, and the sound of friendly voices. Yet even within doors there seems to be a haunting sense of the old, old times when hands long crumbled into dust built up that dainty cloister, and when

patient monkish feet, long stilled for ever, paced its stones. It is not a wholly sad feeling. It may even give zest to the glance of living eyes, and the warm pressure of dear hands. But it has a peculiar pathos :—a pathos which, perhaps, is felt peculiarly by northern people, as the sad-sweet twilight belongs to northern climates, and which many of those, to the manner born, would not exchange for the unbroken garishness of golden-blue days and silver-blue nights.

The habitations on the south side of College Quad are considered the most desirable of all, by reason of the gardens before-mentioned running down to the Wend, although one or two houses on the west side may be a trifle larger. Canon Hadlow's family of three persons inhabited one of these coveted southern houses, and found it roomy enough for their needs ; yet it was a small—a very small—dwelling. The front door opened on to the beautiful cloister. Immediately on entering the house you found yourself in a tiny entrance-hall, to the left of which a steep and narrow staircase of dark oak conducted to the one upper story. On the right, a massive oaken-door gave access to a long, low parlour, whose three latticed windows

—darkened somewhat by a drooping fringe of jessamine and virginia-creeper—looked across the garden and the river to wide meadows. Opposite to the front door, a glass one, which in summer stood wide open all day long, led into the garden. In winter, swinging double-doors, covered with dark baize, shut out the cold air and the chill, damp mist which sometimes crept up from the river.

The exterior of the houses in College Quad was coeval with the Gothic cloister; within, the passing centuries had somewhat modified their aspect. The main features, however, were ancient, and most of the inhabitants had chosen to preserve this general air of antiquity. Only in some few cases had disastrous attempts at modernizing been made with paint and French wall-papers. It would have been needless to tell any Oldchester person that no such sacrilegious innovations deformed the fine oak beams and wainscoting in Canon Hadlow's house. There was a dark tone all through it, which, however, was not chill. It was rather the rich darkness of Rembrandt's shadows, which seem to have a latent glow in the heart of them. A deep red curtain here and there, or a well-worn

Turkey carpet, with its kaleidoscope of subdued tints, relieved the general sombreness. Flowers in all manner of receptacles—from a precious old china punch-bowl to the cheapest of glass goblets—adorned every room in the house throughout the year. Even in winter there was ivy to be had, and red-berried holly, and the coral clusters of the mountain ash, and pale chrysanthemums. The garden furnished an ample supply of stocks, roses, carnations, hollyhocks, china asters, sweetwilliams, wallflowers, and the like old-fashioned blossoms with homely names. But as Mrs. Hadlow herself quaintly remarked, she cared more for the sight and smell of a flower than its sound.

One sacrifice the flowers cost; the Hadlows had no lawn-tennis ground. Mrs. Hadlow declared she could not spare the space. Her neighbours to the right and left boasted of lawns which, with their white lines, looked like tables chalked on the pavement for the popular street game of hop-sotch—and were very little bigger. But the Hadlows' garden was a mosaic of box-bordered flower-beds. Only quite at the lower end, where a clipped hedge divided it from a footpath on the river bank, there was a

strip of green sward like a velvet carpet, spread completely across the garden. At one angle stood a yew-tree of fabulous age, and in its shadow were a garden bench and table, and a few rustic chairs. This was Mrs. Hadlow's drawing-room whenever the weather permitted her to be out-of-doors. There she sewed, and read, and received visits. The oak parlour, which served also as a dining-room, was the ordinary family living room. There was a small room called the study, lined with books from floor to ceiling; but drawing-room, properly so-called, there was none at all. Constance Hadlow was the only one of the family who regretted this circumstance. The canon was perfectly content with his abode. And as to Mrs. Hadlow, no one who valued her good opinion would have ventured to hint to her that her house lacked anything to make it convenient and delightful. An ill-advised stranger had once opined in her presence that the near neighbourhood of the river must make the south side of the College Quad damp and unhealthy during the autumn and winter, and Mrs. Hadlow's indignation had been boundless. That it was sometimes cold in College Quad she

was willing to admit—just as it was sometimes cold on the Riviera or in Cairo. But that it could, under any circumstances, or for the shortest space of time, be damp, was what she would never be brought to acknowledge. As to the Wend, if any exhalations did arise from that gentle stream, they could not, she was sure, be unwholesome—*above bridge*. It was important to bear in mind this limitation, since below bridge, where the factories were, and where the poorer dwellings stood in crowded ranks, and the streets vibrated to the rumble of heavy waggons and tramway cars, the Wend must naturally incur such corruption of its good manners as came from evil communications. Mrs. Hadlow loved and admired Oldchester with enthusiasm. But Oldchester, in her mind, meant the cathedral and its immediate surroundings. Her admiration was bounded by the cathedral precincts; and, to judge from her words, so was her love also. But her heart was not to be imprisoned within any such confines. Prejudice might rule her speech, and warp her judgments, but her warm human sympathies went out towards those unfortunates who dwelt beyond the pale, even

under the shadow of Bragg's factory chimney ; nay, even in those vulgar suburban villas, with fine names, which were particularly abhorrent to Mrs. Hadlow's soul.

The sun shone brightly on a group of persons assembled in Mrs. Hadlow's garden on the Monday forenoon after Mrs. Dobbs's supper-party. It was a sun more bright than warm ; and a little crisp breeze fluttered now and then among the scarlet and gold leaves of the virginia-creeper which draped the back of the house. Constance Hadlow, wrapped in a fleecy shawl, and sitting in a patch of sunshine outside the shadow of the yew-tree, declared it was "bitterly cold." Her opinion was evidently shared by a black-and-tan terrier that shivered convulsively at intervals with a sort of ostentation, as though to hint to the less sensitive bipeds that it was high time to retire to the shelter of a roof and the comforts of the hearth-rug. Mrs. Hadlow's round, rosy face seemed to shed a glow around it like a terrestrial sun, as she beamed from behind a great basket piled with grey woollen socks belonging to the canon : which socks were never darned by any other than his wife's fingers. Her nephew,

Owen Rivers, lounged on the bench beside her. Seated on a low chair, May Cheffington was winding a ball of grey worsted for the socks; and standing opposite to her, with his shoulder against the trunk of the yew-tree, was Mr. Theodore Bransby. This young gentleman had just said something which had startled the assembled company. He was not given to saying startling things. He would probably have pronounced it "bad form" to do so:—a phrase which, to his mind, carried with it the severest condemnation. He had merely observed, "You will all be sorry to lose Miss Cheffington, shall you not, Mrs. Hadlow?" quite unconscious of saying anything to cause surprise. Surprise, however, was plainly expressed on every countenance, including that of Miss Cheffington herself.

The fact was that rumour, speaking by the voices of Mr. and Mrs. Simpson, had already announced in Oldchester that May Cheffington was going away to live with her grand relations in London. The report had not yet penetrated College Quad, but it had been brought to the Bransbys' house that morning by Mrs. Simpson when she came to give her daily lesson to the children.

“Lose her! What do you mean?” asked Mrs. Hadlow.

“You’re not going to be married, are you, May?” cried Miss Constance, dropping her parasol in order to look full at the other girl; while Mr. Rivers, on the other hand, raised himself on his elbow and stared at young Bransby.

May laughed and coloured at her friend’s question. “Certainly not that I know of, Constance,” she answered.

“Are you going away, then?”

“You must ask Mr. Bransby. He seems to know; I don’t.”

As she spoke, May turned a pair of bright hazel eyes full on the young gentleman in question, and smiled. The admixture of Dobbs blood with the noble strain of Cheffington had certainly not produced any physical deterioration of the race. Yet the dowager had been discontented with her grand-daughter’s appearance, and had particularly lamented the absence of the Cheffington profile. Now the Cheffington profile was handsome enough in its way, in certain subjects and at a certain time of life; but with advancing years it was apt to resemble

the profile of an owl: the nose being beaky, and the orbit of the eyes very large, with eyebrows nearly semi-circular; while the chin tended to disappear in hanging folds and creases of throat. The Cheffingtons, moreover, were sallow and dark-haired. May inherited her mother's fair skin and soft brown hair. Her slender young figure, not yet fully grown, was rather below than above the middle height. She had the healthy, though delicate, freshness of a field-flower; but, like the field-flower, she might easily pass unnoticed. There was nothing of high or dazzling beauty about May Cheffington, but she had that subtle attraction which does not always belong to beauty. A great many persons, however, thought she did not bear comparison with Constance Hadlow, her friend and schoolfellow. Besides a firm faith in her own beauty—which is a more powerful assistance to its recognition by others than is generally supposed—Miss Hadlow possessed a pair of fine dark eyes and eyebrows, a clear, pale skin, regular features, and white teeth. Those who were disposed to be critical observed that her face and head were rather too massive for her height; and that her figure,

sufficiently plump at present, threatened to become too fat as she approached middle life. But at twenty years of age that would have appeared a very remote contingency to Constance Hadlow, supposing her to have ever thought about it. Although circumstances often prevented her from being dressed after the latest fashion, her hair—dark, wavy, and abundant—was always skilfully arranged in the prevalent mode, whatever that might be. It happened just then to be a becoming one to Miss Hadlow's head and face. The crimson colour of the shawl wrapped round her made a fine contrast with the creamy pallor of her skin and the vivid darkness of her eyes. Altogether, she looked handsome enough to excuse Owen Rivers for finding it difficult to remove himself from her society, supposing Mr. Simpson's statement to be true that the young man was "dangling after his cousin instead of minding his business."

Theodore Bransby, on being called upon to explain himself, answered that he understood Miss Cheffington was shortly going to London to reside with her aunt, Mrs. Dormer-Smith.

"Oh no, I'm not," said May promptly, before

any one else could speak. "That is quite a mistake."

"Indeed!"

"Oh yes, indeed it is. I'm going to stay with granny."

"Indeed!" said Theodore Bransby once more. Then he added, "Are you quite sure? Because I had it from a person who had it from Mrs. Dobbs herself."

"From granny?" In her astonishment May let fall the ball of worsted. It rolled across the grass under the very nose of the toy terrier, who snapped at it, and then shivered more strongly than ever with an added sense of injury.

"Very likely nothing is positively settled yet," continued Theodore. "Mrs. Dobbs was speaking of family arrangements for the future."

"Then I suppose," said May, with an anxious look, "that she has heard from papa?"

"Yes, I believe so; something was said about a communication from Captain Cheffington."

There was a little pause. Then Mrs. Hadlow said, "Well, of course we shall be sorry to lose you, my dear, as Theodore says. But it is quite right that you should be amongst your own people, and be properly introduced."

“Granny is my own people,” returned May in a low voice.

“Of course; and a most kind and excellent grandmother she is. But I mean—in short, since it is Mrs. Dobbs’s own plan, we must suppose she thinks it best for you to go to town; and I must say I agree with her.”

“It is obviously necessary,” said young Bransby. “Miss Cheffington will have, of course, to be presented.”

“Why, you look quite glum, May!” cried Constance laughing. “Oh, you little goose! I only wish I had the chance of going to town to be presented.”

Owen Rivers, who had hitherto been silent, now addressed May, and asked her if she disliked her aunt.

“Dislike Aunt Pauline? Oh no; I don’t dislike her at all. But I—I don’t know her very well.”

“I thought,” said Bransby, “that you had been in the habit of staying with Mrs. Dormer-Smith during the school vacations?”

“No; before Grandmamma Cheffington died I used to go to Richmond, and I only saw Aunt Pauline now and then. Since that time I

haven't seen her at all, for I've spent all my holidays with dear granny."

Constance began to question young Bransby as to who had given him the news about May's departure; what it was that had been said; whether the time of her going away were positively fixed; and so forth. May rose, and, under cover of picking up her ball of worsted, walked away out of earshot.

"Are you that phenomenon, a young lady devoid of curiosity, Miss Cheffington?" asked Owen Rivers, as she passed near him.

"Oh, there's nothing to be curious about," returned the girl, flushing a little. "Granny and I shall talk it all over together this evening. I need not trouble myself about what other people may say or guess."

Miss Hadlow had apparently forgotten that it was "bitterly cold:" for she continued to sit on the lawn talking with Theodore after the others had gone into the house. She moved at length from her seat at the summons of the luncheon-bell. Fox the terrier, more consistent, had availed himself of the breaking-up of the little party to hasten indoors and establish himself on the dining-room hearthrug:—a step

which nothing but his unconquerable dislike to being alone, had prevented him from taking long ago.

When the two loiterers at length entered the dining-room, Mrs. Hadlow announced that May had gone home. Her grandmother had sent the servant for her a little earlier than usual, and May had refused to remain for luncheon. The young girl's absence gave an opportunity for discussing her and her prospects; and they were discussed accordingly, as the party sat at table.

Mrs. Hadlow expressed great satisfaction at hearing that May was to be received and accepted "as a Cheffington;" Constance inclined to think that May would not duly appreciate her good fortune; and Theodore Bransby observed stiffly, that Miss Cheffington's removal to town had always been inevitable, and that the date of it alone could have been matter for uncertainty to persons who knew anything of the Cheffington family.

"Well," said Rivers, "I suppose Constance is the only one of us here present who possesses that knowledge."

"No; I never knew much of them," answered

his cousin. "I saw them occasionally when I was at school. Sometimes the dowager came down to stay at Brighton, and she used, now and then, to call for May in her carriage; but she never entered the doors. And once or twice Mrs. Dormer-Smith came. I remember we girls used to make game of old Mrs. Cheffington with her black wig and her airs."

"She was thoroughly *grande dame*, I believe," said Theodore Bransby.

"Very likely. The servants used to say she was dreadfully stingy, and call her an old cat. Mrs. Dormer-Smith had nice manners, and was always beautifully dressed."

"Your information is somewhat sketchy, my dear Constance; but no doubt the outline is correct as far as it goes," observed Rivers.

"Decidedly sketchy!" said Mrs. Hadlow, who was helping her guests to minced mutton.

"Miss Hadlow, however, is *not* the only one of us who knows anything about the Cheffingtons," said young Bransby, with his grave air.

"Oh, dear me, I had forgotten!" interposed Mrs. Hadlow, after a quick glance at the young man's face. "To be sure, Theodore has visited the family in town. The fact is, Theodore has

been a stranger himself so long, that we have had no opportunity of hearing his report. Tell us what the Dormer-Smiths are like, Theodore, since you know them."

"Like? They are like people who move in the best society—like thoroughbred people," returned Theodore, drawing himself up, stiffly.

"Poor little May!" said Mrs. Hadlow, thoughtfully. "She's a sweet little thing. I hope they'll be kind to her."

"Do you know anything of Mrs. Dobbs, Aunt Jane?" asked Rivers. "I mean," he added, "of course, you know *of* her. But do you know her?"

"Oh yes. Once, many years ago, the canon had a tough battle with Mrs. Dobbs, when he was helping to canvas for the city member. We couldn't get her husband's vote for the right side. But he was a worthy man, and sold very good ironmongery. When Constance first asked leave to invite her schoolfellow here, I had an interview with Mrs. Dobbs. She came to the point at once. She said, 'Mrs. Hadlow, you need not be uneasy. My friends and equals are not yours; but neither are they my grand-daughter's. She belongs by her father's family

to a different class. As for me, I am too old to make any mistakes about my place in the world, and too proud to wish to change it."

"Too proud!" repeated Bransby, with raised eyebrows.

"I thought it was very well said," answered Mrs. Hadlow. "I only wish all the people of her class had the same honest pride. But Mrs. Dobbs is a woman of great good sense, and of the highest integrity. All the same, of course, now that May is grown up, the girl's position in that house is too anomalous. Captain Cheffington no doubt feels that. He probably left his daughter there so long out of tenderness to Mrs. Dobbs's feelings; and perhaps also to help out the old lady's income. But now, naturally, it must come to an end. He can't sacrifice May's future. That is how I explain the state of the case; and it seems to me to be creditable to all concerned."

"At all events, it is creditable to Mrs. Dobbs, Aunt Jane," said Rivers.

"And why not, pray, to Captain Cheffington too?" asked Constance. "But Captain Cheffington has the misfortune to be born a gentleman, so, of course, Owen disapproves of him."

“Not at all, ‘of course.’ But I agree with you as to the misfortune—for the other gentlemen, at all events!”

“I think you’re a little mistaken about Captain Cheffington, Rivers,” said Theodore. “He’s a friend of mine.”

“In that case I’m very sorry,” answered Owen drily.

Mrs. Hadlow here interposed, rising from the table with a show of cheerful bustle. “Come,” said she, “you children must not loiter here all day. The canon comes home from Wendhurst by the three-forty train, and I am going to meet him; Constance has an engagement with the Burtons; and as for you two boys, I shall turn you out without ceremony.”

The kind lady’s intention had been to break off the discourse between the two young men, which threatened to become disagreeable. But as Bransby and Rivers walked away side by side through the fretted cloister of College Quad, the former, with a certain quiet doggedness which belonged to him, returned to the subject.

“You must understand,” he said, “that I am not very intimate with Captain Cheffington;

but I know him, and am his debtor for some courteous attentions. And I think you are a little—rash, if you don't mind my saying so, in condemning him."

"I don't at all mind your saying so."

"You see, there are a great many circumstances to be taken into account, in judging of Captain Cheffington's career. In the first place, there was his unfortunate marriage."

CHAPTER V.

WHEN Augustus Cheffington had paid that sudden visit to his mother-in-law which resulted in leaving May on her hands, Theodore Bransby happened to be at home during a University vacation, and was flattered by Captain Cheffington's notice. The fact was that Augustus found himself greatly bored and out of his element in Oldchester, and was glad to accept a dinner or two from Mr. Bransby, the solicitor to the Dean and Chapter; for Mr. Bransby's port wine was unimpeachable. He had also condescended to play several games of billiards with Theodore upon a somewhat mangy old table in the Green Dragon Hote; and to smoke that young gentleman's cigars without stint; and to hold forth about himself in the handsomest terms, pleased to be accepted, apparently, pretty much at his own valuation. Theodore Bransby was no fool.

But he was young, and he had his illusions. These were not of a high-flown, ideal cast. He would have shrugged his shoulders at any one who should set up for philanthropy, or poetry, or socialism, or chivalry. But he was subdued by a display of nonchalant disdain for all the things and persons which he had been accustomed to look up to, from childhood. Mr. Bragg, the great tin-tack manufacturer, his father's wealthiest client, was dismissed by Augustus Cheffington in two words: "Damned snob!" and even the bishop he pronounced to be a "prosin' old prig," and spoke of the bishop's wife as "that vulgar fat woman." These indications of superiority, together with many references to the noble and honourable Castlecombes and Cheffingtons who composed Augustus's kith and kin, had greatly fascinated Theodore. And Augustus had completed his conquest over the young man by giving him a letter of introduction to his sister, Mrs. Dormer-Smith, which letter was delivered when young Bransby went to London to read for the Bar.

Although the brother and sister had parted not on the best terms with each other, yet Augustus had not hesitated to give the intro-

duction. He believed that his sister would be willing to honour his recommendation by showing civilities which cost her nothing; and, moreover, he was quite indifferent (being then on the point of saying a long farewell to Oldchester) as to whether the Dormer-Smiths snubbed young Bransby or not. They did not snub him. Mrs. Dormer-Smith rather approved of his manners; and it was quite clear that he wanted neither for means nor friends. She was therefore inclined to receive him with something more than politeness. And, in justice to Pauline, it must be said that she was really glad of the opportunity to please her brother. She was not without fraternal sentiments; and she strongly felt that an introduction from a Cheffington to a Cheffington was not a document to be lightly dishonoured. As for Mr. Dormer-Smith, although his feelings towards his brother-in-law—never very cordial—had been exacerbated by having to pay the bill for the dowager's funeral expenses, yet his resentment had been to some degree soothed by Augustus's abrupt departure, and by his withdrawal of May from her aunt's house. For many years past the attachment of Augustus's relations for

him had increased in direct proportion to the distance which divided him from them. In Belgium he was tolerated and pitied; had he gone to the Antipodes he would doubtless have been warmly sympathized with; and it might safely be prophesied that, when he should finally emigrate from this planet altogether, the surviving members of the family would be penetrated by a glow of affection.

“I think he’s rather nice, Frederick,” said Mrs. Dormer-Smith, with a little sigh of relief after young Bransby’s first visit.

“We may be thankful,” returned her husband, “that Augustus has sent us a possible person. One never can reckon on what he may choose to do.”

“Mr. Bransby is quite possible. Indeed, I think he is nice. He shall have a card for my Thursdays.”

In this way Theodore had been received by Mrs. Dormer-Smith, and had established himself in her good opinion on further acquaintance. “He was,” she said, “so quiet and so safe.” At this time May Cheffington was still at school, being maintained there, as has been recorded, by her grandmother Dobbs; and

Pauline would occasionally speak of her niece to young Bransby. She always spoke kindly, though plaintively, of the girl, over whom there hung the shadow of the unfortunate marriage.

Theodore Bransby was an Oldchester person, and could not, therefore, be supposed to be ignorant of that lamentable event. The fact was, however, that he had never heard a word about it until he made Captain Cheffington's acquaintance in his native city. It had taken place before he was born; and, indeed, Oldchester had been less agitated by the marriage, even at the time when it happened, than any Cheffington or Castlecombe would have believed possible. But Pauline found young Bransby's sentiments on the subject all that they should be. No one could have expressed himself more shocked at the idea of a gentleman's marrying a person in Susan Dobbs's rank of life than did this solicitor's son. And Mrs. Dormer-Smith had not the least suspicion that he would have considered such a marriage quite as shocking a *mésalliance* for himself as for Captain Cheffington. "Misunderstanding" is used as a synonym for "discord;" but, perhaps, a great deal of social harmony depends on misunderstandings.

Theodore could not, of course, have the slightest personal interest in a schoolgirl whom he had never seen ; but his sympathies were so entirely with the Cheffingtons on the question of the unfortunate marriage as to inspire him with an odd feeling of antagonism against Mrs. Dobbs, and a sense that she ought to be firmly kept in her place. He secretly thought Mrs. Dormer-Smith weakly indulgent in allowing Miss Cheffington to associate so freely with her grandmother, and was indignant at the idea of that plebeian exercising any authority over Lord Castlecombe's grandniece. However, all that would doubtless come to an end when the girl left school, and was introduced into society under her aunt's protection. Theodore flattered himself that he thoroughly understood the position. As for Viscount Castlecombe, he certainly knew all about *him*—or, at least, what was chiefly worth knowing ; for he had read about him in the Peerage.

Primed with this varied knowledge, young Bransby held forth to Owen Rivers as they walked together through College Quad, across the open green beyond it, and up to the house of Mr. Bransby, senior, in the Cathedral Close.

Here they parted. Rivers declined a polite invitation from the other to enter, and pursued his way alone towards the High Street; and Bransby, as he waited for the door to be opened, stood looking after him for a few moments.

The two young men had known each other more or less all their lives, but theirs was a familiarity without real intimacy. The years had not made them more congenial to each other. People began to say that they were rivals in Constance Hadlow's good graces. But, whether this were so or not, the latent antagonism between them had existed long before they grew to be men. They had never quarrelled. The air is always still enough in a frost. They did not even know how much they disliked one another. As Theodore watched Owen's retreating figure, the thought uppermost in his mind was that his friend's shooting-coat was badly cut, and that he did not remember ever to have seen him wear gloves.

The home of Mr. Martin Bransby, of the old-established firm of Cadell and Bransby, was a luxurious one. The house was an ancient substantial stone building, with a spacious walled garden behind it, contiguous to the

bishop's. The present occupant had made considerable additions to it. It is perhaps needless to say that he had been severely criticized for doing so, there being no point on which it is more difficult to content public opinion than the expenditure of one's own money. Several of Mr. Bransby's acquaintances were unable to reconcile themselves to the fact that he was not satisfied with that which had satisfied his father and grandfather (for Martin Bransby was the third of his family who had successively held that house and the business of solicitor to the Dean and Chapter of Oldchester). It would have been better, they opined, if, instead of building new rooms, he had saved his money to provide for the young family rising around him. If it were observed to this irreconcilable party that the presence of a numerous family necessitated more space to lodge them in than the original house afforded, they would triumphantly retort, "Very well, then, what business had Martin Bransby to marry a second time? Or, if he must marry, why did he choose a young girl without a penny instead of some person nearer his own age and with a little property?" Martin Bransby, however,

marrying rather to please himself than to earn the approval of his friends, had chosen a remarkably pretty girl of twenty, a Miss Louisa Lutyer, of a good Shropshire family, whom he had met in London. They had now been married twelve years, during which time five children had been born to them, and they had lived together in the utmost harmony. Those persons who disapproved of the match (solely in Mr. Bransby's interests, of course) could find nothing worse to say than that Martin was absurdly in love with his wife, and treated her with weak indulgence. In short, the irreconcilables were driven, year by year, to put off the date at which their unfavourable judgments were to be corroborated by facts, much as sundry popular preachers have been compelled by circumstances over which they had no control, to postpone the end of the world.

Latterly they had had the mournful satisfaction of observing that Martin Bransby was looking far from well—harassed and aged. And when he was attacked by the severe illness which threatened his life, they solemnly hinted that the malady had been aggravated by anxiety about his young family; for although Martin

had made, and was making, a great deal of money, yet, with three boys to put out in the world, two daughters to provide for, and an extravagant wife to maintain, even the excellent business of Cadell and Bransby *must* be somewhat strained to supply his needs.

At any rate, the evidences of wealth and comfort were as abundant as ever in the home which Theodore entered when he parted from his friend. There was plenty of solid furniture, dating from the dark ages before modern æstheticism had arisen to reform upholstery and teach us the original sinfulness of the prismatic colours. But these relics of the earlier part of the century were not to be found in the two spacious drawing-rooms, which had been arranged by the fashionablest of fashionable house-decorators from London. These rooms, together with a tiny cabinet behind them, which was styled "The Boudoir," were Mrs. Bransby's special domain. And here Theodore found her seated by the fireside. A book lay on her knees; but she was not reading it. She was resting in a position of complete repose, with her head leaning against the back of the chair, her hands carelessly crossed on her lap, and

her feet supported on a cushion. She was enjoying the sense of bodily and mental rest which comes from the removal of a keen-edged anxiety; for during several weeks Mrs. Bransby had been the most devoted of sick-nurses, and had scarcely left her husband's room. But now the doctors had pronounced all danger to be over; the children's active feet and shrill voices were no longer hushed down by warning fingers; the housemaid sang over her brooms and dusters; and the mistress of the house had unpacked and put on a new "tea-gown," which had lain neglected for more than a fortnight in its brown-paper wrappings. From the golden-brown clusters of hair on her forehead to the tip of her dainty shoe every detail of her appearance was cared for minutely. Yet there was nothing of stiffness or affectation. She reminded one of an exquisitely-tended hothouse flower, and carried her beauty and her toilet with as perfect an air of unconscious refinement as the flower itself. Certainly Oldchester held no more lovely and graceful figure than Mrs. Bransby presented to the eyes of her stepson. Yet the eyes of her stepson rested on her with a glance of cool disapprobation. His manner of

addressing her, however, was not more chilly than his manner of addressing most other persons—perhaps rather less so; and he was scrupulously polite.

“Did Hatch give a good account of my father this morning?” he asked, seating himself by the fire opposite to Mrs. Bransby.

“Excellent, thank goodness! He is to drive out on Wednesday, if the weather is favourable. I felt so soothed and comforted by Dr. Hatch’s report, that I thought I would indulge myself with half an hour of perfect laziness,” added Mrs. Bransby, with a deprecating glance at Theodore. She constantly reproved herself for assuming an apologetic attitude towards her stepson, but constantly recurred to it; she was so keenly conscious of his—always unexpressed—criticism.

“Mrs. Hadlow desired to send word that the canon means to call on my father this afternoon, if he is well enough to see him.”

“Oh yes; a talk with Canon Hadlow will do him good.” Then, after an instant’s pause, Mrs. Bransby asked, “Have you been in College Quad, then?”

“I lunched with Mrs. Hadlow. Rivers was

there ; I parted from him just now. And Miss Cheffington."

"Oh, really? Mrs. Hadlow is very kind to that little May Cheffington."

Theodore made no answer, but looked stiffly at the fire.

Mrs. Bransby went on: "I saw her in the cathedral at afternoon service yesterday, with the Hadlows. It struck me she was growing quite pretty. Don't you think so?"

"I should not call her *pretty*——" began Theodore slowly.

Mrs. Bransby broke in: "Well, of course, she is eclipsed by Constance. Constance is so very handsome. But still——"

"I should not describe Miss Cheffington as *pretty*," pursued Theodore, in an inflexible kind of way. "She is something more than pretty. She looks thoroughbred."

"But that's exactly what she is *not*, isn't it?" exclaimed Mrs. Bransby impulsively.

"I am not sure that I apprehend you."

"I mean her mother was quite a common person, was she not?"

"A woman takes her husband's rank."

"Yes; but she doesn't inherit his ancestors.

Besides, one really doesn't know much about the father, for that matter. To be sure, Simmy was making a great flourish about May's grand relations in London this morning. But then all poor dear Simmy's geese are swans." (The name of "Simmy" had been bestowed on Mrs. Simpson by the youngest little Bransby but one; and although the elder children were reproved for using it, the appellation had come to be that by which she was most familiarly known in the Bransby family.)

"Mrs. Simpson is a silly person, but her information happens, in this case, to be correct," returned Theodore. "The relations with whom Miss Cheffington is going to live in London are friends of mine."

"Oh! Then what Simmy said is true?" said Mrs. Bransby simply.

Theodore proceeded, with a scarcely perceptible hesitation, "I think you might invite Miss Cheffington here before she goes to town. I—I should be obliged to you for the opportunity of showing her some attention, in return for the Dormer-Smiths' kindness to me in London."

"Yes, I can ask the girl if you like," answered

Mrs. Bransby, not quite as warmly as Theodore thought she ought to have answered such a suggestion from him; "but it will be rather stupid for her, I'm afraid. At the Hadlows' there is a young girl near her own age; but here, unless she likes to play with the children, I don't see how we are to amuse her."

"I did not contemplate Miss Cheffington's playing with the children. I meant that you should invite her to a dinner-party, or something of that sort."

"Invite May Cheffington to a dinner-party!" repeated Mrs. Bransby, opening her soft, brown eyes in astonishment.

"My father spoke of giving a dinner before I go back to the Temple, and he said he thought he should be well enough to see his friends by the end of next week."

"Yes. He talked of inviting the Pipers, and the Hadlows, and perhaps Mr. Bragg."

"Could you not include Miss Cheffington? Perhaps if you allowed me to see your list I might help to arrange it."

"Oh, I suppose one *could*; but wouldn't it seem a very strange thing to do?"

A little colour came into Theodore's pale fair

face, and his chin grew visibly more rigid above his cravat, as he answered, "I don't know. But the social *convenances* are not to be measured by Oldchester's provincial ideas as to their strangeness. And—pardon me—I don't think you quite understand Miss Cheffington's position."

And then he entered on an explanation of the "position," much as he had explained it to Owen Rivers; with only such suppressions and variations (chiefly regarding the private history of Augustus Cheffington) as he thought the difference between his hearers demanded.

"Well, I'm sure if your father has no objection, I have none," said Mrs. Bransby at length. And so Theodore got his own way. It was a matter of course that he should get his own way so far as his stepmother was concerned. Mrs. Bransby had, indeed, successfully resisted him on many occasions; but always through the medium of her husband. If Theodore attacked her face to face, she never had the courage to oppose him. Not that in the present case she very much wished to oppose him. Nor, in truth, had their wills ever clashed seriously. But the secret consciousness of her weakness and timidity was mortifying: for

Mrs. Bransby, although too gentle to fight, was not too gentle to wish she could fight. And after Theodore had left the room, she sat for some time imagining to herself various neat and pointed speeches which would doubtless have brought down her stepson's sententious, supercilious tone, if she had only had the presence of mind to utter them. ✓

CHAPTER VI.

MAY CHEFFINGTON went back to her grandmother's house, very eager to understand the origin of the rumours about herself which she had heard at the Hadlows'. Mrs. Dobbs had not calculated on this, and would have preferred to break the project to May herself, and in her own fashion. However, as it had been mentioned, she spoke of it openly. She merely cautioned her grand-daughter against rashly jumping at any conclusions: the future being very vague and unsettled.

“There's one conclusion I *have* jumped at, granny,” said the girl, “and that is, that I don't mean to give you up for any aunts, or uncles, or cousins of them all. They are strangers to me, and I don't care a straw about them—how should I?—whilst *you* are—granny!”

“There is no question of giving me up, May. Perhaps I should not like that much better than you would. But if your father should think it right for you to stay for a while with his family, we mustn't oppose him. And I must tell you that I should think it right, too.”

“Oh, if it's only staying ‘for a while’——!”

“Well, at all events we needn't look beyond a ‘while’ and a short while, for the present.”

Mrs. Dobbs found it more difficult than she had anticipated to put before May the prospect of being removed from Oldchester altogether, and, now that the idea of losing May out of her daily life fully presented itself, she felt a grip at the heart which frightened her. But she had one of those strong characters whose instinct it is to hide their wounds and suffer silently; and she resolutely put aside her own pain at this prospect—or rather, put it off to the solitary hours to come.

During the four years since her father had left her at Oldchester, May's life had been passed between her school at Brighton and her holidays in Oldchester. These had certainly been the happiest years she could remember in all her young life. Her grandmother's house

had been the first real home she had ever known. Her recollections of their life on the Continent were dim and melancholy. She remembered fragmentary scenes and incidents in certain dull Flemish towns; their strong-smelling gutters, their toppling gables, the *carillons* sounding high up in some ancient cathedral belfry. She had a vision of her mother's face, very pale and thin, with large bright eyes, and streaks of gray in the brown hair. May, as the youngest of Susan Cheffington's children, had come in for the worst part of their Continental life. The earlier years, when there was still some money to spend, and fewer debts to be run away from, had not been quite devoid of brightness. But poor little May's conscious observation had little to take note of at home save poverty, sickness, domestic dissensions, and frequent migrations from one shabby lodging to another. Then her mother died, and some six or eight months afterwards she was brought to England, and—Fate and the dowager so willing it—was sent to school to Mrs. Drax in Brighton. The choice of this school proved to be a very fortunate one for the little motherless stranger. And perhaps the

credit of it ought fairly to be assigned rather to Destiny than the dowager. The latter would have selected a more fashionable, pretentious, and expensive establishment had she consulted merely her idea of what was becoming and suitable for Miss Miranda Cheffington. But she soon found out that whatever was paid for that young lady's schooling must, sooner or later, come out of her own pocket, and she therefore preferred to honour Mrs. Drax with her patronage, rather than Madame Liebrecht, who had been governess for years in a noble family, and was supposed to accept no pupil who could not show sixteen quarterings; or, of course, their equivalent in cash. ✓

The choice made was, as has been said, very fortunate for May. Mrs. Drax had the manners of a gentlewoman, and more amiability than could perhaps have been reasonably expected to survive a long struggle with her special world—a world of parents and guardians, who held, for the most part, a liberal view of her duties and a niggardly one of her rights. Here little May Cheffington remained as a pupil for nearly eight years. During the first half of that time she sometimes spent her holidays with the

dowager at Richmond, and sometimes in Brighton under the care of Mrs. Drax. She preferred the latter. Old Mrs. Cheffington did not treat the child with any active unkindness; but she showed her no tenderness. The little girl was usually left to the care of her grandmother's maid—an elderly woman, to whom this young creature was merely an extra burthen not considered in her wages. The child passed many a lonely hour in the garden, or beside the dining-room fire with a book, unheeded. Her aunt Pauline she only saw at rare intervals. She had a confused sense of innocently causing much sorrow to Mrs. Dormer-Smith, who seemed always to be afflicted (why, May did not for several years understand) by the sight of her clothes; and who used to complain softly to the dowager that “the poor dear child was lamentably dressed.” But, on the whole, she retained a rather agreeable impression of her aunt, as being pretty and gentle, and kissing her kindly when they met.

Then came the dowager's death, the sudden journey to Oldchester, and the first acquaintance with that unknown Grandmother Dobbs, whose

very name she had heard uttered only in a reproachful tone by the dowager, or in a hushed voice by the dowager's elderly maid, speaking as one who names a hereditary malady. And to this *taboo* Grandmother Dobbs the neglected child soon gave the warm love of a very grateful and affectionate nature. May did not know or guess that she was a burthen on her grandmother's means, nor would the knowledge have increased her gratitude at that time. It was the fostering affection which the child was thankful for. She nestled in it like a half-fledged bird in the warm shelter of the mother's wing. She was not timid or reserved by temperament; but the circumstances of her life had given her a certain repressed air. That disappeared now like hoar-frost in the sunshine. She was like a young plant whose growth had been arrested by a too chilly atmosphere. She burgeoned and bloomed into the natural joyousness of childhood, which needs, above all things, the warmth of love, and cannot be healthily nurtured by any artificial heat.

In her school there was no influence tending to diminish May's attachment to her grandmother, or her perfect contentment with the

simple *bourgeois* home in Oldchester. Plain Mrs. Dobbs, who paid her bills punctually, and listened to reason, stood far higher in the schoolmistress's esteem than the Honourable Mrs. Cheffington, who was never contented, and required to be dunned for the payment of her just debts. As to her noble relations, May had no acquaintance with them, and never sighed to make it. She was ignorant of the very existence of many of them. When, at seventeen years of age, she was removed from school, she looked forward to living in the old house in Friar's Row, and she certainly desired no better home. Mrs. Drax, it has been said, had the manners of a gentlewoman, and she had not vulgarized May's natural refinement of mind by misdirecting her admiration towards ignoble things. The provincialisms in her grandmother's speech, and the homely style of her grandmother's household—although she clearly perceived both—neither shocked nor mortified May. On the other hand, she accepted it as a quite natural thing that she should be invited to Canon Hadlow's house as a guest on equal terms. As Mrs. Dobbs had said to Jo Weatherhead, May was very much

of a child still, and understood nothing of the world. Her unquestioning acceptance of the situation as her grandmother presented it to her had something very childlike. She did not inquire how it came to pass that her aunt Pauline, who had taken very little notice of her during the past four years, should now desire to have her as an inmate of her home. She did not ask why her father, after so long a torpor on the subject, had suddenly awakened to the necessity of asserting his daughter's position in the world; neither did she, even in her private thoughts, reproach him for having delegated all the care and responsibility of her education to "granny." A healthy-minded young creature has deep well-springs of unquestioning faith in its parents, or those who stand in the place of parents.

But there was one person not so easily contented with the first statement offered; and that person was Mr. Joseph Weatherhead. Mr. Weatherhead was very fond of May, and admired her very much. His social and political theories ought logically to have made him regard her with peculiar interest and consideration as coming of such very blue blood—at

least on one side of the house. But it so happened that these theories had nothing on earth to do with his attachment to May. That arose, firstly, from her being Sarah Dobbs's grandchild (Jo would have loved and championed any creature, biped or quadruped, that belonged to Sarah Dobbs), and, secondly, from her being very lovable. The poor man was often embarrassed by the conflict between his curiosity and his principles. His curiosity, which was as insatiable and omnivorous as the appetite of a pigeon, would have led him to cross-question May minutely about all she knew or guessed respecting her own future, and the probable behaviour of her father's family towards her; but his conscience told him that it would not be right to put doubts and suspicions into the girl's trusting young soul. Certainly he himself cherished many doubts and suspicions as to the future conduct of May's papa. He questioned Mrs. Dobbs, indeed; but there was neither sport nor exercise for his sharp inquisitiveness in that. When Mrs. Dobbs did not choose to answer him, she said so roundly, and there was an end. She had told him that she was in correspondence with Captain

Cheffington, and that she believed he would share her views about his daughter. Jo, however, entertained a rooted disbelief as to Captain Cheffington's holding any "views" which had not himself for their supreme object.

"And this Mrs. Dormer-Smith, now, Sarah," said he. "What reason have you to suppose that she will be willing to take charge of her niece now; when she would have nothing to say to her before?"

"A pretty girl of seventeen is a different charge from a lanky child of twelve, Jo. Mrs. Dormer-Smith couldn't have taken a schoolgirl in short frocks out into the world with her."

"Humph! You don't *know* that she will take May out into the world with her?"

"I have written. I shall have an answer in a few days, I dare say. I don't expect matters to be settled like a flash of greased lightning, as Mr. Simpson says. There's a deal to be considered. Hold your tongue, now; here's May."

Similar conversations took place between them nearly every day. And when they were not interrupted by any external circumstance, Mrs. Dobbs would resolutely put an end to them by declining to pursue the subject.

One afternoon, about a week after May's return from her visit to the Hadlows', the young girl was seated at the old-fashioned square pianoforte, singing snatches of ballads in a fresh, untrained voice; Mr. Weatherhead had just taken his accustomed seat by the fireside; and Mrs. Dobbs was opposite to him in her own armchair, with the old tabby purring in the firelight at her feet, when Martha opened the parlour door softly, shut it quickly after her, and announced, with a slight tone of excitement in her usually quiet voice, that there was a gentleman in the passage asking for Miss May.

"For me, Martha?" exclaimed May, turning round at the sound of her own name, with one hand still on the keys of the pianoforte. "Who is he?"

"He said 'Miss Cheffington.' I don't know him, not by sight. But here's his card."

Mrs. Dobbs took the card from the servant, and put on her spectacles, bending down to read the name by the firelight. "Bun—Brun—oh, Bransby! Mr. Theodore Bransby. Ask the gentleman to walk in, Martha."

As Martha left the room, Mr. Weatherhead pointed to the door with one thumb, and

whispered, "Wonder what *he* wants!" To which Mrs. Dobbs replied by lifting her shoulders and slightly shaking her head, as much as to say, "I'm sure I can't guess." The next moment Mr. Theodore Bransby was ushered into the parlour.

The room was rather dim, and Theodore did not immediately perceive May, who still sat at the piano. "Miss Cheffington?" he said interrogatively, with a stiff little gesture of the head towards Mrs. Dobbs, which might pass for a bow.

Mrs. Dobbs had risen from her chair, and now motioned her visitor to be seated. "My grand-daughter is here. Pray sit down, Mr. Theodore Bransby," she said. Then May got up, and came forward, and shook hands with him.

"I don't think you know my grandmother, Mrs. Dobbs," she said, presenting him.

Theodore, upon this, began to hold out his hand rather slowly; but, as Mrs. Dobbs made no answering gesture, but merely pointed again to a chair, he was fain to bow once more—a good deal more distinctly, this time—and to sit down with the sense of having received a little check.

“I hope I have not interrupted you, Miss Cheffington?” said he, clearing his throat and settling his chin in his shirt-collar. “You were singing.”

“Oh no; you haven’t interrupted me at all. And, even if you had, it wouldn’t matter. My singing is not worth much.”

“Pardon me if I decline to believe that. From some sounds which reached me through the door, I am sure you sing charmingly.”

May laughed. “Ah,” said she, “the other side of the door is the most favourable position for hearing me. I really don’t know how to sing. Ask granny.”

“No; May doesn’t know how to sing,” said Mrs. Dobbs quietly, but very decisively. (For she had caught an expression on Mr. Theodore Bransby’s pale, smooth face, which seemed to wonder superciliously what on earth *she* could know about it.) Whereupon his pale, smooth eyebrows raised themselves a hair’s breadth more, but he said nothing.

“My grandmother is a great judge of singing, you must know,” went on May innocently. “She has heard all the best singers at the Oldchester Musical Festivals for years and years

past, and she used to sing herself in the choruses of the oratorios."

"Oh, I see!" said Theodore, with a little contemptuous air of enlightenment.

Jo Weatherhead looked across at him uneasily. He had a half-formed suspicion that this young spark with the smooth, rather closely-cropped blonde head, severe shirt-collar, faultlessly-fitting coat, and slightly pedantic utterance, showed a tendency to treat Mrs. Dobbs with impertinence. But he checked the suspicion, for, he argued with himself, young Bransby had had the training of a gentleman. And what gentleman would be impertinent to a worthy and respected woman, and in her own house, too? He thought, as he looked at him, that Theodore bore very little resemblance to his father, Martin Bransby, who was altogether of a different and more massive type.

"You don't favour your father much, sir," said Jo blandly.

The young man turned his pale blue eyes upon him with a look studiously devoid of all expression. "I had the honour of knowing your worthy father well, some five-and-twenty—or it may be thirty—years ago."

Theodore, continuing to stare at him stonily, said, "Oh, really?" in a low monotone.

"Yes; I knew him in the way of business. He was a customer of mine when I was in the bookselling business at Brummagem, as we called it. Your father was, even at that time, very highly thought of by some of the leading legal luminaries. We had no assizes at Birmingham, as no doubt you're aware; but I used to go over to Warwick Assizes pretty reg'larly in those days, having some dealings there in the stationery line—which I afterwards gave up altogether, though that isn't to the point—and I used to frequent a good deal of legal company. Mr. Martin Bransby was thought a good deal of, among 'em, I can tell you, and was taken a great deal of notice of by some of the county families—quite the real old gentry," added Mr. Weatherhead, pursing up his mouth and nodding his head emphatically, like a man enforcing a statement which his hearers might reasonably hesitate to accept.

"Oh, how is Mr. Bransby?" asked May.

"Thanks; my father is going on very well indeed. He has driven out twice, and, in fact, is nearly himself again. He purposes asking

some friends to dine with him next week. Indeed, that furnishes the object of my visit here. I—Mrs. Bransby—of course, you understand that my father's long illness has given her a great deal to do."

"Truly it must!" broke in Mrs. Dobbs, thinking at once sympathetically of the wife and mother threatened with so cruel a bereavement, and now almost suddenly relieved from overwhelming anxiety. "I'm sure most folks in Oldchester have been feeling greatly for Mrs. Bransby."

"And so," continued Theodore, addressing himself exclusively to May, "she has not really been—been able to see as much of you as she would have liked, Miss Cheffington."

May looked at him in surprise. "Why of course?" said she. "Mrs. Bransby hasn't been thinking about *me!* How should she?"

"That is the reason—I mean my father's illness, and all the occupations resulting from it—which has induced Mrs. Bransby to make me her ambassador on this occasion."

As he spoke, Theodore took a little note from his pocket-book, and handed it to May. She glanced at it, and exclaimed with open astonish-

ment, "It's an invitation to dinner! Look, granny!"

Mr. Weatherhead poked forward his head to see. It was, in fact, a formal card requesting the pleasure of Miss Cheffington's company at dinner on the following Saturday. Mrs. Dobbs once more put on her spectacles and read the card.

"I hope you will be disengaged," said Theodore, severely ignoring "granny."

"Oh, I couldn't go to a grand dinner-party. It would be ridiculous!"

"May! That's not a gracious fashion of receiving an invitation, anyhow," said Mrs. Dobbs, smiling a little.

"It's very kind indeed of Mr. and Mrs. Bransby, but I would much rather not, please," said May, endeavouring to amend her phrase.

"Oh, that's dreadfully cruel, Miss Cheffington!"

"You don't think I ought to go, do you, granny?"

"That," replied Mrs. Dobbs, "depends on circumstances."

"I assure you," said Theodore, turning round with his most imposing air, "that it would be

quite proper for Miss Cheffington to accept the invitation. I should certainly not urge her to do so unless that were the case."

Jo Weatherhead's suspicions as to this young spark's tendency to impertinence were rather vividly revived by this speech, and his forehead flushed as dark a red as his nose. But Mrs. Dobbs, looking at Theodore's fair young face made up into an expression of solemn importance, smiled a broad smile of motherly toleration, and answered in a soothing tone—

"No, no; to be sure, you mean to do what's right and proper; only young folks don't look at everything as has to be considered. But youth has the best of it in so many ways, it can afford to be not quite so wise as its elders."

This glimpse of himself, as Mrs. Dobbs saw him, was so totally unexpected as completely to dumfounder Theodore for a moment. Never, since he left off round jackets, had he been so addressed: for the behaviour of our acquaintances towards us in daily life is generally modified by their idea of what we think of ourselves.

"I—I can assure you," he stammered; and then stopped, at a loss for words, in most unaccustomed embarrassment.

“There, there, we ain’t bound to say yes or no all in a minute,” pursued Mrs. Dobbs. “Any way, we couldn’t think of making you postman. That’s all very well for your step-mother, of course; but May must send her answer in a proper way. Meanwhile, will you stay and have a cup of tea, Mr. Bransby? It’s just our teatime. The tray will be here in a minute.”

Theodore had risen as if to go. He now stood hesitating, and looking at May, who certainly gave no answering look of encouragement. She wanted him gone, that she might “talk over” the invitation with her grandmother.

With a pleasant clinking sound, Martha now brought in the tea-tray; and in another minute had fetched the kettle and placed it on the hob, where, after a brief interval of wheezing and sputtering, consequent on its sudden removal from the kitchen fire, it resumed its gurgling sound, and made itself cheerfully at home.

If Mrs. Dobbs had urged him by another word,—if she had shown by any look or tone that she thought it would be a condescension in

him to remain, Theodore would have refused. But she began placidly to scoop out the tea from the caddy, and awaited his reply with unfeigned equanimity. There was an unacknowledged feeling in his heart that, to go away then and so, would be to make a flat kind of exit disagreeable to think of. He would like to leave this obtuse old woman impressed with a sense of his superiority; and apparently it would still require some little time before that impression was made.

“Thanks,” he said. “If I am not disturbing you——”

“Dear no! How could it disturb me? Martha, bring another cup and saucer.”

And then Theodore, laying aside his hat and gloves, drew a chair up to the table and accepted the proffered hospitality.

Having found the method of supercilious reserve rather a failure, the young man now adopted a different treatment for the purpose of awaking Mrs. Dobbs, and that objectionably familiar person with the red nose, to a sense of his social distinction and general merits. He talked—not volubly, indeed: for that would have been out of his power, even had he wished

it, but he talked—in a succession of short speeches, beginning for the most part with “I.” His efforts were not, however, exclusively aimed at Mrs. Dobbs and Jo Weatherhead. He watched May a good deal, and spoke to her of the Dormer-Smiths as though that were a topic between themselves, from which the profane vulgar (especially profane ex-booksellers, with red noses) were necessarily excluded. As the others said very little—with the exception of an occasional question from Jo Weatherhead—Theodore’s talk assumed the form of a monologue spoken to a dull audience.

He was conscious, as he walked away from Friar’s Row, of being a little surprised at his own conversational efforts, and half-repentant of his condescension. He had been obliged to take his leave without obtaining any definite answer to the dinner invitation. But, perhaps, the feeling uppermost in his mind was irritation at May’s perfectly simple acceptance of her position as Mrs. Dobbs’s grand-daughter, and her perfectly filial attachment to her grandmother. “It is really too bad! Cheffington ought never to have allowed his daughter to be got hold of by those people. Mrs. Dormer-

Smith cannot have the least idea what sort of a *milieu* her niece lives in!" he said to himself.

The worst was that May was so evidently contented! If she had been at all distressed by her surroundings, Theodore could have better borne to see her there.

CHAPTER VII.

PERSONS like the Simpsons, who knew Mrs. Dobbs intimately, allowed her to have a strong judgment, and asserted her to have a still stronger will. She was far too bent on her own way ever to take advice, they said. It certainly did not happen that she took theirs. But Mrs. Dobbs's judgment was stronger than they knew. It was strong enough to show her on what points other people were likely to know better than she did. She would undoubtedly have followed Amelia Simpson's counsels as to the best way of dressing the hair in filmy ringlets—if she had chanced to require that information.

On the morning after Theodore Bransby's visit to her house, Mrs. Dobbs put on her bonnet and set off betimes to College Quad. There she had an interview with Mrs. Hadlow, who, it

appeared, was going to the Bransbys' dinner-party, and willingly promised to take charge of May.

"It seemed to me it wouldn't be the right thing for my grand-daughter to go alone to a regular formal party," said Mrs. Dobbs. "But, as I don't pretend to be much of an authority on such matters, I ventured to ask you to tell me."

"Of course you were quite right, Mrs. Dobbs."

"And you think she had better accept the invitation? She doesn't much want to do so herself, being shy of going amongst strangers. But, to be sure, if she may be under your wing, and in company with Miss Hadlow, that would make a vast difference."

"Oh yes, let her go, Mrs. Dobbs. Sooner or later she will have to go into the world, and it may be well to begin amongst people she is used to. Is it true that she is to go to her aunt's house in London very soon?"

"Nothing is settled yet. If there had been, you and Canon Hadlow should have been the first to know it—as it would be only my duty to tell you, after all your kindness to the child. Nothing is settled. But I am in favour of her going myself."

“ You take the sensible view, Mrs. Dobbs, as I think you always do—except at election time,” added Mrs. Hadlow, smiling.

The elder woman smiled back, with a little resolute setting of the lips, and begged her best respects to the canon as she took her leave. The canon was a great favourite with Mrs. Dobbs; and, on his part, their political struggle in that long past election had inspired him with a British respect for his adversary’s pluck and fair play.

The prospect of going with Mrs. Hadlow and Constance greatly reconciled May to the idea of the dinner-party. But she did not look forward to it with anticipations of enjoyment.

“ I would much rather dine in the nursery with the children,” she said, unconsciously echoing Mrs. Bransby’s suggestion.

Mr. Weatherhead, who was present, took her up on this, and said, “ Why, now, May, you will enjoy being in good society! Mr. Bransby is a very agreeable man, and used to some of the best company in the county. Mrs. Bransby, too, is very pleasant and very pretty; a Miss Lutyer she was, a regular beauty, and belonging to a good old Shropshire family. And young

Theodore——” Jo Weatherhead pausing here, and hesitating for a moment, May broke in, “Come now, Uncle Jo,” she exclaimed, “you can’t say that *he’s* pretty or pleasant !”

“He’s not bad-looking,” returned Mr. Weatherhead, rather doubtfully. “Though, to be sure, he isn’t so fine a man as his father.”

“No; this lad is like his mother’s family,” said Mrs. Dobbs. “I remember his grandfather and grandmother very well.”

“Do you? Do you, Sarah? Who were they? What sort of people, now, eh?”

“Common sort of people; Rabbitt, their name was. Old Rabbitt kept the Castlecombe Arms, a roadside inn over towards Gloucester way. He ran a coach between his own market-town and Gloucester before the branch railway was made, and they say he did a good deal of money-lending; any way, he scraped together a goodish bit, and his wife came in for a slice of luck by a legacy. So altogether their daughter—the first Mrs. Martin Bransby that was—had a nice fortune of her own. She was sent to a good school and well educated, and she was a very good sort of girl; but she had just the same smooth, light hair, and smooth,

pale face as this young Theodore. Martin Bransby had money with his first wife—he's got beauty with his second."

"O-ho!" exclaimed Jo Weatherhead, eager and attentive. "Rabbitt, eh? I never knew before who the first Mrs. Bransby was."

"Not a many folks in Oldchester now do know. I happened to know from being often over at Gloucester, visiting Dobbs's family, when I was a girl. Many a day we've driven past the Castlecombe Arms in the chaise. Dear, dear, how far off it all seems, and yet so plain and distinct! I couldn't help thinking of those old times when the lad was here the other day; he *has* such a look of old Rabbitt!"

Thus Mrs. Dobbs, rather dreamily, with her eyes fixed on the opposite houses of Friar's Row—or as much of them as could be seen above a wire window-blind—and her fingers mechanically busy with her knitting. But she saw neither the quaint gables nor the gray stone-walls. Her mind was transported into the past. She was bowling along a smooth highroad in an old-fashioned chaise. A girl friend sat in the little seat behind her, and leaned over her shoulder from time to time to

whisper some saucy joke. Beside her was the girl-friend's brother, young Isaac Dobbs:—A personable young fellow, who drove the old pony humanely, and seemed in no hurry to get home to Gloucester. She could feel the moist, sweet air of a showery summer evening on her cheek, and smell the scent of a branch of sweetbriar which Isaac had gallantly cut for her from the hedge.

Theodore Bransby did not guess that Mr. Dobbs had treated him with forbearance and indulgence; still less did he imagine that the forbearance and indulgence had been due to reminiscences of her girlhood, wherein his maternal grandfather figured as "Old Rabbit."

The question of May's dress for the dinner-party gave rise to no debate. Mrs. Dobbs had been brought up in the faith that the proper garb for a young girl on all festive occasions was white muslin; and in white muslin May was arrayed accordingly. The delicate fairness of her arms and neck was not marred by the trying juxtaposition of that dead white material. It served only to give value to the soft flesh tints, and to the sunny brownness of her hair. When she had driven off in the roomy old fly

with Mrs. Hadlow and the canon and Constance, who called to fetch her, Mrs. Dobbs and Mr. Weatherhead agreed that she looked lovely, and must excite general admiration. But the truth was that May's appearance did not seem to dazzle anybody. Mrs. Hadlow gave her a comprehensive and approving glance when she took her cloak off in the well-lighted hall of Mr. Bransby's house, and said, "Very neat. Very nice. Couldn't be better, May." Canon Hadlow—a white-haired venerable figure, with the mildest of blue eyes, and a sensitive mouth—smiled on her, and nodded in confirmation of his wife's verdict. Constance, brilliant in amber, with damask roses at her breast and in her hair, thought her friend looked very school-girlish, and wanting in style. But she had the good-nature to pay the one compliment which she sincerely thought was merited, and to say, "Your complexion stands even that blue-white book muslin, May. I should look absolutely mahogany-coloured in it!"

May felt somewhat excited and nervous as she followed Mrs. Hadlow up the softly carpeted stairs to the drawing-room. But she had a wholesome conviction of her own unimportance

on this occasion, and comforted herself with the hope of being left to look on without more notice from any one than mere courtesy demanded. Her first impression was one of eager admiration; for just within the drawing-room door stood Mrs. Bransby, looking radiantly handsome. May thought her the loveliest person she had ever beheld; and her dress struck even May's inexperienced eyes as being supremely elegant. Constance Hadlow's attire, with its unrelieved breadth of bright colour and its stiff outline, suddenly appeared as crude as a cheap chromo-lithograph beside a Venetian masterpiece. Behind his wife, seated in an easy-chair, was Martin Bransby, a fine, powerfully built man of sixty, with dark eyes and eyebrows, and a shock of grizzled hair. His naturally ruddy complexion was pallid from recent illness, and the lines under his eyes and round his mouth had deepened perceptibly during the last two months. Theodore stood near his father, stiffly upright, and with a cravat and shirt-front so faultlessly smooth and white as to look as though they had been cast in plaster of Paris. Standing with his back to the fire, was Dr. Hatch:—a familiar

figure to May, as to most eyes in Oldchester. He was a short man, rather too broad for his height; with benevolent brown eyes, a wide, low forehead, and a wide, firm mouth, singularly expressive of humour when he smiled. No other guest had arrived when the Hadlows entered the drawing-room.

After the first greetings, the party fell into little groups: the canon and Mr. Bransby, who were very old friends, conversing together in a low voice, whilst Theodore advanced to entertain Mrs. Hadlow with grave politeness, and Constance made a minute and admiring inspection of Mrs. Bransby's dress.

May thus found herself a little apart from the rest, and sat down in a corner half hidden by the protruding mantelpiece of carved oak, which rose nearly to the ceiling; an elaborate erection of richly carved pillars, and shelves and niches holding blue-and-white china, in the most approved style.

"Well, Miss May, and how are you?" asked Dr. Hatch, moving a little nearer to her, as he stood on the hearthrug.

"Quite well, thank you, Dr. Hatch," said May, looking up with her bright young smile.

“That’s right! But don’t mention to any member of the Faculty that I said so. There’s a professional etiquette in these matters; and I shouldn’t like to be quoted as having given any encouragement to rude health.”

“I’ll take care,” returned May, falling into his humour, and assuming a grave look. “And I will always bear witness for you that you gave me some *very* nasty medicine when I had the measles, Dr. Hatch. I’m sure the other doctors would approve of that, wouldn’t they?”

“Nice child,” murmured Dr. Hatch. “Understands a joke. It would be as much as my practice is worth to talk in that way to some young ladies I could mention. Well, and so this is your first entrance into the gay and festive scene, eh?”

“Yes; I have never been to a regular dinner-party before. I am so glad Mr. Bransby is quite well again,” said May, looking across the room at their host.

“Are you? Well, I believe you are glad. Yes; it is much to be desired that he should be quite well again.” Dr. Hatch’s eyes had followed the girl’s, and rested on Martin Bransby with a thoughtful look. Then, after a

minute's pause, he went on : " Now, as you are not quite familiar here, I'll give you a map of the country, as the French say. Do you know who that is who has just come in? No? That is Mr. Bragg. He makes millions and billions of tin-tacks every week. You've heard of him, of course?" May nodded. " Of course you have. Couldn't live long in Oldchester without hearing of Mr. Bragg. That handsome, elderly man, now bowing to Mrs. Bransby, is Major Mitton, of the Engineers. Ever hear of *him*? Ah, well; I suppose not. He's a very good-natured, kindly gentleman, and an excellent soldier, who distinguished himself greatly in the Crimea. But no one will ever hear him say a word about that. What he *is* proud of is his reputation as an amateur actor. I have known more reprehensible vanities. Ah, and here come the Pipers, Miss Polly and Miss Patty; and I think that makes up our number."

Dr. Hatch did not think of asking May whether she had ever heard of the Miss Pipers. The fact was she had heard of them very often. They were Oldchester celebrities quite as much as Mr. Bragg was. But their fame had not extended beyond Oldchester; whereas Bragg's

tin-tacks were daily hammered into the consciousness of the civilized world.

Miss Mary and Miss Martha Piper (invariably called Polly and Patty) were old maids between fifty and sixty years old. They were not rich; they had never been handsome; they were not, even in the opinion of their most partial friends, brilliantly clever. What, then, was the cause of the distinction they undoubtedly enjoyed in Oldchester society? The cause was Miss Polly Piper's musical talent—or at least her reputation for musical talent, which, for social purposes, was the same thing. Miss Piper had once upon a time, no matter how many years ago, composed an oratorio, and offered it to the Committee of a great Musical Festival, for performance. It was not accepted—for reasons which Miss Piper was at no loss to perceive. The reader is implored not to conclude rashly that the oratorio was rejected because it failed to reach the requisite high standard. Miss Piper knew a great deal better than that. She had been accustomed to mix with the musical world from an early age. Her father, an amiable Oldchester clergyman, rector of the church in which Mr. Sebastian Bach Simpson was organist,

was considered the best amateur violoncello player in the Midland Counties. When the great music meeting brought vocal and instrumental artists to Oldchester, the Reverend Reuben Piper's house was always open to several of them; and Miss Polly had poured out tea for more than one great English tenor, great German basso, and great Scandinavian soprano. So that, as she often said, she was clearly quite behind the scenes of the artistic world, and thoroughly understood its intrigues, its ambitions, and its jealousies. Thus she was less mortified and discouraged by the rejection of her oratorio than she would have been had she supposed it due to honest disapproval. The work, which was entitled "Esther," was played and sung, however;—not indeed by the great English tenor, German basso, and Scandinavian soprano, but by very competent performers. It was performed in the large room in Oldchester, used for concerts and lectures, and called Mercers' Hall. Admission was by invitation, and the hall was quite full, which, as Miss Patty triumphantly observed, was a very gratifying tribute on the part of the town and county. Miss Polly did not conduct her own

music. Ladies had not yet wielded the conductor's *bâton* in those days. But she sat in a front row, with her father on one side of her and her sister Patty on the other, and bowed her acknowledgments to the executants at the end of each piece.

It was a great day for the Piper family, and that one solitary fact (for the oratorio was never repeated) flavoured the rest of their lives with an odour of artistic glory, as one Tonquin bean will perfume a whole chest full of miscellaneous articles. Truly, the triumph was not cheap. The rehearsals and the performance had to be paid for, and it was said at the time that the Reverend Reuben had been obliged to sell some excellent Canal Shares in order to meet the expenses, and had thereby diminished his income by so many pounds sterling for evermore. But at least the expenditure purchased a great deal of happiness; and that is more than can be said of most investments which the world would consider wiser. From that day forth, Miss Polly held the position of a musical authority in certain circles. Long after a younger generation had grown up, to whom that famous performance of "Esther"

was as vague an historical fact as the Heph-tarchy, people continued to speak of Miss Polly Piper as a successful composer. The lives of the two sisters were shaped by this tradition. They went every year to London for a month during the season ; and, for a longer or shorter time, to some Continental city,—Leipsic, Frankfort, or Brussels : once, even, as far as Vienna, —whence they came back bringing with them the latest *dicta* in musical fashions, just as Mrs. Clarkson, the chief Oldchester milliner, announced every year her return from Paris with a large and varied assortment of bonnets in the newest styles. It has been written that “*they*” brought back with them the newest *dicta* on musical matters ; but it must not be supposed that Miss Patty set up to interpret the law on such points. She was, as to things musical, merely her sister’s echo and mouthpiece. But sincerity, that best salt for all human communications, preserved Miss Patty’s subservience from any taint of humbug. However extravagant might be her estimate of Polly’s artistic gifts and attainments, you could not doubt that it was genuine.

These circumstances were, broadly speaking,

known to every one present. But May was acquainted with another aspect of the legend of Miss Piper's oratorio: a seamy side which the poor good lady did not even suspect. That famous oratorio had been a fertile source of mirth at the time to all the performers engaged in it. There were all sorts of stories current as to the amazing things Miss Piper did with her instrumentation: the impossible efforts she expected from the "wind," and the anomalous sounds she elicited from the "wood." These were retailed with much gusto by Jo Weatherhead, who, in virtue of a high nasal voice, and a power (common enough in those parts) of reading music at sight, had sung with the tenors through many a Festival chorus, and known many professional musicians during his sojourn in Birmingham. One favourite anecdote was of a trombone player who at rehearsal, in the very climax and stress of the overture, when he was to have come in with a powerful effect, stretched out his arm at full length, and produced the most hideous and unearthly noise ever heard; and who, on being rebuked by the conductor, handed up his part for inspection, observing, amid the unrestrained laughter of

the band, that that was the nearest *he* could come to the note Miss Piper had written for him, which was some half octave below the usual compass of his instrument. Of this, and many another similar story, Miss Piper and Miss Piper's friends knew nothing. But May, remembering them, looked at the two old ladies as they marched into the room with an interest not so wholly reverential as might have been wished.

They were both short, fat, snub-nosed little women, with wide smiling mouths, and double chins. Miss Patty was rather shorter, rather fatter, and rather more snub-nosed than her gifted sister. But the chief difference between the two, which struck one at first sight, was that whereas Miss Piper's own grey locks were disposed in a thick kind of curl, like a plethoric sausage, on each side of her face, Miss Patty wore a pale, gingerbread-coloured wig. Why, having all the wigmaker's stores to choose from, she should have chosen just that particular hue, May secretly wondered as she looked at her. But so it was. And if she had worn a blue wig, it could scarcely have been more innocent of any attempt to deceive the beholder. Both ladies wore good substantial silk gowns, and

little lace caps with artificial flowers in them. But the remarkable feature in their attire was the extraordinary number of chains, beads, and bracelets with which they had festooned themselves. And, moreover, these were of a severely mineralogical character. Round Miss Patty's fat, deeply-creased throat, May counted three necklaces:—One of coral, one of cornelian, and the third a long string of grey pebble beads which dangled nearly to her waist. Miss Polly wore—besides a variety of other nondescript adornments which rattled and jingled as she moved—a set of ornaments made apparently of red marble, cut into polygonal fragments of irregular length. Their rings too, which were numerous, seemed to be composed for the most part of building materials; and each sister wore a mosaic brooch which looked, May thought, like a bit out of the tessellated pavement of the smart new Corn Exchange in the High Street.

It did not take that young lady's quick perception long to make all the foregoing observations. Indeed, she had completed them within the minute and a half which elapsed between the Miss Pipers' arrival, and the announcement of dinner.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE order of the procession to the dining-room had been pre-arranged not without some difficulty. Mrs. Bransby had pointed out to Theodore that his whim of inviting Miss Cheffington must cause a solecism somewhere in marshalling their guests.

“Constance will, of course, expect you to take her,” said Mrs. Bransby, “and then what is to be done with little Miss Cheffington? I really think I had better invite two more people, and get some young man to take her in to dinner. Perhaps Mr. Rivers would come.”

But Theodore utterly opposed this suggestion, and said that the simple and obvious course was for him to give his arm to Miss Cheffington, and for Dr. Hatch to escort Miss Hadlow.

“Oh, well, if you don’t mind,” said Mrs. Bransby, looking a little surprised. And so it

was settled. But at the last moment, in arranging her table and disposing the cards with the guest's name before each cover, Mrs. Bransby found that it would be necessary, for the sake of symmetrically alternating a lady and gentleman, to divide one couple, and place them on opposite sides of the table. She decided that Dr. Hatch and Miss Hadlow would endure this sort of divorce with equanimity; and thus it came to pass that when Theodore took his seat at table he found himself in the enviable and unexpected position of sitting between the two young ladies of the party—Constance and May.

Mrs. Bransby led out Mrs. Hadlow, the hostess bringing up the rear with Canon Hadlow. Major Mitton had the honour of escorting Miss Piper, while Miss Patty fell to Mr. Bragg. There was, as is usual on such occasions, very little conversation while the soup and fish were being eaten. Miss Piper, indeed, who was constitutionally loquacious, talked all the while to Major Mitton, though in a comparatively low tone of voice; but the rest of the company devoted themselves mainly to their plates; or at least said only a fragmentary sentence now and then. But by degrees the

desultory talk swelled into a continuous murmur, across which bursts of laughter were wafted at intervals. May had the satisfaction she had hoped for, of being allowed to be quiet; for her neighbour on the one hand was the canon, who contented himself with smiling on her silently, whilst Theodore was greatly occupied by *his* neighbour, Miss Hadlow. Being seated between him and Major Mitton, she monopolized the younger gentleman's attention with the undoubting conviction that he enjoyed being monopolized.

Mr. Bragg, a heavy, melancholy-looking man, found Miss Patty Piper a congenial companion on a topic which interested him a good deal—cookery. Not that he was a *gastronome*. He had a grand French cook; but he confided to Miss Patty that he never tasted anything nowadays which he relished so much as he had relished a certain beef-steak pudding that his deceased “missis” used to make for him thirty years ago, and better. Miss Patty had, as it happened, some peculiar and special views as to the composition of a beef-steak pudding; and Mr. Bragg—borne backwards by the tide of memory to those distant days when his missis

and he lodged in one room, and before he had learned the secret of transmuting tin-tacks into luxury and French cooks—enjoyed his reminiscences in a slow, sad, ruminating way.

Presently, when the dessert was on the table, there came a little lull in the general conversation, and the husky contralto voice of Miss Piper was heard saying, “My dear Major, I tell you it was the same woman. You say you heard her at Malta fifteen years ago. Very well. That’s no reason; for she might have been only sixteen or seventeen then. These Italians are so precocious.”

“More like six or seven-and-twenty, Miss Piper. Bless you, she had long outgrown short frocks and pinafores in those days. Fourteen—fifteen—yes; it must be fully fifteen years ago. It was the season that we got up the ‘Honey-moon’ for the garrison theatricals. I played the Duke. It has been one of my best parts ever since. And there was a scratch company of Italian opera-singers doing wretched business. We got up a subscription for them, poor things. But fancy ‘La Bianca’ still singing Rosina in the ‘Barber!’”

“She looked charming, I can tell you. I

don't say that her voice may not be a little worn in the upper notes——”

“I wonder there's a rag of it left,” put in the Major.

“Yes; a little worn. But she knows how to sing. If one must listen to such trivial, florid music, that's the only way to sing it.”

“Ah, there we shan't agree, Miss Piper! No, no; I always stand up for Rossini. I don't pretend to be a great swell at music, but I have an ear, and I like a toon. Give me a toon that I can remember and whistle, and I'll make you a present of Wagner and the other fellows, all howlings and growlings.”

“Major, Major,” called out Dr. Hatch from the opposite side of the table, “this is terribly obsolete doctrine! We shall have you confessing next that you like sugar in your tea, and prefer a rose to a sunflower!”

Mr. Bransby, wishing to avert any unpleasant shock of opinions on such high themes, here interposed. He turned the conversation back to the Italian singer, who could be abused without ruffling anybody's *amour proper*.

“But who is this *prima donna* you're talking of, Major?” said he.

Miss Piper struck in before Major Mitton could reply. "It's a certain Moretti:—Bianca Moretti. We heard her last summer in a minor theatre at Brussels, with a strolling Italian Opera Company. Don't you remember, Patty?"

"Moretti?" said Miss Patty, instantly breaking off in the middle of a sentence addressed to Mr. Bragg, at the sound of her sister's voice.

"The woman with the fine eyes? Oh yes. I remember her particularly, because of the awful scandal there was afterwards about her and that Englishman."

Several heads at the table were now turned towards Miss Patty, who shook her gingerbread-coloured wig with a knowing air.

"I was just telling the Major," said Miss Piper. "We might never have known of it, if it had not been for the Italian Consul, who was a friend of ours. It was quite a sensation! A bit out of a French novel, eh?—Oh yes; quite ready, Mrs. Bransby."

The last words had reference to a telegraphic signal from the hostess, who immediately rose. Mrs. Hadlow had been looking across at her rather uneasily during the last minute or so. The fact was that the Miss Pipers were reputed

in Oldchester to have a somewhat unconsidered and free way of talking. Some persons attributed this to their annual visit to the Continent: others thought it connected rather with Miss Piper's artistic experiences, which in some mysterious way were supposed to have had a tendency to make her "a little masculine." The implication would seem to be that to be "masculine" involves a lax government of the tongue. But as no Oldchester gentleman was ever known to protest against this imputation, it is not necessary to examine it here more particularly. "When she began to talk about a French novel, my dear, there was no knowing what she might say next," said Mrs. Hadlow afterwards to Mrs. Bransby. So the latter hurried the departure of the ladies as we have seen.

When they rose to go away, May, of course, went out last; Theodore holding the door open with his air of superior politeness.

"Who is that pretty little girl? I don't think I know her face," said Major Mitton, when the young man had resumed his seat, and the chairs were drawn closer together.

"That is Miss Miranda Cheffington."

“Cheffington? I knew a Cheffington once—a terrible black sheep. Very likely it’s not the same family, though. What Cheffingtons does this young lady belong to?”

“The family of Viscount Castlecombe.”

“The man I knew was a nephew of old Castlecombe. Gus Cheffington his name was, I remember now.”

Theodore moved a little uneasily on his seat, and, after a moment’s reflection, said gravely, “Captain Augustus Cheffington is this young lady’s father; he is a friend of mine. Miss Cheffington is going to town to be presented next season by her aunt, Mrs. Dormer-Smith. She is a very thoroughbred woman. Do you know the Dormer-Smiths, Major Mitton? They are in the best set.”

The Major did not know the Dormer-Smiths, and had no interest in pursuing the subject. He turned to join in the conversation going on between Mr. Bransby, the canon, and Dr. Hatch, and then Theodore slipped out of his place and went to sit nearer to Mr. Bragg, who was looking a little solitary. Mr. Bragg had a great many good qualities, but he was usually considered to be heavy in hand from a conver-

sational point of view. Theodore, however, did not find him dull. He talked to Mr. Bragg with an agreeable sense of making an excellent figure in the eyes of that millionaire. Theodore had a strong memory, considerable powers of application, and had read a great many solid books. He favoured Mr. Bragg now with a speech on the subject of the currency, about which he had read all the most modern theories up to date. The currency, he felt, must be a peculiarly interesting subject to a man who sold millions and billions of tin-tacks in all the markets of the world. Mr. Bragg drank his wine, keeping his eyes on the table, and listened with silent attention. Theodore, warmed by a mental vision of himself speaking in a breathless House of Commons, rose to parliamentary heights of eloquence. He had already addressed Mr. Bragg as "Sir," and had sternly inquired what he supposed would be the consequence if the present movement in favour of bimetallism should be still further developed in the United States, when he was interrupted by his father's voice saying—

"Come, shall we ask Mrs. Bransby for a cup of coffee?"

Mr. Bragg lifted his eyes and rose from his chair, and Theodore and he moved towards the door side by side.

“It ought to be boiled in a basin, oughtn’t it?” said Mr. Bragg thoughtfully. “Ah, no; it wasn’t you. I remember now, it was Miss Patty Piper who was mentioning—I’ll ask her again when we get upstairs.”

Meanwhile the elder ladies had been deep in the discussion of Miss Piper’s interrupted story. Constance and May had got close together near the pianoforte, and Mrs. Bransby asked Constance to play something “soft and pretty.” Constance opened the instrument and ran her fingers over the keys in a desultory manner, playing scraps of waltzes or whatever came into her head, and continuing her chat with May to that running accompaniment. Mrs. Bransby, Mrs. Hadow, and the Miss Pipers grouped themselves near the fireplace at the other end of the room, and carried on their talk also under cover of the music.

“It was odd enough that on my happening to mention the name of the Moretti to Major Mitton he should remember her at Malta so many years ago,” began Miss Piper.

“Yes; and you see now that I was right, and she can't be so young as you thought her, Polly,” said her sister.

“Lord, what does that matter? I only said she looked young, and so she did. And besides, I dare say the Major exaggerates her age. When a woman becomes a celebrity, or comes before the public in any way, her age is sure to be exaggerated. Many people who only know me through my works suppose me to be eighty, I dare say. They never imagine a woman so young as I was at the time composing a serious work like ‘Esther.’”

“Is she handsome, this Signora Moretti?” asked Mrs. Bransby, who was always interested in, and attracted by, beauty.

“Very handsome—in that Italian style. Great black eyes, and black eyebrows, and a fine profile. Too thin, though. But, oh yes; extremely handsome. And a very clever singer.”

“And a very worthless hussey,” added Miss Patty severely.

“What a pity!” exclaimed Mrs. Hadlow. “It does seem so sad when one finds great gifts, like talent and beauty, without goodness!”

“Well, I don’t know that she was so very bad either,” replied Miss Piper.

“Goodness, Polly! How can you talk so!” cried her sister. “Why, she was living openly with that Englishman!”

“Some people said she was married to him, you know, Patty.”

“Stuff and nonsense!” returned Miss Patty, who, whilst undoubtedly accepting her sister’s views about music, tenaciously reserved the right of private judgment as to the character of its professors, and was, moreover, chronically incredulous of the virtue of foreigners in general. “No sensible person could believe that. And as to her ‘not being so very bad’—what do you make of that nice story of the gambling, and the police, and all the rest of it?”

“The police!” echoed Mrs. Hadlow, in a low shocked voice.

“What was that?” asked Mrs. Bransby.

“Now, just let me tell it, Patty,” said the elder sister. “If I am wrong you can correct me afterwards. But I believe I know more about it than you do. Well, there was an Italian Opera Company singing in a minor theatre of Brussels when we were there, and

doing very well; for the *prima donna*, Bianca Moretti, was a great favourite. They had previously been making a tour through Belgium. One night we were in the theatre with some friends, expecting to hear her for the second time in the 'Barbieri,' when, some time after the curtain ought to have risen, a man came on to the stage, and announced that the Signora Moretti had been suddenly taken ill, and there would be no performance. But the next day we learned that the story of the Moretti's illness was only an excuse—or, at least, that if she was ill, it was only from the nervous shock of having her house searched by the police."

"I think that was quite enough to make her ill! But why did they search her house?" said Mrs. Bransby.

"Well, you see, it was in this way," continued Miss Piper, lowering her voice, and drawing a little nearer to her hostess, while Mrs. Hadlow cast a glance over her shoulder to assure herself that the girls were occupied with their own conversation. "It seems that a set of men were in the habit of meeting every night after the opera in her apartment to play cards. There was the Englishman, and a young

Russian belonging to a grand family, and a Servian, or a Roumanian, or a Bulgarian, or something," said Miss Piper, whose ideas as to the national distinctions between the younger members of the European family were decidedly vague, "and others besides. Now this man, the—the Bulgarian, we may as well call him, was a thorough blackleg, and bore the worst of characters. He led on the Russian to play for very high stakes, and won large sums from him. Well, to make a long story short, one night there was a terrible scene. The Russian accused the other man of cheating. They came to blows, I believe, and there was a regular *esclandre*. And next day the Bulgarian was missing. He had got away with a good deal of plunder."

"How shocking and disgraceful!" exclaimed Mrs. Hadlow, in whom this gossip excited far more disgust than interest; and who thought Polly Piper showed very bad taste in selecting such a topic.

"But why did the police search the Italian singer's apartment? It was not *her* fault, was it?" asked Mrs. Bransby.

"Why, you see, the gambling had gone on

in her rooms. And the Bulgarian turning out to be connected with a regular gang of swindlers, the search was made for any letters or papers of his that might be there. We were told that the Russian ambassador had something to say to it; for the young Russian was connected with *very* high people indeed. Nothing was found, however."

"Nothing was found that could be laid hold of," put in Miss Patty. "But there could be no question what sort of a person that woman was after all that!"

"Well, really, Patty," said her sister, "it seems to me that the Englishman was a deal more to blame. Nobody pretended that the Moretti wanted to gamble for her own amusement, or profit either! It was the ruin of her in Brussels; at any rate for that season. There was a party made up to hiss her whenever she appeared; and there were disturbances in the theatre; and, in short, the performances had to cease. I was sorry for her."

"Upon my word, Polly, I don't see why you should be," cried Miss Patty. "She deserved all she got. I have no patience with bestowing pity and sympathy on such creatures. If she had

been an ugly washerwoman, instead of a painted opera-singer, nobody would have had a soft word for her."

"Oh, surely there are plenty of people who would be gentle to an ugly washerwoman, if she needed gentleness," put in Mrs. Hadlow. "And you know, my dear Miss Patty, we are taught to pity all those who stray from the right path."

"As to that, I hope I can pity error as well as my neighbours—in a *religious* sense," returned Miss Patty with some sharpness. "But this is different. I was speaking as a member of society." ✓

"And the Englishman—was he implicated?" asked Mrs. Bransby, rather from a desire to divert the conversation from a direction fraught with danger to the general harmony than from any special curiosity on the subject.

"No; not exactly implicated," replied Miss Piper. "That is to say, he was not suspected of any unfair play, or anything of that sort; but it was considered disgraceful for him to have been mixed up in these gambling transactions; especially as he was a much older man than the others. And then——"

“And then,” continued Miss Patty, “it was not considered exactly creditable, I believe—although perhaps Polly thinks it was; I’m sure I don’t know,—it wasn’t, most people would say, exactly creditable for a man of family, an English *gentleman*, to be strolling about the world with a parcel of foreign singers. And he had been doing just that. We heard of his being at Antwerp, and Ghent, and Ostend with them.”

“A man of family, do you say? A really well-born man?” said Mrs. Hadlow, sitting suddenly very upright in the energy of her feelings. “How shocking! That really seems to be the worst of all!”

“Well, I suppose we must pity *his* errors,” observed Miss Patty, with some causticity. But Mrs. Hadlow was insensible to the sarcasm; or, at all events, her sense of it was swallowed up by a stronger feeling. “I do think it’s a public misfortune,” she went on, “when a person on whom Providence has bestowed gentle birth derogates from his rank and forgets his duties. It grieves me.”

“You must suffer a good deal in these days, I’m afraid,” said Miss Patty, grimly.

“Not on that account,” replied Mrs. Hadlow. “No; truly not. There may be exceptions—I won’t deny that there are some. But, on the whole, I thoroughly believe that *bon sang ne peut mentir*.”

“Well, perhaps Mr. Cheffington’s blood is not so good as he says it is; that’s all,” said Miss Patty, with a short laugh.

Mrs. Hadlow and Mrs. Bransby uttered a simultaneous exclamation of amazement; and then the former said in a breathless whisper, “Hush, hush, my dear, for mercy’s sake! Did you say Cheffington? That is—Cheffington is the name of that girl! Don’t turn your head.”

“Oh, it can’t be the same!” said Mrs. Bransby, nervously.

“No, no; I dare say not. But the name—it must, I fear, be a member of the family,” answered Mrs. Hadlow.

“How lucky it wasn’t mentioned in her hearing,” said Miss Piper. “Poor little thing, I wouldn’t for the world——! She’s very pretty and bright-looking. I don’t think I ever saw her before.”

Mrs. Bransby hurriedly explained how May came to be there, and as much of her story as

she was acquainted with—which was, in truth, very little. The Miss Pipers listened eagerly, and Mrs. Hadlow sat by with a cloud of anxious perplexity on her usually beaming face. They all admitted that of course the person spoken of *might* be no relation of May's at all; but it was evident that no one believed that hypothesis. To the Miss Pipers the whole matter was simply a relishing morsel of gossip. They dwelt with *gusto* on “the extraordinary coincidence” of Miss Cheffington's being there just that very evening, and “the singular circumstance” that Major Mitton should remember Bianca Moretti, and enjoyed it all very much. Mrs. Bransby's prevalent feeling was one of annoyance, and resentment against Theodore, who had brought this girl into the house. Mrs. Bransby detested a “fuss” of any sort; and shrank, with a sort of amiable indolence, from the conflict of provincial feuds and the excitement of provincial gossip. And now, she reflected, this story would be spread all over Oldchester, and she would be “worried to death” by questions on a subject about which she knew very little, and cared less.

“We won't say another word about this

horrid story," she said, looking appealingly at the Miss Pipers. "Silence is the only thing under the circumstances. Don't you think so? It would be so dreadful if the girl should overhear anything, and make a scene; wouldn't it?"

Miss Polly and Miss Patty readily promised to be most guardedly silent—for that evening, and so long as May should be present; declaring quite sincerely that they would not for the world risk hurting the poor child's feelings. And then Mrs. Bransby began to flatter herself that the subject was done with, so far as she was concerned. But Fate had decided otherwise.

When the gentlemen came into the drawing-room, Miss Hadlow was playing one of her most brilliant pieces, to which Miss Polly Piper was listening with an air of responsible attention, and gently nodding her head from time to time in an encouraging manner; Miss Patty Piper and May were looking over a large album full of photographs together; while Mrs. Bransby was narrating to Mrs. Hadlow, Bobby's latest witticisms, and Billy's extraordinary progress in the art of spelling:—these juvenile prodigies being her two younger children.

Constance did not interrupt her performance on the entrance of the gentlemen, and Major Mitton went to stand beside the pianoforte, gallantly turning over the music leaves at the wrong moment, with the best intentions. Canon Hadlow sat down near Miss Piper; the host with Dr. Hatch crossed the room to speak to Mrs. Hadlow, and Mr. Bragg and Theodore approached the table, at which Miss Patty and May Cheffington were seated. Mr. Bragg drew up a chair close to Miss Patty at once, and began to talk with her in a low voice, and with more appearance of animation than his manner usually displayed. Theodore, as he observed this, remembered with satisfaction that his friend Captain Cheffington had formerly pronounced old Bragg to be a d——d snob. A man must indeed be on a low level who could prefer Miss Patty Piper's culinary conversation to a luminous exposition of the currency question as set forth by Mr. Theodore Bransby. He bent over May, who was still turning the leaves of the photograph book, and said, "I'm afraid you are not having a very amusing evening, Miss Cheffington."

"Oh yes, thank you," returned May, making

the queerest little grimace in her effort not to yawn. "I am very fond of looking at photographs."

"I don't suppose there are many portraits there that you would recognize. A little out of your set," said Theodore. "In fact, I don't know many of them myself, I have been so much away. By the way, have you any commands for your people in town? I go up the day after to-morrow."

"Shall you see Aunt Pauline?"

"Certainly. I suppose Lord Castlecombe is not likely to be in town at this season?" went on Theodore, raising his tone a little so as to be heard by the others. Constance's playing had now come to an end, and there was a general lowering of voices, occasioned by the cessation of that pianoforte accompaniment.

"I don't know, I'm sure. I don't know where he lives," answered May innocently.

"Ahem! He is at this season, in all probability, at Combe Park, his place in Gloucestershire."

May had never heard of her great-uncle's place in Gloucestershire; but now, when Theodore said the words, her thought flashed through

a chain of associations to Mrs. Dobbs's mention of the Castlecombe Arms on the Gloucester Road, kept by "Old Rabbitt," and she blushed as though she had done something to be ashamed of.

"The last time I had the pleasure of seeing your father, he was talking to me about Combe Park," continued Theodore, with a complacent sense of superiority to the rest of the company in these manifestations of familiar intercourse with members of the Castlecombe family. Lord Castlecombe was a very important personage in those parts. As May did not speak, Theodore went on: "Grand old place, Combe Park, isn't it?"

"Is it?" returned May absently. She was looking with great interest at the portrait of a superb lace dress, surmounted by a distorted image of Mrs. Bransby's head and face, which were quite out of focus. But the lace flounces had "come out splendidly," as the photographer remarked. And, if the truth must be told, May admired them greatly.

"Is it?" repeated Theodore, with a little smile. "But you have lived so long abroad, that you are quite a stranger to all these

ancestral glories. I hope, however, that you have not the same preference for the Continent that your father has?"

"Oh, I'm sure I should always love England best. But I don't know the most beautiful parts of the Continent—Switzerland or Italy. We were always in Belgium, and Belgium isn't beautiful. At least I don't remember any beautiful country."

Thus May, with perfect simplicity, still turning over the photographs, and all unconscious that the Miss Pipers had simultaneously interrupted their own conversation, and were staring at her.

"No; Belgium is not beautiful—except architecturally," replied Theodore. "But there is very nice society in Brussels, and a pleasant Court, I believe. No doubt that's one reason why Captain Cheffington likes it."

"Is Brussels your home, then? Do you live there?" asked Miss Patty, leaning eagerly forward.

May looked up, and perceived all at once that every one was gazing at her. The Miss Pipers' sudden attention to what she was saying had attracted the attention of the others—as

one may collect a crowd in the street by fixedly regarding the most familiar object. In her inexperience she feared she had committed some breach of the etiquette proper to be observed at a "grown-up dinner party." Perhaps she ought not to have devoted so much attention to the photographs! She closed the book hurriedly as she answered—

"No, *I* don't live in Brussels, but papa does—at least, generally."

Mrs. Bransby rose from her chair, and came rather quickly across the room. "My dear," she said, "I want to present our old friend, Major Mitton, to you;" and taking May by the arm, she led her away towards the pianoforte.

Theodore observed this proceeding with a cool smile, and sense of inward triumph. Mrs. Bransby began to understand, then, what a very highly connected young lady this was, and was endeavouring, although a little late, to show her proper attention. Another time Mrs. Bransby would receive *his* introduction and recommendation with more respect. In the same way, he felt gratification in the eager questions with which Miss Patty plied him. Miss Patty left the millionaire Mr. Bagg in

the lurch, and began to catechize Theodore on the subject of the Cheffington family.

That fastidious young gentleman said within himself that the snobbery of these Oldchester people was really too absurd; and mentally resolved to cut a great many of them, as he gained a firmer footing in the best London circles. Nevertheless he did not check Miss Patty's inquiries. On the contrary, he condescendingly gave her a great deal of information about his friends the Dormer-Smiths, the late lamented Dowager, the present Viscount Castlecombe, his two sons, the Honourable George and the Honourable Lucius, as well as some details respecting the more distant branch of the Cheffington family, who had intermarried with the Scotch Clishmaclavers, and were thus, not remotely, connected with the great ducal house of M'Brose.

This was all very well; but Miss Patty was far more interested in getting some information about Captain Cheffington which would identify him with the hero of the Brussels story, than of following the genealogy of the noble head of the family into its remotest ramifications. And, notwithstanding that Theodore was much more

reticent about the Captain, she did manage to find out that the latter had lived abroad for many years—chiefly in Belgium—and that his pecuniary circumstances were not flourishing.

“I’m quite convinced it’s the same man, Polly,” she said afterwards to her sister. And, indeed, all the inquiries they made in Oldchester confirmed this idea. The Simpsons gave anything but a good character of May’s absentee parent. And subsequent conversation with Major Mitton elicited the fact that Augustus Cheffington had been looked upon as a “black sheep” even by not very fastidious or strait-laced circles many years ago. The story of the Brussels scandal was not long in reaching the ears of every one in Oldchester who had any knowledge, even by hearsay, of the parties concerned.

Theodore Bransby, who left Oldchester on the Monday following the dinner-party, and spent the intervening Sunday at home, was one of the few in the above-named category who did not hear of it.

CHAPTER IX.

THE correspondence between Mrs. Dobbs and Mrs. Dormer-Smith on the subject of May's removal to London was not voluminous. It consisted of three letters: number one, written by Mrs. Dobbs; number two, written by Mrs. Dormer-Smith; and number three, Mrs. Dobbs's reply to that. Mrs. Dobbs always went straight to the point, both with tongue and pen; and Mrs. Dormer-Smith, although by no means so forcibly direct in her dealings, had a dislike to letter-writing, which caused her to put her meaning tolerably clearly on this occasion, so as to avoid the necessity of writing again.

Mrs. Dobbs had proposed that May should become an inmate of her aunt's house in London—at all events for a time—in consideration of an annual sum to be paid for her board and dress. The said sum was to be guaranteed by

Mrs. Dobbs, and was so ample as to make Pauline say plaintively to her husband, "Just fancy, Frederick, how deplorably imprudent Augustus has been in offending and neglecting this old woman as he has done! You see she has plenty of money. I had no idea what her means were; but it is clear that, for a person in her rank of life, she may be called rich. And Augustus might have obtained solid pecuniary assistance from her, I've no doubt, if he had played his cards with ordinary prudence. But there never was any one so reckless of his own interests as Augustus—beginning with that unfortunate marriage."

Whereunto Mr. Frederick Dormer-Smith thus made reply, "I don't know what you may call 'solid pecuniary assistance,' but it seems to me pretty solid to keep Augustus's daughter, and clothe her, and pay for her schooling, for four years and upwards. As to Augustus's disregard of his own interests, it does not at any rate lie in the direction of refraining from borrowing money, or remembering to pay it back; that much I can vouch for."

Pauline put a corner of her handkerchief to her eyes. "Oh, Frederick," she said, "it pains

me to hear you speak so harshly. Remember, Augustus is my only brother.”

“Mercifully! By George, if there was another of ’em I don’t know what *would* become of us.”

Mrs. Dormer-Smith declined to consider this hypothesis, but contented herself with saying that she should like to do something for poor Augustus’s girl, and asking her husband if he didn’t think they could manage to receive her. Mr. Dormer-Smith thought they could on the terms proposed, which, he frankly said, were handsome. And Pauline added softly—

“Yes; and it is satisfactory that she offers to keep the arrangement strictly secret. It would scarcely do to let it be known that Mrs. Dobbs pays for May. It would be *inconvenable*. People would ask all sorts of questions. It would put the girl herself in an awkward position. ‘Grandmother!’ people would say. ‘What grandmother?’ and the whole story of that wretched marriage would be raked up again. But, on the conditions proposed, I do think, Frederick, it could do no harm to receive May. I am glad you consent. It will be a comfort to me to feel that I am doing something

for poor Augustus's girl, and acting as mamma would have wished."

So a favourable reply was dispatched to Mrs. Dobbs's application. Mrs. Dormer-Smith suggested that May should come to town a little before the beginning of the season, so as to give time for preparing her wardrobe—a task to which her aunt looked forward with *dilettante* relish. And in answer to that, Mrs. Dobbs wrote the third and last letter of the series, assenting to the date proposed for May's arrival, and entering into a few minor details.

She had also, meanwhile, received a letter from Captain Cheffington, elicited, after a long delay, by three successive urgent appeals for an immediate answer. It was a scrawl in a hasty, sprawling hand, and ran thus :

“Brussels, Nov. 1, 18—.

“DEAR MRS. DOBBS,

“I think it would be very desirable for Miranda to be presented by her aunt, if she is to be presented at all, and to be brought out properly. I have no doubt that my sister will introduce her in the best possible way. Since you seem to press for my consent, you have it

herewith, although I hardly feel that I can have much voice in the matter, being separated, as I have been for years, from my country, my family, and my only surviving child. I am a mere exile. It is not a brilliant existence for a man born and brought up as I have been. However, I must make the best of it.

“Yours always,

“A. C.”

This was sufficient for Mrs. Dobbs. She had made a point of obtaining Augustus's authority for his daughter's removal to town; not because she relied on his judgment, but because she knew him well enough to fear some trick, or sudden turn of feigned indignation, if, from any motive of his own, he thought fit to disapprove the step. As to the tone of his reply, that neither troubled nor surprised her. But Mr. Weatherhead was moved to great wrath by it. Mrs. Dobbs had tossed the note to him one day, saying—

“There; there's my son-in-law's consent to May's going to town, in black and white. That's a document.”

Mr. Weatherhead eagerly pounced on it.

“What a disgusting production!” he exclaimed, looking up over the rim of the double eyeglass which he had set astride his nose to read the note.

“Is it?” returned Mrs. Dobbs carelessly.

“Is it? Why, Sarah, you surprise me, taking it in that cool way. It is the most thankless, unfeeling, selfish production I ever read in my life.”

“Oh, is that all? Well, but that’s just Augustus Cheffington. We know what *he* is at this time of day, Jo Weatherhead. It ’ud be a deal stranger if he wrote thankfully, and feelingly, and unselfishly.”

But Mr. Weatherhead refused to dismiss the matter thus easily. He belonged to that numerous category of persons who, having established and proclaimed a conviction, appear to be immensely astonished at each confirmation of it. He had years ago pronounced Augustus Cheffington to be a heartless scoundrel. Nevertheless he was shocked and amazed whenever Augustus Cheffington did anything to corroborate that opinion.

The letter from Mrs. Dormer-Smith was not shown to him. Mrs. Dobbs meant to keep the

amount she was to pay for May a secret even from her faithful and trusted friend Jo. He might guess what he pleased, but she would not tell him. The means, too, by which she meant to raise the money would not, she knew, meet with his approval. And, since she had resolved to use those means, she thought it best to avoid vain discussion beforehand, and therefore said nothing about them.

Accident, however, revealed a part of the secret in this way :

Mr. Weatherhead, calling one afternoon at Laurel Villa to see Mrs. Simpson, who had been kept at home by a cold, found other visitors there. Miss Polly and Miss Patty Piper were drinking tea out of Mrs. Simpson's best cups and saucers, and chatting away with their usual cheerfulness and volubility. The Miss Pipers, as they would themselves have expressed it, "moved in a superior sphere" to that of the music-teacher and his wife; but they did not consider that they derogated from their gentility by occasionally drinking tea and having a chat with the Simpsons. They liked to condescend a little, and opportunities for condescension were rather rare. Then, too,

they had a certain interest in Sebastian Bach Simpson, inherited from the long-ago days when Sebastian Bach's father played the organ in their father's church, and Miss Polly and Miss Patty wore white frocks and blue sashes at evening parties, and were the objects of a good deal of attention from the Reverend Reuben's curates. Besides the sisters there was present Dr. Hatch, who had come to pay a professional visit to Mrs. Simpson, and who was just going away. It was a peculiarity of Dr. Hatch to be always just going away. He had a very large practice, and was wont to aver that his professional duties scarcely left him time to eat or sleep. Yet Dr. Hatch's horses stood waiting through many a quarter of an hour during which their master was engaged in conversation not of a strictly professional nature.

When Mr. Weatherhead entered the best parlour of Laurel Villa, Dr. Hatch had a cup of tea in one hand, and his watch in the other, and greeted the new arrival with a friendly nod, and the assurance that he was "just off." Mrs. Simpson shook hands with Mr. Weatherhead, and the Miss Pipers graciously bowed to him. He, too, was connected in their minds

with old times. Miss Polly specially remembered seeing him on her visits to the Birmingham Musical Festivals, when her father would take the opportunity of turning over Weatherhead's stock of books, and making a few purchases. And once the Pipers had lodged during a Festival week in the rooms over Weatherhead's shop.

"Glad to see you better, Mrs. Simpson," said Jo, taking a seat after having saluted the company.

"Oh yes, thank you, I'm quite well now. I know Dr. Hatch will scold me if he hears me say so"—(with an arch glance baulked of its effect by the unsympathetic spectacles)—"because he tells me I still need great care. But my cough is gone. It is, really!"

Mrs. Simpson girlishly shook back her curls, and proceeded to pour out a cup of tea for Mr. Weatherhead.

"And how is Simpson?" asked the latter.

"Bassy is very well, only immensely busy. He has three new pupils for pianoforte and harmony; the daughters of Colonel ——,—tut, I forget his name,—recommended by that kind Major Mitton. Or at least it would be more

proper to say that Major Mitton recommended Bassy to them! Not very polite to say that the young ladies were recommended—oh dear! I beg pardon. I'm afraid I've over-sweetened your tea?"

She had, in fact, put in half a dozen lumps, one after the other. But Mr. Weatherhead fished the greater part of them out again with his teaspoon, and deposited them in the saucer, saying it was of no consequence.

"I am so sadly absent-minded!" said Mrs. Simpson, smiling sweetly. "Bassy would scold me if he were here."

"Serve you right, if he did!" said Dr. Hatch, rising from the table. "You should pay attention to what you're doing. I expect to hear that you have swallowed the embrocation and anointed your throat with syrup of squills."

"Oh, doctor! You do say the drollest things!" exclaimed the amiable Amelia, with an enjoying giggle.

"Ah, no; not the drollest! Thank Heaven, I hear a great many droller things than I say! That's what mainly supports me in my day's practice."

Mrs. Simpson, not in the least understanding

him, giggled again. Dr. Hatch had the reputation of being a wag; and Amelia Simpson was not the woman to defraud him of a laugh on any such selfish ground as not seeing the point of his joke.

“Well, Mr. Weatherhead,” said Miss Patty Piper, blandly, “so we are to have your sister-in-law for a neighbour, I hear.”

Jo poked his nose forward, and pursed up his mouth. “O-ho! my sister-in-law, Mrs. Dobbs? How do you mean, ma’am, ‘as a neighbour’?”

“We understand that Mrs. Dobbs has been looking after Jessamine Cottage; the little white house with a garden on the Gloucester Road,” returned Miss Patty. Dr. Hatch paused with his hand on the latch of the parlour door to hear.

“Oh dear no,” said Jo Weatherhead decisively. “Quite a mistake. Sarah Dobbs is too wedded to her old home. Nothing would induce her to leave Friar’s Row. You must have been misinformed, ma’am.”

“As to leaving Friar’s Row,” put in Miss Polly, “she must do that in any case; for she has let the premises as offices; and at a high rent, too, I hear. Friar’s Row is considered a choice position for business purposes.”

Jo had opened his mouth to protest once more, when a sudden idea made him shut it again without speaking. "Oh!" he gasped, and then made a little pause before proceeding. "Ah, well—she—it wasn't quite settled when I heard last. Would you mind stating your authority, ma'am?"

"The best—Mr. Bragg told us himself. His managing man at the works has made the arrangement. Mr. Bragg has been looking out for a more central office for some time."

"I told Mrs. Dobbs long ago that she was living at an extravagant rental by sticking to Friar's Row," observed Dr. Hatch, turning the handle of the door. "Depend on it, she has let it at a swinging rent; and quite right, too. Now I really *am* off."

Jo Weatherhead sat very still after the doctor's departure, with his cup of tea in his hand, and a pondering expression of face. The Miss Pipers were not sufficiently interested in him to observe his demeanour very closely. If they did chance to notice that he was unusually silent, that was accounted for by his sense of the superior company he found himself in. They always spoke of him as "a good, odd

creature, with sound principles—a very respectable man, who knew his station.” As for Amelia Simpson, she was habitually unobservant, with an inconvenient faculty, however, of suddenly making clear-sighted remarks when they were least expected.

“I’m sure this is very good news for us!” she exclaimed. “Jessamine Cottage is so near! At least, it *was* quite close to us when we lived in Marlborough Terrace.”

“It will be a good move for Mrs. Dobbs. The air in our neighbourhood is so much better than in her part of the town,” said Miss Patty, with a certain complacency, as who should say, “The merit of this atmospheric superiority is all our own; but we are not proud.”

“And yet I am surprised, too, at Mrs. Dobbs moving,” replied Amelia. “She always declared that she hated the suburbs, with their little slight-built houses.”

“That cannot apply to *our* house,” said Miss Polly. “Garnet Lodge stood in its own ground many a long year before those new houses sprung up between Greenhill Road and the Gloucester Road.”

“But Mrs. Dobbs isn’t going to live in

Garnet Lodge!" returned Amelia, with one of her sudden illuminations of common sense. "And Jessamine Cottage is a mere bandbox."

"I remember Mrs. Dobbs among the trebles in 'Esther,'" observed Miss Polly. "She had a fine clear voice, and could take the B flat in alt with perfect ease."

"And her husband sold capital ironmongery. We have a coal-scuttle in the kitchen now which was bought at his shop—a thoroughly solid article," added Miss Patty.

These appreciative words about the Dobbses, which at another time would have gratified Jo Weatherhead, now fell on an unheeding ear. He took his leave very shortly, and walked straight to Friar's Row.

"Well, Sarah Dobbs," said he, on entering the parlour, "I didn't think you would steal a march on me like this! I did believe you'd have trusted me sooner than a parcel of strangers, after all these years!"

He did not sit down in his usual place by the fireside, but remained standing opposite to his old friend, looking at her with a troubled countenance. Mrs. Dobbs gave him one quick, keen glance, and then said—

“So you’ve heard it, Jo? Well, I didn’t mean that you should hear it from any one but me. But who shall stop chattering tongues? They rage like a fire in the stubble. And the poorer and lighter the fuel, the bigger blaze it makes. It was settled only this very morning, too.”

“It *is* true, then, Sarah? I had a kind of a hankering hope that it might be only trash and chit-chat.”

“You mean about my letting my house, don’t you? Yes; that’s true.”

“And me never to know a word of it!—To hear it from strangers!”

“Now look here, Jo; let us talk sensibly. Sit down, can’t you?”

But Jo would not sit down; and after a minute’s pause, Mrs. Dobbs went on—

“I’ll tell you the truth. I didn’t say a word to you of my plan beforehand, because I was afraid to—there!”

“Afraid! You, Sarah Dobbs, afraid of *me*! That’s a good one!” But his face relaxed a little from its pained, fixed look.

“Yes; afraid of what you’d say. I knew you wouldn’t approve, and I knew why. You

wouldn't approve for my sake. But, thinks I, when once it's done, Jo may scold a little, but he'll forgive his old friend. And I never thought of chattering jackdaws cawing the matter from the house-tops. I meant to tell you myself this very afternoon; I did indeed, Jo."

Jo drew a little nearer to his accustomed chair, and put his hand on the back of it, keeping his face turned away from Mrs. Dobbs. "Of course, you're the mistress to do what you like with your own property," he muttered.

"Nobody's mistress, or master either, to do what's wrong with their own property. I mean to do what's right if I can. I was never one to heed much what outside folks think of me; but I do heed what you think, Jo, and reason good. And I want you to know my feeling about the matter once for all, and then we can leave it alone."

Mr. Weatherhead here slid quietly into the armchair, and sat with his face still turned towards the fire.

"You know," continued Mrs. Dobbs, "I told you some weeks ago that I was troubled about the child's position here. She is a real lady, and ought to be acknowledged as such. That's

the only good that can come now from poor Susy's marriage, and I do hold to it. There was only one way, that I could see, of managing what I wanted. I could do it at a sacrifice—after all, a very small sacrifice.”

Jo Weatherhead shook his head emphatically.

“Yes, really and truly a very small sacrifice,” persisted Mrs. Dobbs. “I don't see why I shouldn't be just as happy and comfortable in Jessamine Cottage as here—provided, of course, that my old friends don't cut me and sulk with me. I shall be lonely enough when once the child's gone; and you and me'll have to cheer each other up, and keep each other company, as well as we can. You won't refuse to do that, will you, Jo? Come, shake hands on it!”

Jo slowly put out his hand and grasped her proffered one. He then took out, filled, and lighted his meerschaum, and smoked in silence for some quarter of an hour, Mrs. Dobbs, meanwhile, knitting in equal silence. All at once she said—

“Hark! There's May's step coming downstairs. Now you'll please to understand that when my moving from this house is mentioned

to the child, it's because I find Friar's Row too noisy, and think the air in Greenhill Road will agree better with my health. I trust you for that, Jo Weatherhead, mind!"

May at this momnt came gaily into the room, and Mr. Weatherhead thus solemnly addressed her: "Miranda Cheffington, you have been to a first-rate school, and have read your Roman history and all that, haven't you?"

"Not much, I'm afraid, Uncle Jo."

"You have read about Lucretia, and Portia, and the mother of the Gracchi" (pronounced "Gratch-I;" for Jo's instruction had been chiefly taken in by the eye rather than the ear, in the shape of miscellaneous gleanings from his own stock-in-trade), "and other distinguished women of classical times, whose virtues were, in my opinion, not wholly unconnected with bounce?"

Mary laughed and nodded.

"Well, allow me to tell you that there are Englishwomen at the present day whom I consider far superior, in all that makes a real good woman, to any Roman or Grecian of them all. Englishwomen to whom bounce in every form is foreign and obnoxious. Englishwomen who do good by stealth and never blush to find it

Fame, because Fame is a great deal too busy with rascals and hussies ever to trouble herself about *them*! Your grandmother, Mrs. Sarah Dobbs, whom I'm proud to call my friend, is one of those women. And what's more—and I'll have you bear it in mind, Miranda Cheffington—I believe you'd be puzzled to find her equal in Europe, Asia, Africa, or America—not to mention Australasia and the 'ole of the islands in the Pacific Ocean."

With that, Mr. Weatherhead walked gravely out; his nose somewhat redder than usual, and his eyes glistening.

CHAPTER X.

ABOUT a year before that dinner-party at which May Cheffington had made her *début* in Oldchester society, Mrs. Hadlow had begun to think it probable that Theodore Bransby might wish to marry her daughter, and to consider the desirability of his doing so. On the whole she did not disapprove the prospect. Constance was very handsome, but she was also very poor. Her ambition might not be satisfied by a match with Martin Bransby's son; but on the other hand, Theodore was a young man of good abilities, and apt to rise in the world. Moreover, he had sufficient property of his own to facilitate his rising—a little ballast of that sort being as useful in the *melée* of this world as the lead in a toy tumbler, and enabling a man, if not to strike the stars with his sublime head, at least to keep right side uppermost.

Certainly Theodore had appeared much attracted by Miss Hadlow. Not only her beauty but her self-assertion approved itself to him; for a man's wife should be able to justify his taste; and there would be no distinction in winning a woman whose meekness made it doubtful whether she could have had the heart to say "No" to an inferior suitor. They had been playfellows in childhood, but school and Cambridge had separated them. But after Theodore began to read for the Bar, and, during the two last vacations, which he had spent chiefly at home, a great intimacy had sprung up between the young people. Theodore's frequent visits to the old house in College Quad did not pass unobserved. One or two persons thought his partiality for the Hadlows—especially when contrasted with the lukewarm politeness he bestowed on other families, such as Raynes the brewer, or the Burtons who lived in a park, and had had nothing to do with retail for two generations—was creditable to Theodore's heart. "He was not one to neglect old friends," said they, candidly confessing at the same time that it was more than they should have expected of him. But the majority felt sure that nothing

short of being in love with Constance Hadlow could induce young Bransby to prefer the canon's old-fashioned parlour to Mrs. Raynes's red and gold drawing-room, or the Burtons' æsthetic upholstery. Oldchester folks did not guess that Theodore intended to frequent a style of society in which neither the Rayneses nor the Burtons would be able to make any figure, nor did they know that he set a considerable value on Mrs. Hadlow's connections. That lady had been a Miss Rivers, and her family ranked among the oldest landed gentry in the kingdom. There were not many Oldchester magnates to whom Theodore Bransby thought it worth while to be more than coolly civil. Mr. Bragg was an exception, but then Mr. Bragg was a man of very great wealth; and as mere size is held in certain cases to be an element of grandeur, so money, Theodore thought, is capable in certain cases of inspiring veneration—that is to say, when there is enough of it.

As to Miss Constance's state of mind about young Bransby, it was too complex to be described in a word. She liked Theodore, and thought him a superior person; if not quite so superior as he thought himself. She had faith,

too, in his future. It would be agreeable to be the wife of a distinguished M.P. or Q.C., or perhaps of both combined in one person. Theodore would certainly settle nowhere but in London, and to live in London had been Constance's dream ever since she was fifteen. Her visions of what her life would be if she married Theodore Bransby concerned themselves chiefly with their joint-entry into some fashionable drawing-room, her presentation at Court, her name in the *Morning Post*, herself exquisitely dressed driving Theodore down to the House in a neat victoria, and returning the salutations of distinguished acquaintances as they passed along Whitehall. All more serious questions regarding their married life Constance set at rest by a few formulas. Of course, she should do her duty. Of course, Theodore would always behave like a gentleman. Of course, they should never condescend to vulgar wrangling. Of course, her husband would give way to her in any difference of opinion;—particularly since she was pretty sure to be always right. And then Constance knew herself to be so very charming, that a man of taste could not fail to delight in her society.

Yet it must not be supposed that she had fully made up her mind to marry Theodore. That Theodore would be very glad to marry her she did not doubt at all. There had been a time—nay, there were moments still—when her visions of herself as Mrs. Theodore Bransby had been blurred by the disturbing element of her cousin Owen's presence. He had shown an attractive appreciation of her attractions; and had, to use Mr. Simpson's phrase, "dangled after his cousin" a good deal. Owen Rivers had reached the age of three and twenty without ever having earned a dinner, and without any serious preparation to enable him to earn one. He had had an expensive education, and had done fairly well at Oxford. His mother had died in his infancy; and his father, a country clergyman, had allowed the young man to lounge away his life at the parsonage, under the specious pretext of taking time to make up his mind what career he would follow. Owen had fished, and shot, and walked, and boated, and cricketed; but he had also read a good deal, having an intellectual appetite at once robust and discriminating. His friends and relatives agreed in thinking him very

clever; and, when they reproached him with wasting his fine abilities and leading a purposeless existence, he would answer jestingly that he should be sorry to belie their judgment by subjecting his talents to the dangerous touchstone of action. His father died before he had determined on a profession. But, fortunately as he thought, and unfortunately as was thought by some other persons, including his Aunt Jane, he inherited wherewithal to live without working, and, with a hundred and fifty pounds per annum, could not lack bread and cheese. On his father's death he went to travel on the Continent. He walked wherever walking was possible, carrying his own knapsack, spending little, and seeing much. After more than two years' absence, he returned to England and made his way to Oldchester to see his Aunt Jane, with whom he had maintained an intermittent correspondence. There he found Constance, whom he last remembered as a sallow, self-sufficient schoolgirl, grown to a beautiful young woman. Her sallowness had turned into a creamy pallor, and her self-sufficiency was mitigated, to the masculine judgment, by the depth and softness of a pair of fine dark eyes.

Owen, on his part, made a decidedly favourable impression on his cousin. He was not handsome—which mattered little—nor fashionably dressed—which mattered more; but he was well made, and had the grace which belongs to youthful health and strength. And he had, too, that indefinable tone of manner which ensured his recognition as an English gentleman. Constance was by no means insensible to this attraction. If she had not the sentiments which originate the finest manners, she had the perceptions which recognize them. When Mary Raynes and the Burnet girls criticized the roughness of Owen's demeanour, comparing it with Theodore Bransby's "polish," she knew they were wrong. Theodore always behaved with the greatest propriety; but between his manners and Owen's there was the same sort of difference as between a native and a foreigner speaking the same language. The foreigner may often be more accurately correct of the two on minor points, but it is an affair of conscious acquirement, and must inevitably break down now and then; whereas the native talks as naturally as he breathes, and can no more make certain mistakes than an oak tree

can put forth willow leaves. Then Owen was very amusing company when he chose to be so,—and he usually did choose to be so when at his Aunt Jane's; and he had good old blood in his veins. This latter fact gave a certain piquancy, in Constance's opinion, to his political theories, which were opposed to the staunch Tory traditions of his family. Constance frequently took her cousin to task on this subject; but with the comfortable conviction to sweeten their controversy that a Rivers could afford to indulge in a little democratic heresy, just as Lord Castlecombe could afford to wear a shabbier coat than any of his tenants.

All these considerations, together with the crowning circumstance that he evidently admired her a good deal, caused Owen to fill a large place in his cousin's mind. She even asked herself seriously more than once if she were in love with Owen, but failed to answer the question decisively. She did, however, arrive at the conviction that falling in love lay much more in one's own power than was commonly supposed; and that no Romeo-and-Juliet destiny could ever inspire *her* with an ungovernable passion for a man who possessed

but a hundred and fifty pounds a year. Mrs. Hadlow had at one time felt some uneasiness—nearly as much on Owen's account as on her daughter's, to say the truth. But she had satisfied herself that there was nothing more than a fraternal kind of regard between the young people—wherein she was wrong; and that there was no danger of their imprudently marrying—wherein she was right.

Mrs. Hadlow had, indeed, made up her mind that Constance would accept Theodore Bransby whenever he should offer himself; and she privately thought it high time that the offer were made. What did Theodore wait for? His means (according to Mrs. Hadlow's estimate of things) were sufficient to allow him to marry at once. But even supposing that he did not choose to marry until he had fairly entered on his career as a barrister, still there ought to be at least some clear understanding between him and Constance. All Oldchester expected to hear of their engagement, and it was not fair to the girl to leave matters in their present uncertain condition. When, at the end of the vacation, young Bransby left Oldchester again without having made any declaration, Mrs.

Hadlow was not only surprised, but uneasy; and she opened her mind to her husband on the subject, invading his study at an unusual hour for that purpose.

“Edward,” said Mrs. Hadlow, “don’t you think that Theodore Barnsby ought to have spoken before he went to town this last time?”

“Spoken, my dear?”

“To Constance; or to us about Constance.”

The canon leaned his head on his hand, keeping the thumb of the other hand inserted between the pages of his Plato as a marker, and looked absently at his wife.

“Well? Don’t you think he ought?” she repeated impatiently.

The good canon meditated for a few moments. Then he said—

“I—I don’t feel quite sure that I understand. What ought he to have said, Jane?”

“Said! Goodness, Edward! He ought to have declared his intentions, of course. It is high time that something was understood clearly.”

The canon’s gentle blue eyes lost their abstracted look, and a little sparkle came into them as he answered, “I hope—nay, I am

sure—Jane, that you would not think of taking any step, or saying any word, which might compromise our dear child's dignity. Let it not appear that you are eager to put this interpretation on the young man's visits."

"My dear Edward, Theodore has been paying Conny marked attentions for more than a year past; but during this last summer and autumn he has been in our house morning, noon, and night. He doesn't come for *our beaux yeux*."

"H'm, h'm, h'm! But, Jane, an attachment of that sort between two young creatures should be treated with the greatest delicacy. It is shy and sensitive. Let us beware of pulling up our flower by the roots to see if it is growing."

This trope by no means corresponded with Mrs. Hadlow's conception of the relations between Theodore Bransby and her daughter. She was an affectionate mother, but she did not delude herself into thinking Constance peculiarly sensitive or romantic. In fact, she was wont to say that her daughter was twenty years older than herself on some points. But the canon erroneously attributed to his daughter a quite poetical refinement of feeling. His views on most subjects were romantic and unworldly, and

his ideas about women were peculiarly chivalrous. They frequently irked Constance. She was not without respect as well as affection for her father; and it was sometimes difficult to bring these sentiments into harmony with her deep-seated admiration for herself. However, she usually reconciled all discrepancies between what he expected of her and what she knew to be the fact, by declaring that "Papa was so old-fashioned!"

"Tell me, Jane," said the canon, after a little pause, "do you think Conny's feelings are seriously engaged? Do you think this matter is likely to make her unhappy?"

"Unhappy? Well, no; I hope not unhappy," answered Mrs. Hadlow slowly.

"Then all is well. We will not let our spirits be troubled."

"But, Edward, although she may not break her heart——"

"Heaven forbid! Break her heart, Jane?"

"Well, I say of course there's no fear of that; but it is detrimental to a girl to have an affair of this kind dragging on in a vague sort of way. It might spoil her chance in other directions; and people will talk, you know."

“Tut, tut! As to ‘spoiling her chance’—which is a phrase very distasteful to me in this connection—if you mean that any eligible suitor would be discouraged from wooing Conny because another man is supposed to admire her too, that’s all nonsense. Do you think I should have been frightened away from trying to win you, Jenny, by any such impalpable figment of a rival?”

“You?” exclaimed Mrs. Hadlow, with a sudden flush and a proud smile. “Oh, that’s a *very* different matter, Edward. I don’t see any young men nowadays to compare with what you were.”

The canon laughed softly. “Thank you, my dear. No doubt your grandmother said much the same sort of thing once upon a time; and I hope your grand-daughter may say it too, some day. But set your heart at rest as to this matter. That Theodore Bransby, whom we have known from his birth, should be a frequent guest in our house, can surprise no one. There is youthful society to be found here. Without reckoning Constance, there’s Owen Rivers, the Burton girls, little May—we may reasonably suppose this to be attractive to a young man

who has no companions of his own age at home, without attributing to him any such intentions as you speak off. In fact," added the canon simply, "we must believe you are mistaken; since, if Theodore loved our daughter, there's nothing to prevent his saying so!"

Of all which speech, two words chiefly arrested Mrs. Hadlow's attention and stuck in her memory—"little May." It was true, now she came to think of it, that the increased frequency of Theodore's visits coincided with May Cheffington's presence in Oldchester. Then she suddenly remembered it was by Theodore's influence that May had been invited to Mrs. Bransby's dinner-party, and many words and ways of his with reference to Miss Cheffington occurred to her in a new light. But then, again, came a revulsion, and she told herself that the idea was absurd. It was out of the question that Theodore Bransby, with his social ambition, should think seriously of marrying insignificant little May Cheffington, who was not even handsome (when compared with Constance), who had childish manners, no fortune—and, worst of all, was Mrs. Dobbs's grand-daughter! "Besides," said Mrs. Hadlow to herself, "he

must be fond of Conny. It's quite an old attachment; and, though Theodore may not have very ardent feelings, I don't believe he is fickle."

Nevertheless, she was not entirely reassured. After Theodore's departure from Oldchester she observed her daughter solicitously for some time; but she finally convinced herself that Conny's peace of mind was in no danger. She had sometimes been provoked by Conny's matter-of-fact coolness, and had felt that young lady's worldly wisdom to be an anachronism. But she admitted that in the present case these gifts had their advantage; for, when Oldchester friends showed their interest or curiosity by hints and allusions to Theodore, which made Mrs. Hadlow quite hot and uncomfortable, Constance met them all with perfect calmness, and she discussed the young man's prospects with an almost patronizing air that puzzled people.

In a few weeks more May Cheffington departed for London; Owen Rivers also went away, and life in the dark old house in College Quad resumed its usual quiet routine.

CHAPTER XI.

It was a raw, gusty afternoon towards the end of March when May and her grandmother arrived in London. There had been some difficulty about the journey, arising from Mrs. Dormer-Smith's objection to her niece's travelling alone, and insisting on her being properly attended. In reply to a suggestion that May would be quite safe in a ladies' carriage, and under the care of the guard, she wrote:—"It is not that I doubt her being safe; but I *cannot* let my servants see her arrive alone when I meet her at the station. Why not send a maid with her?" To which Mrs. Dobbs made answer that she could not send a maid, having only one servant-of-all-work, but that she herself would bring her grand-daughter to London. "I shall go up by one train, and come down by the next," said she to Jo Weatherhead. And when

he remonstrated against her incurring that expense and fatigue, she answered, "Oh, we won't spoil the ship for a ha'porth of tar. If I make up my mind to part with the child, I'll start her as well as I can."

The travellers found Mrs. Dormer-Smith awaiting them at the railway station. She greeted May affectionately, and Mrs. Dobbs amiably. "My servant has a cab here for the luggage," she said. "But"—hesitatingly—"how shall we manage about——? I'm afraid the brougham is too small for three." Mrs. Dobbs settled the question by declaring that she did not purpose going to Mrs. Dormer-Smith's house. She would get some dinner at the station, and return to Oldchester by an evening train. "Oh dear, I'm afraid that will be very uncomfortable for you!" said Pauline, politely trying to conceal her satisfaction at this arrangement. "Will you not come and— and lunch with us?" But Mrs. Dobbs stuck to her own plan.

While the footman was superintending the placing of May's luggage on the cab, her grandmother drew her into the waiting-room to say "good-bye." "God bless you, my dear,

dear child! Write to me often, keep well, and be happy!" she said, folding the girl in her arms. Mrs. Dormer-Smith stood by, not unsympathetic, but at the same time relieved to know James was busy with the luggage, so that he could not witness the parting, nor hear May's exclamation, "Darling granny! darling granny!" Indeed, it might be hoped that he would never know the relationship between this stout, common-looking old woman and Miss Cheffington; nor be able to report it in the servants' hall. She felt that Mrs. Dobbs was behaving very properly, and said with gracious sweetness, "I'm sure we ought all to be very much obliged to you for the care you have taken of my niece. It was most good of you to undertake this tiresome journey."

Mrs. Dobbs looked up with a flash in her eyes. "I only hope," she returned hotly, "that you will take as good care of my grandchild as I have taken of your niece." The next moment she repented of her retort, and said quite humbly, "You will be kind to her, won't you? Poor motherless lamb! You will be kind to her, I'm sure!"

"Indeed I will," answered Mrs. Dormer-

Smith, with unruffled gentleness. "I have always wished for a daughter, and she shall be like my own daughter to me." And, with a motherly caress, she drew May to her side.

"Don't be afraid for me, granny dear!" said May, smiling with tearful eyes. "I shall be very happy with Aunt Pauline. Besides, I shall see you again very soon."

Mrs. Dobbs laid her hand on the girl's shoulder and pushed her gently, but firmly, out of the waiting-room, standing herself in the doorway until May and her aunt had disappeared. Then she sat down by the fire, untied her bonnet-strings, pulled out her handkerchief, and sobbed unrestrainedly. The waiting-room attendant looked at her curiously; for she had noticed that Mrs. Dobbs did not belong to the same class as that elegantly dressed lady, attended by a servant in livery, with whom the young girl had gone away. Presently she drew near, on pretence of poking the fire, and said—

"You're very fond of the young lady, ain't you? But don't take on so. You'll see her again very soon, I dare say. Don't cry, poor dear!"

"I *have* cried," said Mrs. Dobbs, getting up

and drying her eyes resolutely. "I have cried, and it's done me good. And now I'll go and get a bit of food."

But she only trifled with the modest dinner set before her; and, as she sat in a corner of the second-class carriage which conveyed her back to Oldchester, her handkerchief was soaked with silent tears.

To May the separation naturally seemed far less terrible than it did to Mrs. Dobbs. She had no idea that it was to be a long, much less a permanent, one. She found it agreeable to sit in the well-hung, neatly appointed brougham, with a cushion at her back and a hot-water tin under her feet, and to look through the clear glasses at the bustle and movement of London. Her aunt Pauline was very pleasant and sympathetic. May thought that she might come to love her father's sister very dearly. She admired her already. Mrs. Dormer-Smith's gentle manner, her soft, low voice, the quiet elegance of her dress, and even the delicate perfume of violets which hung about her, were all appreciated by May.

"My cousin is not at home, is he, Aunt Pauline?" she asked after a little silence.

“No; Cyril is at Harrow. There are only the children.”

“Oh, children!” cried May, with brightening eyes. “I’m so glad! I love children. I didn’t know you had any children besides Cyril.”

Mrs. Dormer-Smith laughed her peculiar little guttural laugh, consisting of several ha, ha, ha’s, slowly and softly uttered, and made no answer.

“Are they boys or girls? How many are there? How old are they?” questioned May eagerly.

“Two little boys. Harold is—let me see—Harold is six, and Wilfred five. It is very awkward having two little things in the nursery so many years younger than their elder brother. Cyril is turned fifteen. It is like beginning all one’s troubles over again,” said Pauline plaintively. The birth of these two children was, indeed, a standing grievance with her.

May thought this an odd way of talking, and said no more on the subject of her little cousins. But she looked forward to seeing them with pleasant expectation.

The sight of the house in Kensington brought back vividly to her mind the day after the

dowager's funeral, when she had arrived there from school, feeling very strange and forlorn. She remembered, too, the abrupt departure next morning with her father, and her impression that the Dormer-Smiths had not behaved well, and that her father was very angry with them. May was shown into a bedroom at the back of the house, overlooking some gardens. The maid, having asked if she could do anything for Miss Cheffington, and having mentioned that the luncheon-gong would sound in ten minutes, withdrew, and left May alone. She examined the room with girlish interest. It was very pretty, she thought. Perhaps, in point of solid comfort, the old-fashioned furniture of her room in Friar's Row might be superior ; but in Friar's Row there was no such ample provision of looking-glasses as there was here. She was still contemplating herself from head to foot in a long swing mirror, which stood in a good light near the window, when the gong sounded.

May ran downstairs, and in the dining-room she found her aunt and a heavy-looking man with grizzled, sandy hair, and dull blue eyes, who asked her how she did, and supposed she would hardly recognize him.

“Oh yes, I do, Uncle Frederick!” she answered.

And again an uncomfortable recollection of her father’s angry departure from that house came over her. But whatever quarrels there might have been in those days, her aunt and uncle appeared to have forgotten all about them. Mr. Dormer-Smith told May more than once that he was pleased to see her.

“You’re not a bit like your father, my dear,” said he, with an approving air not altogether flattering to Augustus.

“Oh yes, Frederick!” interposed his wife. “There is a family expression.”

“It’s an expression I have never seen on your brother’s face. No, nor any approach to it.”

Mrs. Dormer-Smith laughed the soft little laugh which was habitual with her when embarrassed or disconcerted, and changed the conversation. “I hope you like your room, May?” she said.

“Oh yes, very much indeed, thank you, Aunt Pauline.”

“I wish I could have come upstairs with you. But I am obliged to *ménager* my strength as much as possible.”

“Are you not well, Aunt Pauline?” asked May with ready sympathy.

“I am not *strong*, dear.”

“You would be better if you exerted yourself more,” said Mr. Dormer-Smith. “Your system gets into a sluggish state from sheer inactivity.”

“Ah, you don’t understand, Frederick,” answered his wife, with a plaintive smile.

And May felt indignant at her uncle’s want of feeling. But the next minute she relented towards him when he said, as he rose from table—

“I’ll go round to the chemist’s myself for Willy’s medicine, and bring it back with me, as I suppose you will be wanting James to go out again with the carriage by-and-by.”

“Is one of the little boys ill?” asked May.

This time it was her aunt who replied calmly, “Oh no. The child has a little nervous cough; it is really more a trick than anything else.”

“Huggins doesn’t think so lightly of it, I can assure you. He tells me great care is needed,” said Mr. Dormer-Smith.

“Can I—would you mind—might I see my little cousins?” asked May, with some hesitation.

She was puzzled by these discrepancies of opinion between husband and wife.

Mr. Dormer-Smith turned round with a look almost of animation. "Come now, if you like. Come with me," he said. And May followed him out of the room, disregarding her aunt's suggestion that it would be better for her to lie down and rest after her journey.

The nursery was a large room—in fact, an attic—at the top of the house. May noticed how rapidly the elegance and costliness of the furniture and appointments decreased as they mounted. If the dining-room and drawing-rooms represented tropical luxury, the bedrooms cooled down into a temperate zone; and the top region of all was arctic in its barrenness. The nursery looked very forlorn and comfortless, with its bare floor, cheap wall-paper dotted with coarse, coloured prints, and its small grate with a small fire in it, which had exhausted its energies in smoking furiously, as the smell in the room testified. At a table in the middle of the room sat a hard-featured young woman, with high cheek-bones, and a complexion like that of a varnished wooden doll, mending a heap of linen; and in one corner, where stood

a battered old rocking-horse and a top-heavy Noah's Ark, two little boys were kneeling on the floor, building houses with wooden bricks. On their father's entrance, they looked up languidly; but when they saw who it was, they scrambled to their feet with some show of pleasure, and came to stand one on each side of him, holding his hands. They were both like him, blue-eyed and sandy-haired, and both looked pale and sickly. Harold, the elder, seemed the stronger of the two. Wilfred was a meagre, frail-looking little creature, with a half-timid, half-sullen expression of face. Their father kissed them both, and, sitting down, drew the younger child on his knee, whilst Harold stood pressing close against his shoulder.

"Well, do you know who this is?" asked Mr. Dormer-Smith, pointing to May.

Apparently they had no wish to know, for they nestled closer to their father, and sulkily rejected May's proffered caresses.

"Oh, come, you mustn't be shy," said their father. "This is your cousin May; kiss her, and say, 'How d'ye do?'"

But nothing would induce either of the boys to give May his hand, nor even to look at her;

and at length she begged her uncle not to trouble himself, and hoped they would all be very good friends presently.

“And how do we get on with our lessons, ma’amselle?” asked Mr. Dormer-Smith of the hard-featured young woman, who, beyond rising from her chair when they came in, had hitherto taken no notice of them.

“We haven’t had no lessons to-day,” put in Harold, with a lowering look at “ma’amselle.”

“No, monsieur, it has been impossible till now; I have had so much sewing to do for madame. See!” and she pointed to the heap of linen. “But we will have our lessons in the afternoon.”

“I don’t want lessons; I want to go out with papa. Take me with you, papa,” cried Harold. Whereupon little Wilfred lisped out that he too would go out with papa, and set up a peevish whine.

“It is too cold for you, my man,” said the father. “The sharp wind would make you cough. Harold will stay with you, and you can play together, and do your lessons afterwards, like good boys.”

But the children only wailed and cried the

louder, whilst mademoiselle, with her eyes on her needlework, monotonously repeated in her Swiss-French, "What is this? Be good, my children," and apparently thought she was doing all that she was called upon to do under the circumstances.

May thought her little cousins peculiarly disagreeable children; but she could not help feeling sorry for them and for their father, who looked quite helpless and distressed. "Would you like me to tell you a story?" she said. "I know some very pretty stories."

A wail from Wilfred and a scowl from Harold were all the answer she received from them. But her uncle caught at the suggestion eagerly.

"Oh, that would be very kind of Cousin May," he said. "A pretty story! You'll like that, won't you?"

"No, I shan't! I want to go with papa," grumbled Harold.

"I want to go wis papa," sobbed Wilfred.

"It is always so when monsieur comes to the nursery," said the Swiss, coolly going on with her sewing. "The children are so fond of monsieur."

“Poor little fellows!” cried May.

Then kneeling down beside her uncle, she began softly to stroke Wilfred’s hair, and to speak to him coaxingly. After a while, the child glanced shyly into her face, and ceased to sob. Presently he allowed himself to be transferred from his father’s knee to May’s. The Noah’s Ark was brought into requisition. May ranged its inmates—all more or less dilapidated—on the floor, and began to perform a drama with them, making each animal’s utterances in an appropriate voice. A smile dawned on Wilfred’s pale little face, and Harold drew near to look and listen with evident interest.

“Now, Uncle Frederick, if you have to go out, I will stay and play with the children, until lesson-time. They are going to be very good now; ain’t you, boys?”

“Ve’y good now,” assented Wilfred, his attention still absorbed by the Noah’s Ark animals.

“Well, if you’ll make the pig grunt again, I will be good,” said Harold, with a Bismarckian mastery of the *do ut des* principle.

Mr. Dormer-Smith’s face beamed with satisfaction. “It’s very good of you, my dear,” said he. “If you don’t mind, it would be very kind

to stay with them a little while ; that is, if you are not too tired by your journey ? ” And as he went away, he repeated, “ It’s very good of you, my dear ; very good of you ! ”

But May found that her aunt took a different view.

“ *Dear May,* ” said she, when she learned where her niece had been spending the two hours after luncheon, “ this is very imprudent ! You should have lain down and taken a thorough rest instead of exerting yourself in that way. ”

“ Oh, I’m not in the least tired, Aunt Pauline. ”

“ Dear child, you may not think so ; but a railway journey of three or four hours jars the nerves terribly. ”

“ Oh, I was very glad to amuse the children, Aunt Pauline. They were crying to go out with their father, so I tried to comfort them. They got quite merry before I left them. ”

Mrs. Dormer-Smith slowly shook her head and smiled. “ You will find them extremely tiresome, poor things ! ” said she placidly. “ They are by no means engaging children. Cyril was very different at their age. ”

“Oh, Aunt Pauline! I think they might be made—I mean I think we shall come to be great friends. I couldn’t bear to see them cry, poor mites!”

“That is all very sweet in you, dear May, but I fancy it is best to leave their nursery governess to manage them. Her French is not all that I could wish. But a pure accent is not so vitally important for boys. It is much if an Englishman can speak French even decently. And Cecile makes herself very useful with her needle.”

Pauline then announced that she would not go out again that afternoon, but would devote herself to the inspection of May’s wardrobe. “Of course you have no evening dresses fit to wear,” she said; “but we will see whether we cannot manage to make use of some of your clothes. Smithson, my maid, is very clever.”

“Why, of course granny would not have sent me without proper clothes!” protested May, opening her eyes in astonishment. “And I *have* an evening frock—a very pretty white muslin, quite new.”

To this speech Aunt Pauline vouchsafed no answer beyond a vague smile. She scarcely

heard it, in fact. Her mind was preoccupied with weighty considerations. As she seated herself in the one easy-chair in May's room, and watched her niece kneeling down, keys in hand, before her travelling trunk, she observed with heartfelt thankfulness that the girl's figure was naturally graceful, and calculated to set off well-cut garments to advantage.

"Oh!" exclaimed May suddenly, turning round and letting the keys fall with a clash as she clasped her hands, "above everything I must not miss the post! I want to send off a letter, so that granny may have it at breakfast time to-morrow for a surprise. Have I plenty of time, Aunt Pauline?"

"No doubt," answered her aunt absently. She was debating whether the circumference of May's waist might not be reduced an inch or so by judicious lacing.

"Perhaps I had better get my letter written first, Aunt Pauline. I wouldn't miss writing to granny for the world, and any time will do for the clothes."

To which her aunt replied with solemnity, and with an appearance of energy which May had never witnessed in her before, "Your

wardrobe, May, demands very serious consideration. April is just upon us. You are to be presented at the second Drawing-room. Dress is an important social duty, and we must not lose time in trifling."

CHAPTER XII.

IT was a great comfort to Mrs. Dormer-Smith to find her niece so pretty ("not a beauty," as she said to herself, "but extremely pleasing, and with capital points"), and so entirely free from vulgarisms of speech or manner. In fact, May's outward demeanour needed but very few polishing touches to make it all her aunt could desire. But a more intimate acquaintance revealed traits of character which troubled Mrs. Dormer-Smith a good deal.

"I suppose," she observed to her husband, with a sigh, "one had no right to expect that poor Augustus's unfortunate marriage should have left no trace in his children. But it is dreadfully disheartening to come every now and then upon some absolutely middle-class prejudice or scruple in May. Now, Augustus, whatever his faults may be, always had such a thoroughbred way of looking at things."

“Certainly, no one can accuse your brother of having scruples,” said Frederick.

“Besides, it is terribly bad form in a girl of her age to set up for a moralist.”

“It doesn’t seem much like May to set up for anything : she is always so childish and unpretending.”

“Oh yes ; and that *ingénue* air is delicious : it goes so perfectly with her *physique*. But there are so many things which one cannot teach in words, but which girls brought up in a certain *monde* learn by instinct.”

“What sort of things do you mean ?” asked her husband after a little pause.

“Well, on Thursday, for instance, I was awfully annoyed. Mrs. Griffin was here, and seemed pleased with May, and talked to her a good deal. You know that is very important, because the duchess invites people or leaves them out pretty much as her mother dictates. So I was naturally very much gratified to see May making a good impression. In fact, Mrs. Griffin whispered to me, ‘Charming ! So fresh.’ Presently Lady Burlington came in, and they began talking of those new people, the Aaronssohns, who have a million and a half a year.

Lady Burlington had been at a big dinner there the night before, and she told us the most astonishing things of their vulgarity and their pushing ways. When she was gone Mrs. Griffin said, 'I do like Lady Burlington,' and began praising her manners and her air of *grande dame*. And, very kindly turning to May, she said, 'Do you know, little one, that that is one of the proudest women in England?' 'Is she?' said May. 'I should never have guessed that she was proud.' Something in her way of saying it caught Mrs. Griffin's attention; and she pressed her and cross-questioned her, until May blurted out that she thought it despicable to accept vulgar people's hospitality only because they were rich, and then to ridicule them for being vulgar. I never was so shocked; for, you know, the duchess and Mrs. Griffin both went to the Aaronssohns' ball last season. Now you know," pursued Mrs. Dormer-Smith almost tearfully, "that kind of thing will never do. You must allow that it will never do, Frederick."

"It would be awkward," assented Frederick, looking grave. "Couldn't you tell her?"

"Of course, I spoke to her after Mrs. Griffin

had gone away. But she only said, 'What could I do, Aunt Pauline? The old lady insisted on my answering her, and I couldn't tell her a story.' You see what a difficult kind of thing it will be to manage, Frederick."

Mr. Dormer-Smith had become a great partisan of May's. He was genuinely grateful for her kindness to his children, and would willingly have taken her part had it been possible. But he felt that his wife was right; it would really never do to carry into society an *enfant terrible* of such uncompromising truthfulness. And this feeling was much strengthened by the recollection of sundry remarks which May had innocently made to himself—remarks indicating an inconvenient assumption on her part that one's principles must naturally regulate one's practice. However, as he told his wife, they must trust to time and experience to correct this crudeness.

"She is but a schoolgirl, after all," he said.

Pauline did not pursue the subject, but she reflected within herself that there are school-girls and schoolgirls.

There had been some discussion as to who should present May. Mrs. Dormer-Smith was

of opinion that had there been a Viscountess Castlecombe, the office would properly have devolved on her ladyship; but old Lord Castlecombe had been a widower for many years. At length it was decided that May should be presented by her aunt.

“I know it is a great risk for me to go out *décolletée* on an English spring day,” said that devoted woman. “And Lady Burlington would do it if I asked her. But I wish to carry out the duty I have undertaken towards Augustus’s daughter, as thoroughly as my strength will allow. Under all the circumstances of the case, it is important that she should be publicly acknowledged, and, as it were, identified with the family. Of course, I shall feel justified in buying my gown out of May’s money.”

“May’s money” had come to be the phrase by which the Dormer-Smiths spoke of the payment made by Mrs. Dobbs for her granddaughter.

But besides the comforting sense of duty fulfilled, there were other compensations in store for Mrs. Dormer-Smith. May’s presentation dress was pronounced exquisite, and was ready in good time; and May herself profited

satisfactorily by the instructions of a fashionable professor of deportment, in the difficult art of walking and curtsying in a train. To be sure, she had alarmed her aunt at first, by going into fits of laughter when describing Madame Melnotte's lessons, and imitating the impressive gravity with which the dancing-mistress went through the dumb show of a presentation at Court. But she did what she was told to do, not only with docility, but with an unaffected simplicity which Aunt Pauline's good taste perceived to be infinitely charming. And she said to her husband that she really began to hope May would be "a great success."

The great day of the Drawing-room came and went, as do all days, great or small. But whether she had been a success or a failure, in her aunt's sense of the words, May had not the remotest idea. Indeed, the various feelings on the subject of her presentation which had filled her breast beforehand (including a genuine delight in her own appearance as she stood before the big looking-glass, while Smithson put the finishing touches to her head-dress), were all swallowed up in the supreme feeling of thankfulness that it was over; and that she

had not disgraced herself by tumbling over her train, or otherwise shocking the eyes of august personages. Also, in a minor degree, she was thankful that Aunt Pauline's antique lace-flounce—a portion of the dowager's legacy lent for the occasion—had escaped destruction. On their drive homeward, she sat silent, trying to extricate some definite image from her confused impressions of the ceremony, and finding that her most distinct recollection recorded the pressure of a persistent and ruthless elbow against her ribs. Mrs. Dormer-Smith, too, was too much exhausted to say much. She leaned back in the carriage with closed eyes, wrapping her furs round her, and sniffing at a bottle of salts.

But when refreshed by a glass of wine, and seated in a well-cushioned chair before a blazing fire, Mrs. Dormer-Smith felt very well satisfied with the result of the day. Mrs. Griffin had been there, and had nodded approvingly across a struggling crowd of bare shoulders; and Mrs. Griffin's approbation was worth having. Mr. Dormer-Smith came home from his club a full hour earlier than usual, in order to hear the report—a proof of interest which May, not

being a whist-player, was unable fully to appreciate.

“Well,” said Pauline, with a kind of pious serenity, “we have accomplished this somewhat trying social duty.”

“Trying, indeed,” exclaimed May. “I’m afraid you are dreadfully tired, Aunt Pauline. And the crowd and closeness made your head ache, I saw. How is your head now?”

“It is better, dear, much better.”

“Well?” said Mr. Dormer-Smith, looking interrogatively with raised eyebrows at his wife.

“Oh yes, Frederick; very nice indeed, very satisfactory. I was very much pleased. I *had* been a little anxious about the effect of the *corsage*, but Amélie has done herself great credit. And, mercifully, white suits our dear child to perfection. She really looked very well.”

“Did I, Aunt Pauline? Well, I’m sure it didn’t much matter how I looked.”

“Didn’t matter!” echoed Mrs. Dormer-Smith in a shocked tone.

“Oh, come, May!” cried her uncle. “I thought you were above that sort of nonsense.

Do you mean to tell me that you don't care about looking pretty?"

"Oh no! I mean—well, I did think my dress was lovely when I looked at myself in the big glass upstairs; but in that crush who could see it? And I was awfully afraid that Aunt Pauline's lace flounce would be torn completely off the skirt."

Her uncle laughed. "You don't appear to have altogether enjoyed your first appearance as a courtier," said he.

"Enjoyed! Oh, who *could* enjoy it?" Then, fearful of seeming ungrateful, she added, "It was very, very kind of Aunt Pauline to take so much trouble, and to get me that beautiful dress."

May had not been accustomed to think about ways and means. It had seemed a matter of course that her daily wants should be supplied, and she had hitherto bestowed no more thought on the matter than a young bird in the nest. But it was impossible for her to live as a member of the Dormer-Smiths' family without having the question of money brought forcibly to her mind. There were small pinchings and savings of a kind utterly unknown in Friar's

Row; elaborate calculations were made as to the possibility of this or that expenditure; Aunt Pauline frequently lamented her poverty; and yet, withal, there was kept up an appearance of wealth and elegance. May was not long in discovering the seamy side of all the luxury which surrounded her; and it amazed her. Why should her aunt so arrange her life as to derive very little comfort from very strenuous effort? And what puzzled her most of all at first was the air of conscious virtue with which this was done: the strange way in which Aunt Pauline would mention some piece of meanness or insincerity as though it were an act of loftiest duty. On one or two occasions May had innocently suggested a straightforward way out of some social difficulty; such as wearing an old gown when a new one could not be afforded, or refusing an invitation which could only be accepted at the cost of much bodily and mental harass. But these childish suggestions had been met by an indulgent smile; and she had been told that such and such things must be done or endured in order to keep up the family's position in society. Once May had asked, "Then why *should* we keep up our position in

society?" But her aunt had shown such genuine consternation at this impious inquiry, that the girl did not venture to repeat it.

Another question, however, soon forced itself upon May—namely, how it came to pass that, under all the circumstances, so much money was spent on her dress. Besides the court train and petticoat, her aunt had provided for her a wardrobe which, to the young girl's inexperienced eyes, appeared absolutely splendid (for Pauline's conscience, although cramped and squeezed into artificial shape like a Chinese lady's foot, was alive and sentient; and she would on no account have failed to expend "May's money" for May's advantage): and yet all the while there were the two little boys in their comfortless nursery, wearing coarse clothing and shabby shoes; and there was Cecile toiling at needlework instead of attending to the children, in order that the cost of a seamstress might be saved! On this subject May felt that she had a right to interrogate her aunt; and accordingly she took courage to do so. Mrs. Dormer-Smith was considerably embarrassed, and made an attempt to fence off the subject. But May persisted.

“It’s very, very good of you and Uncle Frederick to do so much for me,” she said; “but I can’t bear to take it all.”

“Nonsense, May! Remember you are a Cheffington. You *must* appear in the world properly equipped.”

“But, Aunt Pauline, it isn’t fair to Harold and Wilfred!”

“Harold and Wilfred?” echoed her aunt, opening wide her soft dark eyes. “What *do* you mean, May?”

May coloured hotly, but stuck to her point. “Well,” she said, “you know Uncle Frederick was saying the other day that Willy ought to have change of air; and you said you couldn’t afford to send him to the seaside just now; and—and I think Cecile thinks they ought to have new walking suits; and all the while I have so many expensive new frocks. I can’t bear it. It isn’t really fair.”

Then Mrs. Dormer-Smith found herself compelled to assure her niece that no penny of the cost of her toilet came out of Uncle Frederick’s pocket, and reading a further question in the girl’s face, she hastened to anticipate it by adding, “The arrangements made for you here,

May, are in entire accordance with your father's wishes. There has been a correspondence with him on the subject, and he wrote quite distinctly; otherwise your uncle and I would not have undertaken to bring you out."

"I hope," said May, "that papa does not deprive himself of anything for me. He used not to be at all well off, I know. I can remember when I was a little thing in Bruges."

"Augustus deprives himself of *nothing*," answered Mrs. Dormer-Smith softly, but emphatically. "Pray say no more on the subject, my dear. This sort of thing makes my head ache."

Her conscience being thus relieved, May accepted and enjoyed her new finery and her new life. She found that "taking up one's position in society" involved pleasanter things than being presented at a Drawing-room. It was delightful to be tastefully and becomingly dressed. It was agreeable to be sure of plenty of partners at every dance. It was satisfactory to have so admirable a chaperon as Aunt Pauline. One could no more form a fair judgment of that lady from knowing her only in domestic life, than one could fully appreciate a

swan from seeing it on dry land. In the congenial element of "society," her merits were exhibited to the utmost advantage. They were, indeed, greater than May had any idea of; Mrs. Dormer-Smith's tact in warding off ineligible partners, and securing as far as possible eligible ones for her niece, was masterly. But May admired her aunt's unruffled temper and gentle grace. She had been quick to find out—with some astonishment, but beyond the possibility of doubt—that fine people can be exceedingly rude on occasion; and she observed with pride that Aunt Pauline was never rude. Moreover, Aunt Pauline's softness of manner was a far more effectual protection against impertinence, than the *brusquerie* affected by sundry ladies who forgot the wisdom embodied in the homely saying, that "those who play at bowls must look out for rubbers;" and who were always liable to be vanquished by greater insolence than their own.

May soon began to be reticent of her real sentiments and opinions in speaking to her aunt and uncle. She felt that nine times out of ten she was not understood; or, which was worse, was misunderstood. But in writing to her dear

granny, she frankly and fully poured out all her heart. These letters were the joy and consolation of Mrs. Dobbs's life. Every minutest detail interested her. She laughed over May's description of the Drawing-room, and read it out aloud to Jo Weatherhead by way of a wholesome corrective to his Tory prejudices.

But at the same time she secretly treasured a copy of the *Morning Post* containing Miss Miranda Cheffington's name, and a description of Miss Miranda Cheffington's toilet on that occasion. And she listened, with a complacency of which she was more than half ashamed, to Mrs. Simpson's ecstasies on the subject; and to the scraps of information which the good-natured Amelia quoted—generally incorrectly—from social gossip setting forth how Mrs. Dormer-Smith and her niece, Miss Miranda Cheffington, had been present at this or that grand entertainment. These things might appear frivolous; but was it not for this end, to put May in her right place in the world, to give her her birthright, that Mrs. Dobbs had made a great sacrifice? Jo Weatherhead understood this so well, that the "fashionable intelligence" in the local newspapers assumed a quite pathetic interest

in his eyes. When he went to drink tea with his old friend in the parlour of her new abode with its trashy, stuccoed ceiling, miserably thin walls, and squeezed little fireplace, he felt it to be a positive comfort to pull from his pocket a copy of the *Court Journal* or other equally polite print, and read aloud to Sarah some paragraph in which May's name occurred. It was a consolation, too, to let himself be lectured and laughed at by Sarah for his absurd admiration of the aristocracy. And he took every opportunity of combating her Radicalism, in order that she might victoriously vindicate the steadfastness of her political principles.

Meanwhile, Captain Cheffington saw the accounts of his daughter's appearance in the fashionable world, and began to think that he had been too easy in giving his consent to it. He had got nothing by it; and perhaps something might have been got. He wrote twice to Pauline, urgently requiring her to tell him what was the exact sum which Mrs. Dobbs paid for her granddaughter's maintenance. That it was handsome he did not doubt; knowing by experience that the Dormer-Smiths would not contribute a shilling. Pauline had replied

evasively to the first letter, and not at all to the second, with the result that Augustus's imagination absurdly exaggerated Mrs. Dobbs's wealth. The old woman must be rolling in money after all! Had May's allowance been a small one, his sister would not have hesitated to tell him the exact sum. It was clear to his mind that the Dormer-Smiths were making an uncommonly good thing of it, and he was decidedly disinclined to leave all the profit to them. He wrote off to Oldchester a demand for money on his own account. It was refused; and his anger was very bitter. He even began to cherish a grudge against May. Why should she be surrounded by luxury, enjoying all the gaieties of London, and taking a social position to which her only claim was the fact of being *his* daughter, whilst he lived the life of an out-cast? He went so far as to threaten to come to England and bring away his daughter: having some idea that Mrs. Dobbs might ransom May, and pension him off. But the energy which might once upon a time have enabled Augustus Cheffington to take this strong step had waned long ago. He had grown inert. And, above all, the circumstances of his private life rendered

such independent action difficult, if not impossible.

It presently began to be reported amongst Mrs. Dormer-Smith's acquaintance, with other items of tea-table gossip, that "little May Cheffington had a rich old grandmother somewhere down in the country." Theodore Bransby, who was admitted as a familiar visitor at the Dormer-Smiths', and who made a parade of his intimacy with the Cheffingtons, was interrogated on the subject. He maintained a cautious reserve in his replies :—"He really could say nothing ; he had no idea what the old lady's means might be ; he could scarcely, in fact, be said to know her at all." Wishing, as he did, completely to ignore that objectionable old ironmonger's widow, it was irritating to find her existence known, and her means discussed, in London. To be sure, no one troubled himself to inquire "Who is she?" general interest being exclusively concentrated on the question, "What has she?" Theodore's reticence was by no means attributed to its real cause. People said that young Bransby was looking after the girl himself, and wanted to choke off possible rivals. Theodore did, indeed, push himself as far as

possible into every house which May frequented. There were some still inaccessible to him; but he had patience and perseverance. And he was constantly meeting May in the course of the season. She was far more pleased to see him in London than she had ever been in Oldchester. He was associated with persons whom she loved: and on many occasions when ball-room lookers-on pronounced Miss Cheffington and young Bransby to be "spooning awfully," May was talking with animation of his half-brothers, Bobby and Billy, of the dear old canon and her friend Constance, or even of Mr. and Mrs. Sebastian Bach Simpson. Theodore had no relish for these topics; but it was better to talk with May of them, than not to talk with her at all. And to the girl, he seemed the only link between her present life and the dear Oldchester days.

At the beginning of June, however, he ceased to have this exclusive claim on her attention. One fine day Aunt Pauline, returning from an afternoon drive with her niece, found a large visiting card with "The Misses Piper" engraved on it with many elaborate flourishes, whilst underneath was written in pencil "Miss Hadlow."

“Piper!” said Pauline, languidly dropping her eyeglass, and looking round at May. “What can this mean?”

“Oh, it means Miss Polly and Miss Patty and my schoolfellow Constance Hadlow!” cried May, clapping her hands. “Fancy Conny being in town! I dare say the Pipers invited her on a visit. I’m so glad!”

Mrs. Dormer-Smith’s countenance expressed anything but gladness; and she privately informed May that it would be impossible to do more than send cards to these ladies by the servant. “I *can’t* have them here on my Thursdays, you know, May,” she said plaintively, and with an injured air.

Three months ago May would have indignantly protested against this tone, and would have pointed out that it would be unfeeling and ungrateful on her part to slight her old friends. But she had by this time learned to understand how unavailing were all such representations to convince Aunt Pauline, in whose code personal sentiments of goodwill towards one’s neighbour had to yield to the higher law of duty towards “Society.”

“Perhaps,” said May, after a pause, “if you

cannot go yourself, Uncle Frederick would take me to Miss Piper's some Sunday after church, when we go for a walk with the children. You see they have written 'Sundays' on the corner of their card."

"Oh, do you think they would be satisfied with that sort of thing?" asked her aunt.

"They are most kind, good-natured old ladies," pursued May. "They wouldn't mind the children at all. Indeed, they like children. And as to coming to your Thursdays, Aunt Pauline, I really don't think they would care to do it. Music is their great passion—at least, Miss Polly's great passion—and when they are in London I think they go to concerts morning, noon, and night. Miss Hadlow is different. Her grandpapa was a Rivers," added May, blushing at her own wiliness, "and she is very handsome, and sure to be asked out a great deal."

But May's profound strategy did not end here. She coaxed Uncle Frederick by representing what a treat it would be to Harold and Wilfred to go out visiting with papa. Those young gentlemen, privately incited by hints of possible plum-cake, were soon all eagerness to

go; and when, on the very next Sunday, May set off with her uncle and cousins to walk to Miss Piper's lodgings, she felt that she had achieved a diplomatic triumph.

CHAPTER XIII.

THOSE Oldchester persons who considered Miss Piper's artistic tendencies responsible for her occasional freedom of speech would have been confirmed in their opinion as to the demoralizing tendency of Art and Continental travel had they known how the daughters of the late Reverend Reuben Piper employed Sunday afternoon in London. Miss Patty herself had been startled at first by the idea of not only receiving callers, but listening to profane music on that day; and the sisters had had some discussion about it. When Patty demurred to the suggestion, Polly inquired whether she truly and conscientiously considered that there was anything more intrinsically wrong in seeing one's friends and opening one's piano on a Sunday than on a Monday.

“No; of course not *that*,” answered Patty.

“If I thought it wrong, I shouldn’t discuss it even with you. I should simply refuse to have anything to do with it.”

“I know that, Patty,” said her sister. “And I hope I am not altogether without a conscience either.”

“No, Polly; but would you do this in Oldchester?”

“Certainly not.”

“Then that’s what I say. We ought not to have two weights and two measures. If a thing is objectionable in Oldchester, it is objectionable in London.”

“Not at all. Circumstances alter cases. I may think it a good thing to take a sponge-bath every morning; but I should not take it in public.”

“Polly! How can you?”

“What I mean is, that, so long as we are not a stumbling-block of offence to other people, we have a right to please ourselves in this matter.”

So Miss Polly’s will prevailed, as it prevailed with her sister upon most occasions; and the Sunday receptions became an established custom.

The house in which the Miss Pipers lodged when they came to London was in a street

leading out of Hanover Square. The lower part of it was occupied by a fashionable tailor—a tailor so genteel and exclusive that he scorned any appeal to the general public, and merely had the word “Groll” (which was his name) woven into the wire blind that shaded his parlour window. The rooms above were sufficiently spacious, and were, moreover, lofty—a great point in Miss Polly’s opinion, as being good for sound. They were furnished comfortably, albeit rather dingily. But a few flower-pots, photographic albums, and bits of crochet-work, scattered here and there, answered the purpose—if not of decoration, at least of showing decorative intention. A grand pianoforte, bestriding a large tract of carpet in the very middle of the front drawing-room, conspicuously asserted its importance over all the rest of the furniture.

May and her uncle, accompanied by the two little boys, were shown upstairs, and, the door of the drawing-room being thrown open, they found themselves confronted by a rather numerous assembly. The last bars of a pianoforte-piece were being performed amidst the profound silence of the auditors, and the newly

arrived party stood still near the door, waiting until the music should come to an end.

At the piano sat a smooth-faced young gentleman playing a series of incoherent discords with an air of calm resolve. Immediately behind him stood an elderly man of gentleman-like appearance, whom May found herself watching, as one watches a person swallowing something nauseous, and involuntarily expecting him to "make a face" as each new dissonance was crashed out close to his ear. But his amiable countenance remained so serene and satisfied, that the doubt crossed her mind whether he might not possibly be deaf. In the embrasure of a window stood a very tall, thin man, whose bald head was encircled by a fringe of grizzled red hair, and whose eyes were fast shut. But as he stood up perfectly erect, with his hands folded in a prayerful attitude on his waistcoat, it was obvious that he was not asleep. Miss Piper was seated with her back towards the door and her face towards the pianist, so that May could not see it. But the composer of "Esther" nodded her head approvingly at every fresh harmonic catastrophe which convulsed the keyboard. Her satisfaction

seemed to be shared by a stout lady of majestic mien, who sat near her and fired off exclamations of eulogium, such as "Charming!" "Wonderful modulation!" "Intensely wrought out," and so on—like minute guns; and with a certain air of suppressed exasperation, as though she suspected that there *might* be persons who didn't like it, and was ready to defy them to the death. A dark-eyed girl, very plainly dressed, and holding a little leather music-roll in her hand, occupied a modest place behind this lady. Sitting close to the dark-eyed girl was a man of about thirty-five years old, well-featured, short in stature, and with reddish blonde hair and moustaches. This personage's countenance expressed a singular mixture of audacity and servility. His smile was at once impudent and false, and he listened to the music with a pretentious air of knowledge and authority. The rest of the company, with Miss Patty, were relegated, during the performance, to the back drawing-room, where tea was served; and the folding-doors were closed, lest the clink of a tea-spoon, or the sibillation of a whisper, should penetrate to the music-room. But, in truth, nothing less than a crash of all the crockery on

the table, and a simultaneous bellow from all the guests, could have competed successfully with the pianoforte-piece then in progress.

At length, with one final bang, it came to an end, and there was a general stir and movement among the company. The amiable-looking elderly man advanced towards Miss Piper with a most beaming smile, and said, in a soft refined voice—

“That is the right way, isn’t it? One knows the sort of thing said by people who don’t understand this school of music, the only music, in fact; but I have long been sure that this is the right way.”

“Of course, it is the right way,” exclaimed the stout lady, breathing indignation, not loud but deep, against all heretics and schismatics.

“We are so very, very much obliged to you, Mr. Turner,” said the hostess. “That new composition of yours is really wonderful!” (And so, indeed, it was.)

As Miss Piper went up to the young gentleman who had been playing the piano, and who remained quite cool and unmoved by the demonstrations of his audience, she caught sight of the group near the door, and hastened to

welcome them. May was received with enthusiasm, and her uncle with one of Miss Piper's best old-fashioned curtsies. Mr. Dormer-Smith began to apologize for bringing his little boys, and to explain that he had not expected to find so numerous an assembly; but Miss Piper cut him short with hearty assurances that they were very welcome, and that her sister in particular was very fond of children. Then, the doors being by this time reopened, she ushered them all into the back room, crying—

“Patty! Patty! Who do you think is here? May Cheffington!” and then Miss Patty added her welcome to that of her sister.

Harold and Wilfred had been shyly dumb hitherto, although once or twice during the pianoforte-playing Wilfred had only saved himself from breaking into a shrill wail and begging to be taken home, by burying his face in the skirts of May's dress; but on beholding plum-cake and other good things set forth on the tea-table, they felt that life had compensations still. They took a fancy also to the Miss Pipers, finding their eccentric ornaments a mine of interest; and before three minutes had elapsed Harold was devouring a liberal slice of cake,

and Wilfred, seated close to kind Miss Patty, was diversifying his enjoyment of the cake by a close and curious inspection of that lady's bracelet, taken off for his amusement, and endeavouring to count the various geological specimens of which it was composed.

As soon as May appeared in the back drawing-room, Constance Hadlow rose from her seat in a corner behind the tea-table, and greeted her.

"Dear Conny," cried May, "I am so glad to see you! Then you are staying with the Miss Pipers! I guessed you were."

Mr. Dormer-Smith was then duly presented to Miss Hadlow. Constance was in very good looks, and her beauty and the quiet ease of her manner made a very favourable impression on May's uncle.

Miss Hadlow found a seat for him near herself; and then turned again to May, saying, "There is another Oldchester friend whom you have not yet spoken to. You remember my cousin Owen?"

May's experience of society had not yet toned down her manner to "that repose which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere." She heartily shook

hands with the young man, exclaiming, "This is a day of joyful surprises. I didn't expect to see you, Mr. Rivers. Now, if we only had the dear canon, and Mrs. Hadlow, and granny, I think I should be *quite* happy."

"You are not a bit changed," said Owen Rivers, giving May his chair, and standing beside her in the lounging attitude so familiar to her in the garden at College Quad.

"Changed! What should change me?"

"The world."

"What nonsense!" cried May, with her old schoolgirl bluntness. "As if I had not been living in the world all my life!"

Mr. Rivers raised his eyebrows with an amused smile.

"Well, *isn't* it nonsense," pursued May, "to talk as if a few hundred or thousand persons in one town—though that town *is* London—made up the world?"

"It is a phrase which every one uses, and every one understands."

"But every one does not understand it alike."

"Perhaps not."

"What did you mean by it, just now?"

"What could I mean but the world of fashion,

the world par excellence? Rightly so-called, no doubt, since it affords the best field for the exercise of the higher and nobler human faculties. Those who are not in it exist, indeed; but with a half-developed, inferior kind of life, like a jelly-fish."

May laughed her frank young laugh.

"You're not changed either!" she said emphatically.

"Did you enjoy the performance with which that young gentleman has been obliging us?" asked Rivers.

"I only heard the end of it."

"Very diplomatically answered."

"Are you fond of music, Mr. Rivers?"

"Yes, of *music*—very fond."

"So am I; but I know very little about it. Granny is a good musician."

"How fond you are of Mrs. Dobbs!" said Rivers.

"I am very proud of her, too," answered May quickly.

Owen Rivers looked at her with a singular expression, half-admiring, half-tenderly, pitying—as one might look at a child whose innocent candour is as yet "unspotted from the world."

“I suppose you know all the people here,” said May, looking round on the assembly.

“I know who they are, most of them.”

“That gentleman who was standing by himself at the window—the tall gentleman—who is he?”

“Mr. Jawler, a great musical critic.”

“And the pleasant-faced man who seemed so delighted with the playing?”

“Mr. Sweeting. He is an enthusiastic admirer and patron of young Cleveland Turner, the pianist: a very kindly, amiable, courteous gentleman, with much money and leisure, as I am told.”

“That stout lady talking to Miss Piper seems to be musical also?”

“That is Lady Moppett: a very good sort of woman, I dare say, but fanatical. She would bowstring all us dogs of Christians who believe in melody.”

“And who is that disagreeable little man in the corner?”

“Disagreeable——?”

“The little man with moustaches. There. Close to the nice-looking, dark-eyed girl.”

“Oh, that man? But he is not considered

disagreeable by the world in general, Miss Cheffington! He is by way of being a rather fascinating individual: Signor Vincenzo Valli, singing-master, and composer of songs. I wonder why he condescends to favour Miss Piper with his presence."

"Is it a condescension?"

"A great condescension. Signor Valli is nothing, if not aristocratic."

At this moment there was a general movement in the other room. The young pianist seated himself once more at the instrument. The various groups of talkers dispersed, and took their places to listen. May whispered nervously to Miss Patty, that perhaps she and her uncle had better go, and take away the children before the music commenced.

"I am so afraid," she said naively, "that Willy may cry if that gentleman plays again."

Miss Patty found a way out of the difficulty by taking the children away to her own room. It was no deprivation to her, she said, not to hear Mr. Turner play.

So the two little boys, laden with good things, and further enticed by the promise of picture-books, trotted off very contentedly under

Miss Patty's wing. Mr. Dormer-Smith had passed into the front drawing-room, where he was chatting with Lady Moppett, who proved to be an old acquaintance of his. May was following her uncle to explain to him about the children, when Miss Piper hurried up to her with an anxious and important mien.

"Sit down, my dear," she said; "sit down. Cleveland Turner is going to play that fine Beethoven, the one in F minor, the opera 57, you know. Mr. Jawler particularly wishes to hear him perform it."

May glanced round, and seeing no place vacant near at hand, returned to the other room, and took a seat close to the folding-doors, which were now left open.

"What is our sentence?" asked Rivers.

"Do you mean what is he going to play? A piece of Beethoven's."

"Ah! Well, at least he will have something to say this time. Remains to be seen whether he can say it."

Mr. Cleveland Turner performed the *sonata appassionata* correctly, although coldly, and with a certain hardness of style and touch. But the beauty of the composition made itself

irresistibly felt, and when the piece was finished there was a murmur of applause. Mr. Jawler opened his eyes, inclined his head, opened his eyes again, and said, apparently to himself, "Yes, yes—oh yes!" which seemed to be interpreted as an expression of approval; for Miss Piper looked radiant, and even the icy demeanour of Mr. Cleveland Turner thawed half a degree or so. Signor Valli had applauded in a peculiar fashion—opening his arms wide, and bringing his gloved hands together with apparent force, but so as to produce no sound whatever. And as he went through this dumb show of applause, he was talking all the time to the dark-eyed girl near him, with a sneering smile on his face.

Miss Piper bustled up to them. "Dear Miss Bertram," she said, "you must let us hear your charming voice. Mr. Jawler has heard of you. He would like you to sing something. Signor Valli," with clasped hands, "*might* I entreat you to accompany Miss Bertram in one of your own exquisite compositions? It would be such a treat—such a musical feast, I may say!"

Miss Bertram unrolled her music-case in a

business-like way, and spread its contents before the singing-master.

“What are you going to sing, Clara?” asked Lady Moppett, turning her head over her shoulder.

“Signor Valli will choose,” answered the young lady quietly.

Valli selected a song, and offered his arm to Miss Bertram to lead her to the piano. She did not accept it instantly, being occupied in replacing the rest of her music in its case; and with a sudden, impatient gesture, Valli wheeled round and walked to the piano alone. Miss Bertram followed him composedly, and took her place beside him. May looked at her with interest, as she stood there during the few bars of introduction to the song.

Clara Bertram was not beautiful, but she had a singularly attractive face. Her dark eyes were not nearly so large, nor so finely set, as Constance Hadlow's, but they were infinitely more expressive, and her rather wide mouth revealed a magnificent set of teeth when she smiled or sang. The song selected for her was one of those compositions which, if ill-sung, or even only tolerably sung, would pass unnoticed,

But Miss Bertram sang it to perfection. Her voice was very beautiful, with something peculiarly pathetic in its vibrating tones, and she pronounced the Italian words with a pure, unaffected, and finished accent.

“Oh, how lovely!” exclaimed May, under her breath, when the song was over.

“Isn’t it?” said Miss Piper, who happened to be near enough to catch the words. “I am so glad you are pleased with her! Do you think Mrs. Dormer-Smith would like her to sing now and then at a *soirée*? She wants to get known in really good houses.”

Before May could answer the little woman had hurried off again, and in another minute was leading Miss Bertram up to Mr. Jawler, who spoke to the young singer with evident affability, keeping his eyes open for a full minute at a time.

Meanwhile Valli was left alone at the piano, and an ugly look came into his face as he glanced round and saw himself neglected. But his expression changed in an instant with curious suddenness when Miss Hadlow drew near, and, leaning on the instrument, addressed some words of compliment to him.

“Will you not let us hear you sing, Signor Valli?” she said presently.

Valli merely shook his head in answer, keeping his eyes fixed on Miss Hadlow’s face with a look of bold admiration, and letting his fingers stray softly over the keys.

“Oh, that is a terrible disappointment!”

“I don’t think so,” replied the singing-master, speaking very good English.

“It is, indeed.”

Again he shook his head.

“It is to me, at all events.”

“Well, I shall sing for you; a little song *sotto voce*, all to ourselves.”

“Oh, but that would be too selfish on my part, to enjoy your singing all to myself.”

“It is a very good plan to be selfish,” returned Valli; and forthwith he began a little Neapolitan love-song—murmuring, rather than singing, it—and still keeping his eyes fixed on Miss Hadlow.

At the first sound of his voice, low and subdued though it was, Miss Piper held up her finger to bespeak silence. There was a general hush. Every one looked towards the piano, against which Constance was still leaning, with

her back to the rest of the company. She made a little movement to withdraw to a seat, but Valli immediately ceased singing, and, under cover of a noisy *ritournelle* which he played on the piano, said to her, "I am singing for you. If you go away, my song will go away too."

"But I can't stand here by myself, Signor Valli," protested Constance, by no means displeased. At this moment Miss Piper approached to implore the *maestro* to continue, and Constance whispered to her in a few words the state of the case.

"Caprices of genius, my dear," said the little woman. "When you have seen as much of professional people as I have, you will not be astonished." Then to Valli, "Will you not continue that exquisite air? We are all dying to hear it."

"Yes; on condition that you both stay there and inspire me," answered he, with an unconcealed sneer.

Miss Piper, however, took him at his word, and, linking her arm in Constance's, remained standing close to the instrument. Valli, upon this, resumed his song. He gave it now at the full pitch of his voice, addressing it ostentatiously

to Miss Hadlow, and throwing an exaggerated amount of expression into the love passages. Miss Piper was enchanted, and led off the applause enthusiastically. Valli was soon surrounded by a group of admirers, Mr. Dormer-Smith among them. May was conscious of a painful impression, which destroyed any pleasure she might have had in the song. And that Owen Rivers shared this impression was proved by his walking up to the piano, and unceremoniously putting his cousin's hand on his arm to lead her away.

"Oh, don't take Conny away, Mr. Rivers," cried Miss Piper. "Signor Valli is going to favour us with some more of his delicious national airs."

"Come and sit down, Constance," said Owen authoritatively. "Let me get you a seat also, Miss Piper," he added. "It can scarcely be necessary for the due exhibition of this gentleman's national airs to keep two ladies standing."

"Oh no, no; please don't mind me. I'm quite comfortable," said Miss Piper, with a shade of vexation on her good-humoured round face.

Constance remained perfectly calm and self-possessed; only a faint smile and a sparkle

in her eyes revealed a gratified vanity as she took the chair near May, to which her cousin conducted her.

Miss Piper shrugged up her shoulders and pursed up her mouth. "He has no idea what artists are," she whispered in Lady Moppett's ear. "And, besides, poor dear young man, he's so desperately in love with his cousin that he can't bear her to be even looked at. I only hope Signor Valli won't take offence."

But Valli, finding himself now the object of general attention, was very gracious. He sang song after song without the inspiration of Miss Hadlow's handsome face opposite to him; and he sang far better than before;—with less exaggeration, and managing his naturally defective voice with singular skill and *finesse*. But the praise and flattery which his hearers poured forth unstintingly did not seem quite to satisfy him. His glance wandered restlessly as though in search of something; and finally, after a very clever rendering of an old air by Carissimi, he addressed himself suddenly to Miss Bertram, who was standing somewhat apart in the background, and asked, in Italian—

"Is the Signorina content?"

“I always like your singing of that aria,” she answered, in a quiet, matter-of-fact tone.

“Like it, indeed !” exclaimed Lady Moppett, with her severest manner. “I should think you did like it, Clara ! And you ought to profit by it. To hear singing so finished—of such a perfect school—is a lesson for you.”

Valli, upon this, made a low bow to Lady Moppett—a bow so low as to seem almost burlesque. As he raised his face again he turned it towards Miss Bertram with a subtle smile, saying, “Miladi is such a judge ! Her praise is very precious.” Clara, however, kept an impassive countenance, and declined to meet the glance he shot at her. Then Valli made a second and equally low bow to the hostess, and, cutting short her ecstatic compliments and thanks, left the room without further ceremony.

The party now broke up. Lady Moppett departed with Miss Bertram and Mr. Jawler, to whom she offered a seat in her carriage. Mr. Cleveland Turner and his patron, Mr. Sweeting, went away together. In a few minutes there remained Mr. Dormer-Smith, with his niece, and Owen Rivers. Miss Patty bustled in with the two children.

“Dear me,” said she. “Is the music all over? Well, now let us be comfortable.”

But Mr. Dormer-Smith declared he must reluctantly bring his visit to an end. “I don’t know how to thank you,” said he to Miss Patty, “for your kindness to my children. I hope you will forgive me for bringing them.”

Miss Patty heartily assured him that there was nothing to forgive, and that she hoped he would bring them again. She had gathered from the artless utterances of Harold and Wilfred an idea of their home life, which made her feel compassionately towards them.

As for Miss Polly, she was in the highest spirits. Mr. Jawler and Signor Valli, both stars of considerable magnitude in the musical world, had shone for her with unclouded lustre. It had been, she thought, a highly successful afternoon. So also thought Harold and Wilfred. And perhaps these were the only three persons who had enjoyed themselves thoroughly and unaffectedly.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE London season proceeded with its usual accumulation of engagements, its usual breathless chase after half-hours that have got too long a start ever to be recaptured, its usual fleeting satisfactions and abiding disappointments, its snubs, sneers, smiles, follies, falsehoods, and flirtations. The rushing current of fashionable life in London carried little May Cheffington on its surface, together with many brazen vessels of a very different kind. Constance Hadlow observed half-enviously to her friend that she was thoroughly "in the swim," a phrase which May found singularly inappropriate in her own case, feeling that there was no more question of a swim than in shooting Niagara! To her, especially, the whirl of society was confusing, phantasmagoric, and unreal. All the faces were new to her, most of

the names awoke no associations in her mind. On the other hand, this peculiar inexperience gave freshness to her impressions and keenness to her insight. She had none of those social traditions which, nine times out of ten, supply the place of private judgment. She found her impression of many personages startlingly at variance with the label which the world had agreed to affix to them. It is possible to be at once simple and shrewd, just as it is possible to be both *ruse'* and dull-witted.

May's simplicity was not of the blundering thick-skinned type; and her ingenuous freshness was admired by a great many persons, among whom was Mrs. Griffin. Far from being offended by May's moral indignation against those who accepted the hospitality of vulgar people, and then ridiculed them for being vulgar, Mrs. Griffin entirely approved her sentiments. Mrs. Griffin herself deplored, as she often said, "the servility towards mere money, which was degrading the tone of society." And whenever any new instance of it came to her knowledge, she would shake her head, and exclaim, softly, "Oh, Mammon, Mammon!" But this did not, of course, apply to her daughter

the duchess, who sometimes went to the Aaronssohns.' Her daughter was so very great a lady as to be above ordinary restrictions. Other people worshipped Mammon; the duchess only patronized Mammon—which was, surely, a very different thing!

Aunt Pauline, however, derived no gratification from May's unconventional frankness. It was, on the contrary, a source of constant anxiety to her; and she felt daily more and more that it would be a relief to get May off her hands. Introducing her niece into society—even although the niece was a pretty girl, and a Cheffington to boot—had not proved so pleasing a task as she had anticipated. There was, to her thinking, a strange perversity in the girl's character, which made her callous where she should be sensitive, and sensitive where she might well be indifferent. For instance, she showed culpable coolness about her great-uncle Castlecombe and his family, and provoking warmth about her Oldchester friends. Not that May was apt to speak much of her life in Oldchester. In the natural course of things she would have talked freely and eagerly about her dear granny; but very soon after her arrival

in London, her affectionate loquacity on this subject received a check. Aunt Pauline had hinted, with her usual mild politeness, that it would be desirable not to speak of Mrs. Dobbs before Smithson or any of the servants. Seeing the startled look in May's eyes, and the indignant flush on May's cheeks, her aunt added diplomatically, "Your father would not like it, May. I am trying to carry out his expressed wishes. That ought to be enough for you."

It was enough, at all events, to close May's lips. Her love and pride combined to make her silent. She tried to persuade herself that her father, at all events, had some good and reasonable motive for this prohibition, and that he, at least, was not ashamed of Mrs. Dobbs—ashamed of granny! The very thought made her hot with anger. But that Aunt Pauline was ashamed of her was too clear to May's honest mind. Painful as this conviction was, however, she came by degrees to hold it rather in sorrow than in anger, and to regard her aunt with something of the same indulgent toleration that Mrs. Dobbs had once expressed to Jo Weatherhead. For Mrs. Dormer-Smith's worldliness was not at all of a cynical sort. It was rather

in the nature of a deep-rooted superstition conscientiously held.

To some points of her worldly creed Pauline clung with religious fervour. One of these was the duty incumbent on a dowerless young lady to marry well. To marry *very* well was to marry a man with birth and money; but to secure a husband with money only—provided there were enough of it—she allowed to be marrying well. She did not look at the matter with vulgar flippancy. It was, no doubt, a sacrifice for a well-born woman to become the wife of an under-bred man, however wealthy. But well-born women were no less called upon than their humbler sisters to make sacrifices in a good cause.

None of the Castlecombes much frequented fashionable society, and Mrs. Dormer-Smith had hitherto resigned herself, without much difficulty, to seeing very little of her noble kinsfolk. But when May was introduced, her aunt thought it desirable to cultivate them. Lord Castlecombe's big, gloomy, family mansion in town had been let ever since his wife's death many years ago; and whenever his lordship came to London to give his vote in the House of Peers—which was

almost the sole object that had power to bring him up from the country—he occupied furnished lodgings. Of his two sons, both bachelors, the elder was governor of a colony on the other side of the globe, and the younger held a permanent post under Government. This Lucius Cheffington occasionally met Mr. Dormer-Smith at the club, and exchanged a few words with him. Captain Cheffington, on his penultimate visit to England, when his ungrateful country declined to provide for him, had quarrelled with all the Castlecombes, and had made himself particularly obnoxious to Lucius; for Lucius, whom his cousin considered a solemn ass, held a lucrative place, whilst Augustus, who knew himself to be a remarkably clever fellow, with immense knowledge of the world, was relegated to poverty and obscurity. But Pauline had not quarrelled with them. She would not willingly have quarrelled with any one, least of all with her Uncle Castlecombe and his family. And as to Mr. Dormer-Smith, it chanced that the one point of sympathy between himself and his cousin-in-law Lucius was the latter's cordial dislike to Gus. Nevertheless, the dislike did not descend to Gus's daughter. Lucius was pleased to approve of

his young kinswoman, none the less, perhaps, that it was evident her father troubled himself little about her.

Mr. Dormer-Smith knew very well that the most effectual way of winning Lord Castlecombe's goodwill for his grand-niece was to assure his lordship that he would not be called upon to do anything for her. He, therefore, confidentially informed Lucius that the girl's grandmother in Oldchester was defraying her expenses, and would, no doubt, eventually provide for her altogether. The sagacity of this course was proved soon afterwards, when Lucius announced that his father would come and dine with Pauline the next time he should be in town, and make Miranda's acquaintance.

This was well. And even as to May's Oldchester friends matters turned out better than her aunt could have hoped. In the first place, the Misses Piper showed no disposition whatever to force themselves on Mrs. Dormer-Smith. That being the case, there was no objection to May's going to see them every Sunday with her uncle and the children. To Harold and Wilfred these Sunday visits were such a delightful break in the dull routine of their

lives that their father would have endured considerable boredom and discomfort rather than deprive them of it. But, in fact, he was not bored. Whenever the music became too severe, he could withdraw into the tea-room, where he always found some one to chat with. Possibly he, too, felt these Sundays to be a break in the monotony of his daily life. There was a cordial, hearty tone about the hostesses which was decidedly pleasant, although he was aware that Pauline would pronounce it sadly underbred. But Pauline was not there to be shocked, and there were some red drops in Mr. Dormer-Smith's veins (he was not quite so blue-blooded as his wife) which warmed to this plebeian kindness. Sometimes even the moisture would come into his eyes when he watched his little boys clinging familiarly about Miss Patty as they never clung about their mother. The good-natured old maid had won the children's hearts completely. They were overheard one day in a lively discussion as to which was the prettier, Miss Patty or Cousin May: Wilfred inclining, on the whole, to award the palm of beauty to his cousin, but Harold powerfully arguing in favour of Miss Patty that she had

such "beautiful curls" (an ingenuous, and probably unique, tribute to the ginger-bread coloured wig!) and a "shiny brooch like a butterfly."

Then Constance Hadlow, whom Mrs. Dormer-Smith had unwillingly invited to lunch one day with her former schoolfellow, proved to be in every respect "most presentable," as Aunt Pauline herself candidly admitted. So presentable was she in fact, so handsome, self-possessed, and even (on the mother's side) well connected, that there might have arisen objections of a different sort against receiving her, as being a dangerous competitor for that solemn duty of marrying well. But a chance word of May's to the effect that young Bransby had long been an admirer of Constance, and that they were supposed by many persons in Oldchester to be engaged to each other, relieved Aunt Pauline's mind on that score.

"It would be very suitable," she said approvingly. "I think Mr. Bransby a very nice person; so quiet."

The subject of this glowing eulogium had not appeared at Mrs. Dormer-Smith's receptions for some time. He had been ordered into the

country, to cure a violent cold by change of air; and although he much disliked leaving town at that moment, he never thought of neglecting his physician's advice. Theodore's mother had been consumptive; and the fear that he inherited her constitution made him anxiously careful of his health. Immediately on his return to London he presented himself, about half-past five o'clock one Thursday afternoon, in Mrs. Dormer-Smith's drawing-room, and experienced a shock of disagreeable surprise on finding Constance Hadlow seated near May at the tea-table. May, innocently supposing that she was doing him a good turn, gave him her place, and went to another part of the room. But Constance coolly greeted him with a "How d'ye do, Theodore?" in a tone of the politest insipidity, which he sincerely approved of. Nevertheless, he would rather not have found her there. On glancing round he was struck by several innovations. In the first place, the pianoforte—usually a dumb piece of furniture in Mrs. Dormer-Smith's house—stood open, with some loose sheets of music lying on it; and Signor Vincenzo Valli sat, teacup in hand, smiling his false smile beside Mrs. Griffin.

Theodore knew perfectly well who Signor Valli was; and it needed not Mrs. Griffin's gracious demeanour to instruct this rising young man that Valli was sufficiently the fashion to be worth being civil to. But he was surprised to find him there. His surprises, however, were not at an end; for whom should he behold in familiar conversation with a gentleman at the opposite side of the room but Owen Rivers? And near them was—he could hardly believe his eyes—Mr. Bragg! It seemed to Theodore as if there had been a conspiracy amongst his acquaintance to make all sorts of fresh combinations on the social chess-board during his brief absence. He felt that it was necessary for him to take an accurate survey of the new positions. But he saw no immediate opportunity of doing so; for there was no one at hand to interrogate, except Constance Hadlow, who, of course, knew nothing. She must be spoken to, however; but he would cut the conversation as short as possible.

Thoughts—even the weighty thoughts of a diplomatically-minded young gentleman—move quickly, and there was scarcely any perceptible pause between Constance's greeting and his

gravely polite remark that it was quite an unexpected pleasure to see her there.

“Yes; I came up a few weeks ago with the Pipers.”

“Oh! you are staying with *them*?” (This with a strong flavour of his superior manner; for the Pipers were really nobodies.)

“And what have you been doing with yourself? I haven’t seen you anywhere,” said Constance coolly.

“I have been out of town. But in any case we might possibly not have met. Have you been going out much?”

“Oh, as much as most people, I suppose. I was at the Aaronssohns’ dance last night.”

“The Aaronssohns!” exclaimed Theodore. (This time he was so astonished that he spoke quite naturally.) “I didn’t know that you knew them.”

“Oh, I don’t know them.”

“Then how did you get—I mean——”

“How did I get there? Dear me, Theodore, your visit to the country has given you a refreshing buttercup-and-daisy kind of air! Do you suppose that the Aaronssohns’ ball-room was filled with their personal friends and

acquaintances? Mrs. Griffin got me an invitation.”

Now to be presented to Mrs. Griffin and to be invited to the Aaronssohns' were pet objects of Theodore Bransby's social ambition, and he had not yet compassed either of them.

“Oh, indeed!” said he, struggling, under the disadvantage of conscious ill-humour, to maintain that air of indifference to all things in heaven and earth which he imagined to be the completest manifestation of high breeding. “I suppose that was achieved through Mrs. Dormer-Smith's influence.”

“Not altogether. It was May Cheffington who first introduced me to Mrs. Griffin. She's just the same dear little thing as ever—I don't mean Mrs. Griffin! But Mrs. Griffin found out that she had known my grandfather Rivers. I believe they were sweethearts in their pinafores a hundred years ago; so she has been awfully nice to me.”

While Constance was speaking, Theodore's eye lighted on Mr. Bragg, solid and solemn, wearing that look of melancholy respectability which is associated with the British workman in his Sunday clothes.

“Oh, and Mr. Bragg was at the Aaronssohns’, too,” said Constance, following the young man’s glance. “Fancy Mr. Bragg at a ball!”

“Did Mrs. Griffin know *his* grandfather?” asked Theodore, with a sneer.

It was clear to Constance that he had quite lost his temper. Otherwise he would not, she felt sure, have said anything in such bad taste. But she replied calmly—

“I don’t think Mr. Bragg ever had a grandfather. But he is rich enough to do without one. It is poor persons like you and me who find grandfathers necessary—or, at all events, useful.”

Theodore understood the sarcasm of this quiet speech, and it helped him to master his growing irritation. There are some natures on which a moral buffet acts as a sedative.

“Was it your friend Miss Piper who brought Mr. Bragg here?” he asked, showing no sign of having felt the blow, except a slight increase of pallor.

“Oh dear, no! The Pipers have never been here themselves, except to leave a card at the door. This is not the kind of society they care for, you know. I saw Mr. Bragg come in

to-day with May's cousin, Mr. Lucius Cheffington, but I can't say whether he first introduced him or not."

"Is that Mr. Lucius Cheffington?"

"That man talking to Owen?—Yes."

"Mrs. Dormer-Smith has rather a mixed collection this afternoon. I see Valli over there. You know who I mean? That short, foreign man near——"

"Oh yes; Signor Valli is a great ally of mine. He's delightful, I think. His airs and graces are so amusing. I can tell you how *he* comes to be here, if you like," returned Constance placidly. She was secretly enjoying Theodore's discomfiture. He had expected to play the part of town mouse, and to patronize and instruct her. "The fact is," she continued, "that Lady Moppett begged Mr. Dormer-Smith to induce his wife to have her *protégée*, Miss Bertram, to sing here on Thursday afternoons, promising, as a kind of bait, to get Valli to come too. I don't think Mrs. Dormer-Smith particularly wished to have Miss Bertram; but she thought it would be nice to have Valli, who is run after by the best people, and is very difficult to get hold of. So the negotiation

succeeded. It is too funny how one has to *ménager* and coax these professional people. If you don't want any more information just now, I think I will go and speak to Mrs. Griffin." Whereupon Constance glided away, self-possessed and graceful, and with a becoming touch of animation bestowed by the consciousness that she had been mistress of the situation.

Theodore looked decidedly blank for the moment. No one bestowed any attention on him. As he sat watching, he was struck by the evidently familiar way in which Owen Rivers and Mr. Cheffington were talking together. He himself particularly desired to be introduced to Lucius Cheffington, but a secret, grudging feeling made him unwilling to owe the introduction to Rivers. Presently Rivers moved away to join May and Miss Bertram, who were turning over some music together, and Mr. Bragg took his place near Mr. Cheffington. This was the opportunity which Theodore had wished for. He at once rose and walked up to them. Theodore's manner was never servile, but there was an added gravity in his demeanour towards certain persons, intended to show that he thought them worth taking

seriously; and this tribute he rendered to Mr. Bragg. For, although the young man had by no means forgotten Mr. Bragg's deplorable insensibility to an enlightened view of the currency question, yet he prided himself on thoroughly understanding that the great tin-tack maker's claims to consideration rested on a solid basis quite apart from culture or intelligence.

"I wish," said Theodore, after the first salutations, "that you would do me the favour to make me known to Mr. Lucius Cheffington. I know so many members of his family, but I have not the pleasure of his personal acquaintance."

Mr. Bragg eyed him with his usual heavy deliberation. "Oh," said he slowly, "this is Mr.—I don't call to mind your Christian name—eh? Oh yes—Mr. Theodore Bransby."

Mr. Lucius Cheffington made an unusually low bow, his pride being of the sort which manifests itself in the most ceremonious politeness.

He was a small, lean man, with a pale face deeply lined by ill-health and a fretful temperament. He had closely shaven cheeks and chin;

heavy, grizzled moustaches ; and very thick, grizzled hair, which he wore rather long. His voice was harsh, though subdued, and he spoke very slowly, making such long pauses as occasionally tempted unwary strangers to finish his sentences for him. A double eye-glass with tortoise-shell rims was set astride his nose ; and behind the glasses two dark, near-sighted eyes looked out, somewhat superciliously, upon a world which fell sadly short of what a Cheffington had a right to expect.

“ I have the pleasure of knowing your cousin, Captain Augustus Cheffington, very well indeed,” said Theodore.

Lucius bowed again and adjusted his eye-glass. A shade of surprise and annoyance passed over his face. His Cousin Augustus had been a sore subject with the family for years ; and latterly such rumours as had reached England about him had not made the subject more agreeable.

“ I have often thought,” pursued Theodore, quite unaware that his listener was regarding him with a mixture of astonishment and disfavour, “ that it is a great pity a man of Captain Cheffington’s abilities and accomplishments should

live out of England ; unless, indeed, he held some diplomatic appointment abroad. In my opinion these are times in which the great old families should hold fast by the public service. As I ventured to say to one of our county members the other day——” And so on, and so on. Having thus happily launched himself, Theodore proceeded in his best Parliamentary style : holding forth with a power of self-complacent and steady boredom beyond his years. A sensitive person would have been petrified by the unsympathizing stare from behind those tortoise-shell-rimmed glasses ; but Theodore was not sensitive to such influences : being fortified by the *à priori* conviction that he must naturally make a favourable impression. And since Lucius Cheffington could not, compatibly with his own dignity, plainly tell him that he considered him a presumptuous young ass, there was nothing to check his flow of eloquence.

But at length the cold stare was softened, and the pale, peevish, furrowed face turned to Theodore with a faint show of interest. Some casual word of this intrusive young man’s seemed to show that he came from Oldchester.

“Do you know—a—Mrs.—a—Dobbs?” asked Lucius, speaking for the first time, and edging in this point-blank question between two of Theodore’s neatly-turned sentences setting forth a political parallel between the late Lord Tweedledum and the present Right Honourable Tweedledee.

It was a shock; but Theodore bore it stoically. “Not exactly. I have spoken with her. Mrs. Dobbs is not precisely—— in our set,” he answered, with a slight smile at one corner of his mouth, intended to demolish Mrs. Dobbs.

“I thought that, being a native of Oldchester, you might—a—be——” begun Mr. Cheffington in his low, harsh tones.

“Be acquainted with her? Really——”

“I thought that, being a native of Oldchester, you might—a—be able to tell me something about her.”

“Not much, I fear,” replied Theodore. He felt tempted to add that in Oldchester there were natives and natives.

“She’s—a—rich, isn’t she?” pursued Mr. Cheffington.

“Not that I know of,” answered Theodore, staring a little.

“ Rich is, perhaps, too much to say. At any rate, she is—a—quite well—— ”

“ Well off? Oh, as to that—— ”

“ At any rate, she is quite well-to-do, I presume! ”

Theodore had never considered the question, but he said, “ Oh yes,” at a venture; and then suddenly a light flashed upon his mind. Perhaps Mrs. Dobbs *was* rich, after all. Though she lived in so humble a style she might, perhaps, have laid by money.

“ She appears to be a person of—a—great—good sense,” said Mr. Lucius Cheffington, remembering how Mrs. Dormer-Smith had stated that she declined to give any money-assistance to Augustus. And after that he made a second very low bow, and brought the interview to an end.

Little had Theodore Bransby expected to hear Mrs. Dobbs discussed and approved by a member of the noble house of Castlecombe. He had noticed that Mrs. Dormer-Smith systematically avoided any mention of the vulgar old woman. But then Mrs. Dormer-Smith was a person of the very finest taste. And, to be sure, it could scarcely be expected that Mr. Lucius Cheffing-

ton should feel Augustus's *mésalliance* as acutely as it was felt by Augustus's own sister. Besides, if, as really seemed possible, the ironmonger's widow turned out to be a moneyed person——! But it must be recorded of Theodore, that not even the idea of her having money reconciled him to Mrs. Dobbs. He said to himself afterwards, when he was meditating on what he had heard, that nothing so convincingly proved how much he was in love with Miss Cheffington, as his being ready to forgive her even her grandmother!

CHAPTER XV.

GEORGE FREDERICK CHEFFINGTON, fifth Viscount Castlecombe, was, in many ways, a very clever old man. He was extremely ignorant of most things which can be taught by books. But he had a thorough acquaintance with practical agriculture, considerable keenness in finance, and a quick eye to detect the weaknesses of his fellow men. On the other hand, his overweening self-esteem led him to think that what he knew comprised what was chiefly, if not solely, worth knowing, and his avarice occasionally overrode his native talent for business. In his youth he had been idle and extravagant. The former vice gave him the reputation of a dunce at school and college, and, by a reaction which belonged to his character, made him defiantly contemptuous of bookish men, with one single exception, presently to be noted. As to his

extravagance, that was effectually cured by the death of his father. From the moment that he came into possession of the family estates, which he did at about thirty years of age, his income was administered with sagacious economy, and by the time his two sons arrived at manhood Lord Castlecombe was a very rich man.

If he had a soft place in his heart, it was for his son Lucius, who resembled his dead mother in features, and also, unfortunately, in the delicacy of his constitution. George, his heir, was like himself—strong, tough, and hardy. Lord Castlecombe secretly admired Lucius's talents very much, and had been highly gratified when his second son took honours at his University. That this success had not been followed by any particularly brilliant results later, and that Lucius had, as it were, stuck fast in his career, had even decidedly failed in Parliament, and had finally been shelved in a Government post which, although lucrative, was inglorious, his lordship attributed to the increase of folly, incapacity, and roguery which he had observed in the world during the last twenty years or so. That a Cheffington of such abilities as Lucius should remain undis-

tinguished was part of the general decadence. In politics Lord Castlecombe was a Whig of the old school; and though he continued to vote with his party, yet the only point on which he was thoroughly in sympathy with the Liberals—a word, by the way, which he had come greatly to dislike, as covering far too wide a field—was that they fought the Tories.

The person whom Lord Castlecombe most detested in all the world was his nephew Augustus. He disliked his extravagance, his poverty, and the biting insolence of his tongue. This antipathy had latterly added poignancy to the old man's desire that his son should marry, and transmit the Castlecombe title and estates in the direct line; for Augustus was the next heir after his two cousins. It was true that the contingency of Captain Cheffington succeeding seemed remote enough. George Cheffington was only his senior by a couple of years, and Lucius was his junior. But neither of them had married; and they were well on in middle life. Lucius, indeed, seemed to have settled down into incorrigible old bachelorhood. And although George, in answer to his father's exhortations on the subject, always replied that

he really would think seriously of looking for a wife on his next visit to England (persons suitable for that dignity not being to be found, it appeared, in the particular portion of the globe where his official duties lay), yet the years went by, and still there came no daughter-in-law, no grandson to inherit the coronet and enjoy the broad acres of Castlecombe. The idea that Augustus Cheffington might ever come to enjoy them was gall and wormwood to their present owner. But he had never breathed a word on this subject to any human being.

Mrs. Dormer-Smith was gratified by her uncle's gracious acceptance of an invitation to dine with her, soon after his arrival in town, about the middle of June. Lord Castlecombe did not visit her often; but that was from no ill-will on his part. In fact, he was rather fond of Pauline. He considered her a bit of a goose. But he thought it by no means unbecoming in a woman to be a bit of a goose. And she had thoroughbred manners, a gentle voice, and was still agreeable to look upon. The old lord disliked ugly women, and maintained that the sight of them disagreed with him like bad wine.

This consideration influenced Pauline in the choice of her guests to meet her uncle. It was understood there was to be no large party. It had been agreed that they should invite Mr. Bragg, who had bought a good deal of land in Lord Castlecombe's county, was director of a company of which the noble viscount was chairman, and of whom his lordship was known to entertain a favourable opinion, as being a man who made no disguise about his humble origin, and was free from the offensive pretensions of many *nouveaux riches*. For, although Lord Castlecombe willingly admitted that money could buy everything on which most people valued themselves, he greatly disliked the notion that it could be supposed to buy the things on which *he* most valued himself.

"Well, then, Frederick," said Mrs. Dormer-Smith, "that makes four men: my uncle, Lucius, Mr. Bragg, and yourself. Then May and I; and I thought of having that handsome Miss Hadlow. Uncle George likes to see pretty faces. We want another woman, but really I don't know who there is available at this moment. There are so few odd women who ain't frights," pursued the anxious hostess

plaintively. "If it were a man, now—— There are plenty of odd men to be had." Then, struck by a sudden inspiration, she said, "Why shouldn't we have an odd man instead of another woman? Uncle George gives me his arm, of course. You take Miss Hadlow, Mr. Bragg takes May, and Lucius and the odd man go in together. Positively, I think it would be the best arrangement of all."

"I suppose Lucius wouldn't mind, eh?"

"It certainly would be the best arrangement for *me*, at all events; for if there are only those two girls, I can simply put my feet up on a sofa when we go into the drawing-room, shut my eyes, and be quiet for half an hour, which, of course, would be out of the question if there was any woman who required to have civilities paid her; and in all probability I shall be in a state of nervous prostration by Friday. This season with May has tried me severely."

Mr. Dormer-Smith offering no objection, there only remained to make choice of the "odd man," and, after a moment's reflection, Pauline decided on young Bransby.

"Bransby!" exclaimed Mr. Dormer-Smith. "He's a dreadful prig."

“ I think he’s very nice, Frederick. But really that is not the point. He’s engaged, or wants to be engaged, or something of the sort, to Miss Hadlow, so of course—— ”

“ What? You don’t mean to say that handsome girl would have such an insignificant fellow as Bransby? ”

“ I mean to say nothing about it. The subject has only a faint interest for me, Frederick. But what is important is that, in any case, *he will help to take her off.* ”

Mr. Dormer-Smith stared; he understood his wife’s phrase, but not her allusion. “ Why, you don’t suppose there’s any danger of her setting her cap at Lucius? ” said he.

“ I should have no objection to her doing so. ”

“ Well, there’s nobody else. ”

“ We need not discuss it, Frederick. Please give your best attention to the wine; you know that Uncle George is terribly fastidious about his wine, and the worst is that if he is discontented, he will not hesitate to say so before everybody. ”

That really did seem to her the worst. Most of the evils of life, she thought, might be more endurable if people would but be discreet, and say nothing about them.

The evil of Uncle George's public reprobation of her wine did not, however, befall her. Lord Castlecombe was content with his dinner, and looked round him approvingly as he sat on his niece's right hand.

"A couple of uncommonly pretty girls those," said his lordship. "They've got on pretty frocks, too; I like a good bright colour."

Pauline had begged Miss Hadlow beforehand not to wear black, or any sombre hue, her uncle having a special dislike to such; and Constance, perfectly willing to please Lord Castlecombe by looking as brilliant as she could, had arrayed herself in her favourite maize-colour.

"You have a very nice gown on, too, Pauline," added his lordship graciously.

Mrs. Dormer-Smith privately thought her own toilette detestable. It was a gaily-flowered brocade (a gift from her husband soon after Wilfrid's birth), which had been hidden from the light for several years. But she had self-denyingly caused Smithson to furbish it up for the present occasion, and was gratified that her virtue did not go unrewarded.

"I knew you liked vivid colours, Uncle George," said she softly.

“Of course I do. Everybody does, that has the use of his eyes. Don't believe the humbugs who tell you otherwise. Your upholsterer now will show you some wretched washed-out rag of a thing, and try to persuade you to cover your chairs with it, because it's *æsthetic*! Parcel of fools! Not that the fellows who sell the things are fools. They know very well which side their bread is buttered.” Then glancing across the table with his keen, sunken, black eyes, he continued, “That little Miranda—what is it you call her? May? Well, May is a very good name for her—is remarkably fresh and pretty. Good frank forehead. Not a bit like her father. Different type. But the other girl is the beauty. Uncommonly handsome, really.”

“I'm glad you think May nice,” said Mrs. Dormer-Smith. “Of course I was anxious that you should like her. She is poor Augustus's only child—only surviving child. You know there were five or six of them, but the others all died in babyhood.”

Lord Castlecombe did know it, and remembered it now with grim satisfaction. At least Augustus had no male heir to come after him.

“ Ah! Gus made a pretty hash of it altogether,” said the old man.

But he did not say it unkindly. He would not willingly have been harsh or brutal towards Pauline. She really was a very sweet creature, and had, he thought, almost every quality that he could desire in the women of his blood. For, it must be observed, Lord Castlecombe did not know that Pauline admired æsthetic furniture, nor that she considered Augustus to have been rather hardly treated by the Castlecombes.

“ Of course,” replied that gentle lady. “ My poor brother’s unfortunate marriage—— ”

“ Oh! Ah! Yes. But that, at all events, seems to have turned out better than could have been expected. Lucius tells me there is a grandmother who has money, and is generous.”

“ Not to Augustus, Uncle George; Mrs. Dobbs positively refuses to assist Augustus.”

“ H’m!” grunted Uncle George, his opinion of Mrs. Dobbs’s good sense taking a sudden leap upward. “ Well, my dear, people have to think of their own interests, you know.” Then, in a louder tone, “ Frederick, send me that

white Hermitage. It's a very fair wine, as times go—a very fair wine indeed.”

When the ladies had left the table, young Bransby felt what he would have called, in speaking of any one else, “a little out of it.” My lord talked with Mr. Bragg, Lucius and Frederick were discussing some item of club politics, in the midst of which the host would now and again interpolate some parenthetical observations addressed to young Bransby, obviously as a matter of duty. At length, in declining the claret which Mr. Dormer-Smith pushed towards him, Theodore took the opportunity to say—

“Do you think I might venture to go upstairs? I have a message for Mrs. Dormer-Smith about a little commission with which she entrusted me.”

“No more wine, really? Oh, my wife will be charmed to see you,” replied Frederick, with alacrity. And, thereupon, the young man quietly left the room.

It was true that he had undertaken a commission for Mrs. Dormer-Smith; but he would not have prematurely withdrawn himself from the company of a peer and a millionaire, on that

account. He was moved by a far weightier purpose. He had made up his mind to propose to Miss Cheffington; and, if the Fates favoured him, he might do it that very evening. For some time past—before May left Oldchester—Theodore had been sure that he wished to marry her. There were drawbacks. She had no money (or at all events he had not reckoned on her having any money), and she had connections of a very objectionable kind. But he rather dwelt on these things, as proving the disinterested nature of his attachment. He was so much in love with May, that he liked to fancy himself making some sacrifices on her account. As to her feelings towards him, he was not without misgivings. But he watched her in society at every opportunity, and had convinced himself that she was, at all events, fancy-free. She did not even flirt; but enjoyed herself with child-like openness:—or was bored with equal simplicity and sincerity. As to her aunt, Theodore did not doubt that his suit would be favourably received by Mrs. Dormer-Smith. She must, long ago, have perceived his intentions; and he felt that his being invited to that intimate little dinner—almost a family dinner—was strong encouragement.

Theodore was fortifying himself with this reflection as he mounted the stairs to the drawing-room. His foot fell more and more lingeringly on the soft, soundless carpet as he neared the door. He was on an errand which can scarcely be undertaken with cool self-possession, even by a young gentleman holding the most favourable view of his own merits and prospects. One can never certainly reckon on one's soundest views being shared. A servant carrying coffee, preceded him, and opened the drawing-room door just as he arrived on the landing; and Theodore felt positively grateful to the man for, as it were, covering his entrance, and relieving him from the embarrassment of walking in alone. He entered close behind the footman, and was, for a few moments, unperceived by the ladies.

The room was a little dim; all the lamps being shaded with rose-colour. Mrs. Dormer-Smith was reclining on a sofa, with closed eyes. But she was not asleep; for beside her in a low lounging-chair, and talking to her in a subdued voice, sat Constance Hadlow. May was at the other side of the room, leaning with both elbows on a little table which stood in a recess between

the fireplace and a window, and apparently absorbed in a book. Theodore thought she made a charming picture, with the soft light falling on her fair young face and white dress; and his pulse, which had been beating a little quicker than usual all the way upstairs, became suddenly still more accelerated.

May looked up.

“Is that you?” she said. “Where are the others?”

It was not a very warm or flattering welcome; but Theodore was scarcely conscious of her words. He was thinking what a fortunate chance it was which left May isolated, so far away from the other ladies as to be out of earshot, if one spoke in a suitably low tone. At the sound of her niece’s voice Mrs. Dormer-Smith languidly turned her head.

“Oh, please don’t move, Mrs. Dormer-Smith,” said Theodore, speaking in a quick, confused way, very different from his accustomed manner. “If I am to disturb you, I must go away at once. But I—I don’t take much wine, and he said—Mr. Dormer-Smith said he thought I might—if you don’t mind my preceding the other men by a few minutes, I will be as quiet as a mouse.”

He crossed the room and sat down by May, in the shadow of a heavy window-curtain.

The hostess murmured a gracious word or two, and then closed her eyes again. She had been a little vexed by the young man's premature arrival; but if he was content to be quiet, and whisper to May, she need not stand on ceremony with him. The fact was, she was listening with great interest to Constance's account of a feud which had arisen between Lady Burlington and Mrs. Griffin's daughter, the duchess. Constance had the details at first hand, from Mrs. Griffin herself, on the one side, and from Miss Polly Piper on the other: for the feud had arisen about Signor Vincenzo Valli. The fashionable singing-master had thrown over one of the great ladies for the other, on the occasion of some *soirée musicale*; and the quarrel had been espoused by various personages of distinction, whose sayings and doings with regard to it Mrs. Dormer-Smith considered to be at once important and entertaining. She mentally contrasted with a sigh the intelligence, tact, and correctness of judgment which Constance brought to bear on this matter, with the nonchalance—not to say downright levity and

indifference—displayed by May. It was impossible to get May to interest herself in the bearings of the case. In fact, she had abandoned the discussion, and gone away to her book; whereas this provincial girl, with not one quarter of May's advantages, understood it perfectly, remembered the names of all the people concerned, had a very sufficient knowledge of their relative importance, and was able to impart to her hostess a variety of minute circumstances, narrated in a low, quiet tone, free from emphasis or emotion, which was delightfully soothing.

May, for her part, was by no means pleased to have her reading interrupted; but politeness, and the sense that she was, in her degree, responsible for the hospitality of the house, impelled her to close her book at once, and to turn a good-humoured countenance towards her companion.

“Isn't Uncle Frederick coming?” she asked, finding nothing better to say at the moment.

“Presently. Are you in a great hurry to see him?” returned Theodore.

“Oh no; I was amusing myself very well.”

“Are you angry with me, for interrupting you?”

“ Oh no,” answered May again. But this second “ Oh no ” was not quite so hearty as the first.

“ May I see what you have been reading ? ”

She pushed the book towards him.

“ ‘ Mansfield Park.’ Whose is it ? ”

“ Good gracious! You don’t mean to say that you don’t know ? ”

“ I don’t read novels,” said Theodore loftily, but not severely. It was all very well for women to have that weakness.

“ But this is an English classic! Mr. Rivers says so. You really ought to know who wrote ‘ Mansfield Park,’ even if you have never read it. It is one of Jane Austen’s works.”

“ Ah! Do you—do you like it ? ” said Theodore, scarcely knowing what he said. He was playing nervously with a little ivory paper-knife which lay on the table, and his whole aspect and manner—had not both been to some extent concealed by the shadow of the velvet curtain—would have betrayed to the most indifferent observer that he was agitated and unlike himself. He felt that the precious minutes of this chance *tête-à-tête* were passing swiftly; he longed to profit by them; and yet,

now that the moment had come, he feared to stand the hazard of the die, and kept deferring it by idle words.

“Oh yes! I like it, of course,” answered May. “Not so much, perhaps, as ‘Emma,’ or ‘Pride and Prejudice.’ Mr. Rivers advised me to read it.”

It was the second time she had mentioned Rivers’s name, and this fact stung Theodore unaccountably. It acted like a touch of the spur to a lagging horse. He burst out, still speaking almost in a whisper, but with some heat—

“Rivers is a happy fellow! What would I give if you cared enough about me to follow my advice!”

“You have only to advise me to do something which I like as much as reading Jane Austen,” replied May archly. But his tone had struck her disagreeably. She peered at him furtively as he sat in the shadow, trying in vain to see his countenance clearly. The idea crossed her mind that he might have taken too much wine at dinner. But it was so repulsive an idea to her, that she felt she ought not to entertain it without better foundation.

“It is a most fortunate chance for me to have this—this blessed opportunity,” pursued Theodore. (He had hesitated for the epithet, and was not by any means satisfied with it when he had got it). “I have long been wanting to speak to you.”

“To me? Well, that need not have been very difficult,” answered May, edging a little away, and trying to obtain a good view of his face.

“Pardon me. It is not easy to have the privilege of a private word with Miss Cheffington. When we meet in society, you are surrounded, as is but too natural. And latterly, in your own home, you have been a good deal engrossed. I could not say what I have to say before——”

He glanced over at Constance Hadlow as he spoke. This was an immense relief to May, who had been growing more and more uncomfortable, and vaguely apprehensive. She thought she understood it all now. Conny had been treating him with coolness and neglect. She herself had noticed this, and now he wanted to enlist the sympathies of Conny’s friend.

“Oh, I see!” she exclaimed. “It’s something about Constance that you wish to say to me.”

“About Constance? Ah, May, you are cruel! You know too well your power!” he said, endeavouring to give a pathetic intonation to his voice, but producing only an odd, croaking, throaty sound. Then May decided, in her own mind, that he *had* been taking too much wine; and, angry and disgusted, she tried to rise from her chair and leave him. But she was hemmed in by the little table, and on her first movement, Theodore took hold of the skirt of her dress to detain her. May turned round upon him with a pale, indignant face, and flashing eyes.

“Don’t touch my dress, if you please. I wish to go away.”

“Miss Cheffington—May—you must hear what I have to say now. You must know it without my saying, for I have loved you so long and so devotedly. But I have a right to be heard.”

May was thunderstruck. But she perceived in a moment that she had, in one sense, done him injustice—he had not drunk too much wine. But this——! This was worse! How far easier it would have been to forgive Theodore if he had even got tipsy—just a little tipsy—

instead of making such a declaration! She supposed she had no right to be disgusted; she had heard that properly behaved young ladies always took an offer of marriage to be a great honour. But she was disgusted, nevertheless; and so far from feeling honoured, she was conscious of a distressing sense of humiliation. She tried, however, to keep up her dignity, and at the same time to say what was right to this—this dreadful young man, who had suddenly presented himself in the odious light of wanting to make love to her.

“Oh, please don't say any more. I'm very much obliged to you. I mean I'm extremely sorry. But I beg you won't say another word, and forget all about it as quickly as possible.”

“Forget it! Nay, that is out of the question. I could not if I would.”

Theodore began to recover his self-command as May lost hers. She was agitated and trembling. Well, he would not have had her listen to his words unmoved. She was very young and inexperienced. And he had, it seemed, taken her by surprise.

“Is it possible,” he continued softly, “that you were quite unprepared to hear——”

“Quite unprepared. But that makes no difference. And you really must allow me to go away. I’m very sorry, indeed, but I can’t stay here another moment.”

“Am I so repulsive?” said he, with a sentimental beseeching glance. But he met an expression in her face which made him add quickly, in quite another tone, “Well, well, I will prefer your wishes to my own,” at the same time drawing himself and his chair to one side.

She had looked almost capable of leaping over the table to escape. May brushed past him, and darted away out of the room without another word.

Theodore seized hold of the book she had left behind her, and bent his head over it. He saw not one word on the printed page beneath his eyes, but it saved him from appearing as confused as he felt. Had he been rejected? And, if so, was it a rejection which he was bound to consider final? Or had he received no real answer at all? Gradually, as his throat grew less dry, his head less hot, and his brain more clear, he arrived at the conclusion that he had virtually had no answer. May was little more

than a child, and he had startled her. Then he remembered that word of May's, "It is about Constance you wish to speak to me." Could she be under any misapprehension as to his position with regard to Constance? The idea was fraught with comfort. That, at least, he could set right, and without delay. He rose and walked across the room at once to Mrs. Dormer-Smith's sofa.

At this moment the procession of men, headed by Lord Castlecombe, arrived from the dining-room. Constance glided away, leaving her vacant chair for Theodore, who immediately occupied it, thus cutting off Mrs. Dormer-Smith from the rest of the company. That lady looked anxiously across his shoulder.

"*Would* you," she said to Theodore, "would you be so very good as to ask my husband to inquire where Miss Cheffington is? My uncle would like to talk to her, I know; and—— Oh, there she is! Thanks. Don't trouble yourself."

May had returned to the drawing-room; but instead of going near her noble grand-uncle, she perversely seated herself in a remote nook beside Mr. Bragg, with whom she presently

began a conversation, keeping her face persistently turned away from every one else. Her noble grand-uncle did not seem to care. His lordship marched straight up to Miss Hadlow, and stood before her, coffee-cup in hand, with his curious air of perfectly knowing how to behave like a fine gentleman whenever he should think it worth while. Lucius and Frederick were continuing their club discussion, which possessed the advantage—for persons of leisure—of having neither beginning nor end, and of being indefinitely elastic. Pauline took in the whole room with one comprehensive glance, and then leant back against her cushions with a sigh, which, if not contented, was resigned. She made no effort to recall May to her duty towards Lord Castlecombe.

“You must forgive me, Mr. Bransby,” she said graciously, “if I have been selfish in engrossing Miss Hadlow. If you don’t take care, my uncle will do the same! Lord Castlecombe admires her very much.”

Theodore cleared his throat, settled his cravat with a rather unsteady hand, and looked at her as solemnly as if he were about to commence an oration. But all he managed to say was—

“There has been a mistake, Mrs. Dormer-Smith.”

“A mistake?”

“Yes. I have some reason to believe that you are under a wrong impression about me.”

His hostess faintly raised her eyebrows, and answered with a smile, “I hope not: for all my impressions of you are very pleasant.”

Theodore bowed gravely. “You are very kind,” said he. “It is important to me to set this matter right. You perhaps imagine—some one may have told you that I and Miss Hadlow—there has been, I believe, some idle gossip coupling our names together.”

“Not very unnaturally,” said Mrs. Dormer-Smith, still smiling. But she began to wonder what he could be driving at.

“Well, I do think it hard that one cannot be on friendly terms with a person one has known all one’s life without being supposed to be engaged to her.”

“Or him,” put in Pauline quietly.

“Of course. I mean, of course, that it is particularly unfair to the lady. But it puts a man in a false position too. I have just been speaking to May——”

Then, in an instant, the true state of the case flashed on Mrs. Dormer-Smith, to her unspeakable consternation. This, then, was her model young man, whom she had pronounced to be so "nice" and so "quiet;" and who, moreover, had always expressed the most proper sentiments on the subject of unequal marriages! She felt herself to be of all ladies the most persecuted by fate.

"Oh," she said, coldly interrupting him; "it was scarcely necessary to say anything to Miss Cheffington on the subject."

But Theodore was beyond taking heed of any snub or check of that kind. "One moment," he said, breathing quickly. "If you will allow me to finish what I was saying, you will see—I am, as you must have perceived, deeply attached to your niece."

"No, no," protested Mrs. Dormer-Smith faintly. "I never perceived it."

"Then that must have been because you were looking in a wrong direction. You were misled about Constance Hadlow; otherwise, the nature of my attentions could scarcely have escaped you."

"And you say that you have been speaking to—to my niece?"

“I have this evening told her how devotedly I love her.”

“Good heavens!” whispered Mrs. Dormer-Smith, letting her head sink back among the sofa-cushions. “And what was her reply?”

“Her reply was—well, practically, it was no reply at all. May was agitated and startled, and I think she had believed that foolish gossip about my engagement to Miss Hadlow. But I trust to you to explain——”

“Pray, Mr. Bransby, say no more. I regret extremely that this should have happened.”

“Oh, but I don’t know that I have any reason to despair,” he answered naïvely.

This was almost more than Pauline could endure. She got up from the sofa, and plaintively murmuring, “Say no more; pray say no more. I really am not equal to it at present,” fairly walked away from him.

That night when the guests were gone, Mrs. Dormer-Smith sent for her husband to her dressing-room, and revealed to him what young Bransby had said. His indignation at the young man’s presumption was equal to her own: although not wholly on the same grounds.

“You will have to talk to him, Frederick,”

she said. "When he went away he said something about requesting an early interview. I cannot stand any more of it. It upsets me too frightfully. Of course, you won't quarrel with him. Just give him politely to understand that it is out of the question. Fortunately, May appears to have been as much *outrée* by this preposterous proposal as I could desire. May behaved very nicely to-night altogether. I was pleased with her."

"H'm! Oh yes; but I thought she might have paid a little more attention to your uncle. She never went near him after we came upstairs. I think she talked to old Bragg more than to any one else."

"Frederick," said his wife slowly, "do you know that Lady Hautenville is making a dead set at Mr. Bragg for Felicia?"

"Is she?"

"Yes. Mrs. Griffin told me all about it. They are moving heaven and earth to catch him."

"Really? Well, *bonne chance!*"

"It would be *mauvaise chance* for him, poor man! Felicia has a frightful temper, and incredibly extravagant habits. She must be

over her eyebrows in debt. But I fancy Mr. Bragg has better taste."

Her meaning tone made her husband look at her with sudden earnestness. "What do you mean?" he asked brusquely.

Mrs. Dormer-Smith put her hand to her forehead. "Let me entreat you not to raise your voice!" she said. "I have had quite enough to try my nerves this evening. I mean that I think Mr. Bragg is interested in May. It would be a splendid match for her."

"*What?*" cried Frederick, disregarding his wife's request, and raising his voice considerably. "Old Bragg!"

Pauline turned on him impressively. "Frederick," she said, speaking with patient mildness, as one imparting higher lore to some untutored savage, "Mr. Bragg is barely fifty-four; and his income—entirely within his own control—is over sixty thousand a year."

CHAPTER XVI.

THEODORE did not take his rejection meekly. In his interview with Mr. Dormer-Smith he pressed hard to see May again, and insinuated that she was under undue influence. Moreover, he conveyed, with stiff civility, that he considered himself to have been badly treated by the whole family, who had first encouraged his attentions and then rejected them.

“He really is a fearful young man!” said May to her aunt on hearing the report of the interview. “What does he mean by insisting on ‘an answer from my own lips’? Could he not believe what Uncle Frederick said? Besides, he has had his answer from me. The truth is, he is so outrageously conceited that he can’t believe any young woman would refuse him of her own free will.”

“The idea of his dreaming for an instant

that *I* encouraged him is too preposterous," said Mrs. Dormer-Smith, shaking her head languidly. "I am sadly disappointed. I thought him quite a nice person. I fancied he had sufficient *savoir vivre* to understand—— However, it is one more proof that one can never reckon on half-bred people who don't know the world."

It was privately a great relief to May to know that her aunt took her part in this affair. Aunt Pauline's motives and views were still very mysterious to May on many points. She did not even now fully understand the grounds of her aunt's virtuous indignation against Theodore Bransby, although she was thankful for it. "Aunt Pauline thought him good enough for Conny," said May to herself innocently; "and Conny is so beautiful, and so much admired!"

It was true that—thanks, in the first place, to Mrs. Griffin—Constance had enjoyed a more brilliant season than she had ever ventured to dream of. Fashionable houses, of which she had read in the newspapers, but which had appeared to her as unattainable as though they were in another planet, had opened their doors to her; and old connections of her mother's

family, finding her in the aforesaid houses, discovered that she was a charming girl, and were delighted to open *their* doors to her. She had accepted several invitations to country houses, and would probably not be at home again until late in the autumn.

Mrs. Griffin watched this young lady's progress with considerable interest. She opined that Miss Hadlow was a shining instance of the advantages of "race."

"In spite of having been brought up in the pokiest way in some provincial town, as I understand, that girl has a thorough-bred self-possession quite remarkable," said Mrs. Griffin. "She never makes a blunder. You are never nervous about her. She has no trace of that loud, bouncing style, which I detest, and which so many underbred-people take up nowadays, mistakenly imagining it to be the proper thing. She doesn't 'go in' for anything. And," added Mrs. Griffin musingly, "there's a wonderful look of her grandfather, poor Charley Rivers, about the brow and eyes."

The season was rapidly drawing to a close when Mrs. Dobbs received two letters; one from her granddaughter, and the other from

Mrs. Dormer-Smith. Jo Weatherhead, arriving one evening at his usual hour in Jessamine Cottage, was told by his old friend that she had had a letter from May, and that she meant to read him a portion of it. No proposition could have been more welcome to Mr. Weatherhead. He drew his chair up to the grate—filled now with fresh boughs instead of hot coals; but Jo kept his place in the chimney-corner winter and summer—and prepared to listen.

Mrs. Dobbs read as follows:—"You must know, dear granny, that I told Aunt Pauline yesterday that I really must go home at the end of this season. She has been very kind and so has Uncle Frederick; but granny is granny, and home is home."

Here Mr. Weatherhead slapped his leg with his hand, and took his pipe out of his mouth as though about to speak; but on Mrs. Dobbs holding up her hand for silence, he put his pipe back again, and slowly drew his forefinger and thumb down the not inconsiderable length of his nose.

Mrs. Dobbs read on: "To my amazement, Aunt Pauline answered that it was my father's wish that I should remain with her altogether! That is not my wish. And it isn't yours—is

it, granny dear? And if we two are agreed, I cannot think my father would object. I mean to write to him about it. I should have done so already, but I have not his address, and Aunt Pauline can't or won't give it to me. Please send it. I shall tell my father just what I feel. I don't care for what Aunt Pauline calls Society. I was happy enough as long as it was only like being at the play, with the prospect of going home when it was over, and living my real life. But to go on with this sort of thing and nothing else, year in, year out—it would be like being expected to live on wax fruit, or those glazed wooden turkeys I remember in a box of toys you gave me long ago. Please answer directly, directly. There's an invitation for me to go in August to a place in the Highlands, where Mrs. Griffin's daughter has a shooting-box. At least, I suppose it is Mrs. Griffin's daughter's husband who has the shooting-box. Only nobody talks much about the duke, and everybody talks a great deal about the duchess." ("Fancy our Miranda among the dukes and duchesses!" put in Jo Weatherhead, softly. And he smacked his lips as though the very sound of the words had a

relish for him.) “Aunt Pauline wants to go to Carlsbad; Uncle Frederick is to join a fishing-party in Norway; the children are to be sent to a farmhouse; and Mrs. Griffin has offered to take care of me in the Highlands. But I would far, *far* rather come back to dear Oldchester, and be amongst people who know me, and care for me, and whom I love with all my heart. Do write and ask for me back, granny darling! And mind you give me papa’s address. I am resolved to write to him, whatever Aunt Pauline may say. He is *my* father, and I have a right to tell him my feelings.”

“That’s all of any consequence,” said Mrs. Dobbs, slowly refolding the letter. “Oh, of course she writes at the end ‘Love to Uncle Jo.’ She never forgets that.”

There was a brief silence. Mr. Weatherhead, who was very tender-hearted, blew his nose and wiped his eyes unaffectedly. “Of course you’ll have the child down, Sarah,” said he; “anyway, for a time. She’s pining, that’s where it is; she’s pining for a sight of you.”

Mrs. Dobbs sat choking down her emotion. She had cried privately over that letter herself, but she was resolved to discuss it now with

judicial calmness ; and it was provoking that Jo endangered her judicial tone of mind by that foolish, soft-hearted way of his, which was terribly catching. But she loved Jo for it, nevertheless, and scolded him so as to let him know that she loved him.

“It’s a good thing your feelings are righter and kinder than most folks’, Jo Weatherhead, for you’re sadly led by ’em, my friend. If you’d wait and hear the whole case, you might help me with your advice.” Then Mrs. Dobbs pulled another letter from her pocket, and handed it to her brother-in-law. This second epistle was from Mrs. Dormer-Smith, and ran thus :—

“DEAR MRS. DOBBS,

“I think it right to let you know how very important it is for May not to miss her visit to Glengowrie. There will be among the guests there a gentleman who has been paying her a good deal of attention—a man of princely fortune. I have some reason to think that May is disposed to look favourably on this gentleman ; but he must be allowed time and opportunity to declare himself. No better opportunity

could possibly be found than at Glengowrie; and I may tell you, *in confidence*, that the duchess has, at my friend Mrs. Griffin's request, invited them both *on purpose*. I trust, therefore, that, in my niece's interests, you will induce her not to relinquish this chance. As to her writing to her father, it is absurd, and would only irritate my brother after his giving me *carte blanche* to do the best I can for her. If the visit to Glengowrie turns out as we hope, I shall have procured for her a settlement which many a peer's daughter will envy. My husband and I have such confidence in your good sense, that we are sure you will second our efforts as far as you can. Of course you will consider this letter *strictly private*, and will not, above all, mention it to May.

“ I am, dear Mrs. Dobbs,

“ Yours very truly,

“ P. DORMER-SMITH.”

“ You see that alters the case, Jo,” said Mrs. Dobbs, when he had finished reading the letter.

Jo nodded thoughtfully, and rubbed his nose. “ Of course, what you want, Sarah, is for the child to be happy. That's the main thing,” said he.

“Of course I want her to be happy. And I want her to have her rights,” answered Mrs. Dobbs, setting her lips firmly.

“Ah! Yes, to be sure! Her rights, eh?”

“My son-in-law brought no good to any of us in himself. If his name can do any good to his daughter, she ought to have the benefit of it—and she shall.”

“Ay, ay. Her rights, eh? To be sure. Only—only it ain’t always quite easy to know what a person’s rights are, is it?”

“I know well enough what May’s rights are,” answered Mrs. Dobbs sharply.

“Nor yet it ain’t quite easy to be sure whether they’d enjoy their rights when they got ’em,” pursued Jo, with a thoughtful air. “Everybody likes to be happy. There can be no manner of doubt about *that*. And somehow the dukes and duchesses don’t seem to be enough to make Miranda quite—not *quite* happy, humph?”

“I wonder you should confess so much of your dear aristocracy!” returned Mrs. Dobbs with some heat.

“Why, you see, Sarah, it may be—I only say it *may* be—that the way Miranda has been

brought up, living here in the holidays in such a simple kind of style, and all that, makes her feel not altogether at home among these tip-top folks."

"If you mean she isn't good enough for them, that's nonsense; downright nonsense. And I wonder at a man with your brains talking such stuff! If you mean they're not good enough for her, that's another pair of shoes. As to manners—why, do you imagine that that aunt of hers, who—though she *is* a fool, is a well-born fool, and a well-bred one—would be taking May about, presenting her at Court, and introducing her to the grandest society, if the child didn't do her credit? Not she! I'm astonished at you, Jo! I thought you knew the world a little bit better than that."

Mrs. Dobbs leant back in her chair, and fanned her flushed face with her handkerchief. Mr. Weatherhead, having smoked his pipe out, put it in its case, and then sat silent, slowly stroking his nose, and casting deprecating glances at his hostess. At length the latter resumed, in a calmer tone, "But May's future is what I've got to think of. I'm an old woman.

I can leave her next to nothing when I die. I want her to marry. All women ought to marry. Nobody in my own walk of life would suit her. And what gentleman fit to match with her was ever likely to come and look for her in my parlour in Friar's Lane? You ought to know all about it, Jo Weatherhead. We've gone over the whole ground together often enough."

They had done so. But Jo Weatherhead understood very well that his old friend was talking now, not to convince him, but herself. "Well, Sarah," he said, "there seems a good chance for May to marry well, according to this good lady. 'Princely fortune,' she says. That sounds grand, don't it?"

"Ah! And it isn't a few thousands that Mrs. Dormer-Smith would call a princely fortune."

"Not a few thousands you think, eh, Sarah? Tens of thousands I shouldn't wonder, humph?" And Mr. Weatherhead pursed up his mouth, and poked forward his nose eagerly.

"Not a doubt of it."

"Bless my stars! To think of our little Miranda!—and her aunt says that May is disposed to look favourably on the gentleman."

“So she says. But I can tell you that May doesn't care a button for him at present.”

“Lord! How do you know, Sarah?”

“How do I know? That's so like a man! No girl in love would give up the chance of meeting her lover, as May wants to give it up. If she'd rather come to Oldchester than go to Scotland, it is because—so far, at any rate—she doesn't care a button for him.”

“I never thought of that. But perhaps, Sarah, she doesn't know that he is to be invited.”

Mrs. Dobbs seemed struck by this remark. “Well now, that's an idea, Jo!” said she, nodding her head. “It may be so. They seem to have had the sense not to talk to her about the matter. May's just the kind of girl to fling up her heels and break away, if she suspected any scheming to make a fine match for her. But she might come to care for him in time. There's no reason in nature why a rich man shouldn't be nice enough to be fallen in love with. And by his taking to May—and she without a penny—I'm inclined to think well of the young man.”

After some further consideration it was

agreed that Mrs. Dobbs should write and propose a middle term : in the interval between her aunt's departure for Carlsbad, and the date of her invitation to Glengowrie, May should come down to Oldchester, on condition that she afterwards paid her visit to the Duchess. This arrangement would be a joy to Mrs. Dobbs, would satisfy May's affectionate longing, and could not prejudice the girl's future prospects. A letter to May was written, as well as one to Mrs. Dormer-Smith. This letter was very short, and may as well be given.

“ DEAR MRS. DORMER-SMITH,

“ I have to acknowledge yours of the 5th. I agree with you that it would be a pity for my granddaughter not to accept the invitation you speak of. Some good may come of it, and I do not think that any harm can come. If May spends the three or four weeks with me after you start for the Continent, I will undertake for her to meet the lady who is to take charge of her to Scotland, at any place that may be agreed upon. I wrote to May by this post, and she will tell you what I propose. With regard to her father's address,

I have had none for some time past, except, 'Post-Office, Brussels.' This much I shall tell her, as I think she has a right to know it. You need not disturb yourself about her writing to her father, as I think, from what I know of Captain Cheffington, that he is not likely to answer her letter.

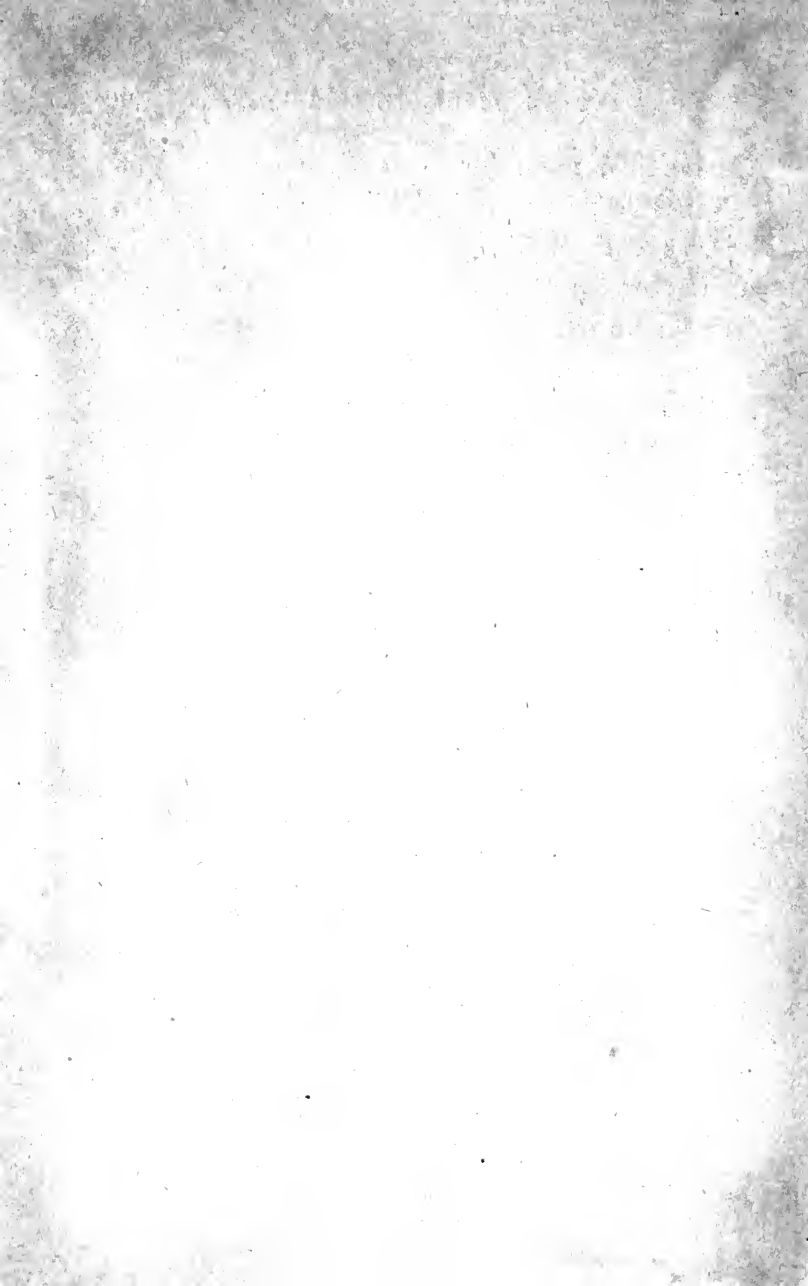
“ I am, dear Mrs. Dormer-Smith,

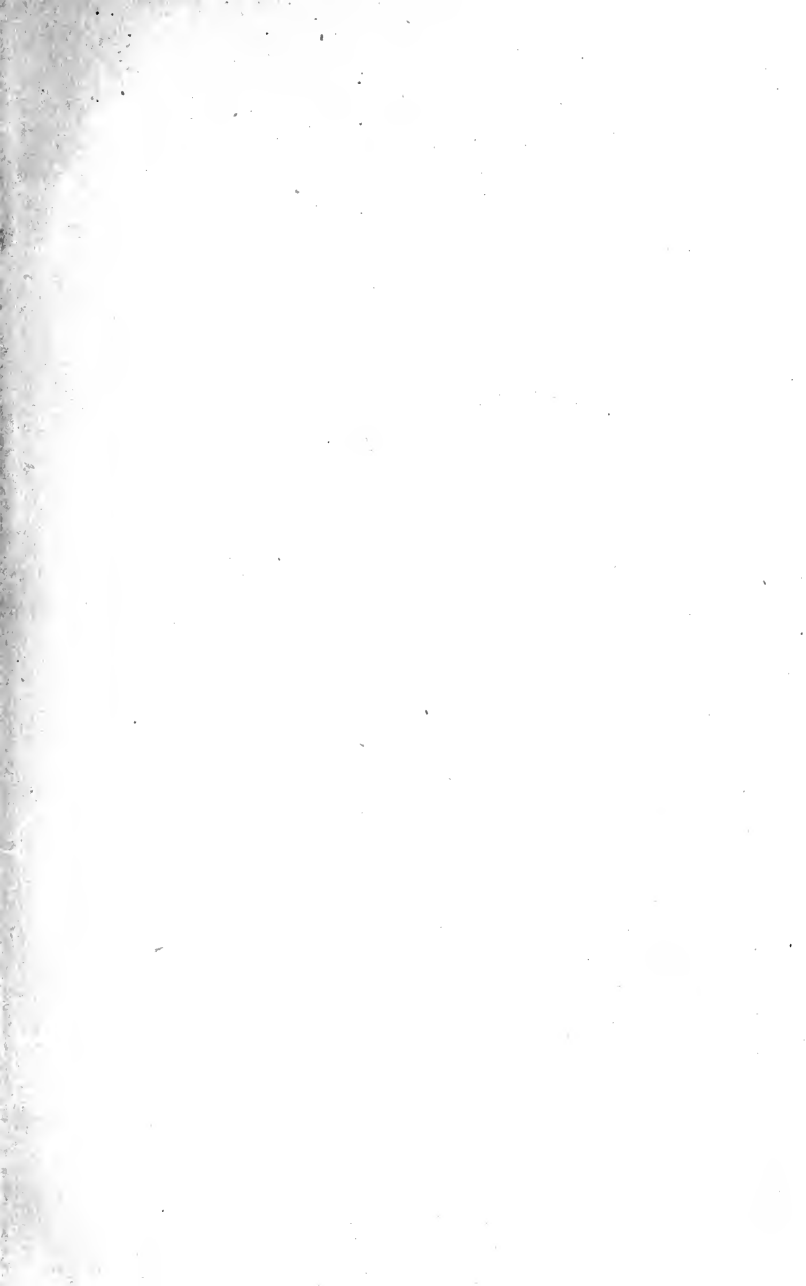
“ Yours truly,

“ SARAH DOBBS.”

The proposal was accepted, and within a fortnight after the despatch of this letter, May Cheffington was in Oldchester once more.

END OF VOL. I.





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