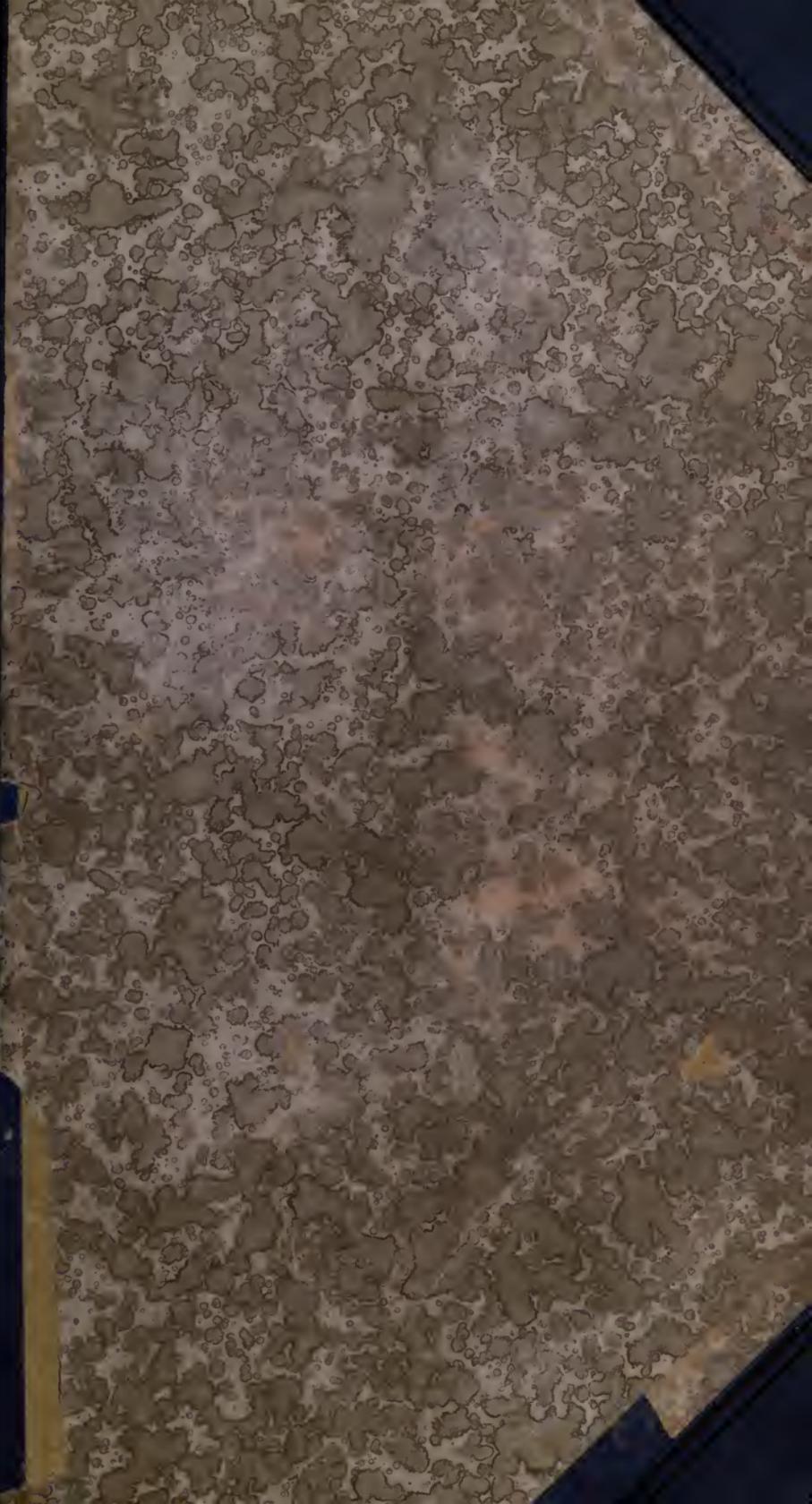


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THAT UNFORTUNATE MARRIAGE.



# THAT UNFORTUNATE MARRIAGE.

BY

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AUTHOR OF

“AUNT MARGARET’S TROUBLE,” “A CHARMING FELLOW,”  
“LIKE SHIPS UPON THE SEA,” ETC.

*IN THREE VOLUMES.*

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# THAT UNFORTUNATE MARRIAGE.

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## CHAPTER I.

THE following morning Mrs. Dormer-Smith was in a flutter of excitement. She left her bedroom fully an hour earlier than was her wont. But before she did so she sent a message begging May not to absent herself from the house. For even in this wintry season May was in the habit of walking out every morning with the children whenever there came a gleam of good weather. Smithson, Mrs. Dormer-Smith's maid, who was charged with the message, volunteered to add, with a glance at May's plain morning frock—

“Mr. Bragg is expected, I believe, Miss.”

“Very well, Smithson. Tell my aunt I will not go out without her permission.”

Smithson still lingered. "Shall I—would you like me to lay out your grey merino, Miss?" she asked.

"Oh no, thank you!" answered May, opening her eyes in surprise. "If I do go out, it will only be to take a turn in the square with the children. This frock will do quite well."

Smithson retired. And then Harold, who was engaged in a somewhat languid struggle with a French verb, looked up savagely, and said—

"I hate Mr. Bragg."

Wilfred, seated at the table with a big book before him, which was supposed to convey useful knowledge by means of coloured illustrations, immediately echoed—

"I hate Mr. Bragg."

"Hush, hush! That will never do!" said May. "Little boys musn't hate anybody. Besides, Mr. Bragg is a very good, kind man. Why should you dislike him?"

"Because he's going to take you away," answered Harold slowly.

"Nonsense! I dare say Mr. Bragg will not ask to see me at all. And if he does, I shall not be away above a few minutes."

“Shan’t you?” asked Harold doubtfully.

“Of course not! What have you got into your head?”

“Yesterday, when they didn’t think I was listening, I heard Smithson say to Cecile——”

May stopped the child decisively. “Hush, Harold! You know I never allow you to repeat the tittle-tattle of the nursery. And I am shocked to hear that you listened to what was not intended for your ears. That is not like a gentleman. You know we agreed that you are to be a real gentleman when you grow up—that is, a man of honour.”

“*I* didn’t listen!” cried Wilfred eagerly.

“I am glad you did not.”

“No, *I* didn’t listen, Cousin May. I was in Cyril’s room. Cyril gave me a long, long piece of string;—ever so long!”

May laughed. “Your virtue is not of a difficult kind, Master Willy! You never do any mischief that is quite out of your reach.” Then, seeing that Harold looked still crest-fallen, she kissed his forehead, and said kindly, “And Harold will not listen again. He did not remember that it is dishonourable.”

The child was silent, with his eyes cast down

on his lesson-book, for a while. Then he raised them, and looking searchingly at May, said, "I say, Cousin May, I mean to marry you when I grow up."

"And so do I!" said Wilfred, determined not to be outdone.

"Very well. But I couldn't think of marrying any one who did not know his French verbs. So you had better learn that one at once."

Harold's naturally rather dull and heavy face grew suddenly bright; and he settled himself to his lesson with a little shrug, and a shake like a puppy. "No; you wouldn't marry any one who didn't know French, would you?" said he emphatically.

"And *I* know F'ench!" pleaded Wilfred.

"There now, be quiet, both of you, and let me finish my letter," said May. And there was nearly unbroken silence among them.

Meantime Mr. Bragg was having an interview with Mrs. Dormer-Smith. He had gradually made up his mind to put the same question to her that he had put to Mrs. Dobbs: namely, whether May were free to receive his proposals. He could not help being uneasy about young

Bransby's relations with May. Mrs. Dobbs, it was true, had denied that her granddaughter thought of him at all; and Mr. Bragg did not doubt Mrs. Dobbs's veracity. But he underrated her sagacity; or, rather, her opportunities for knowing the truth. She lived very much outside of May's world. She might divine the state of May's feelings, and yet be mistaken as to their object. The story he had heard of young Bransby's having been rejected by Miss Cheffington could not be true; for was not young Bransby a constant visitor at her aunt's house—frequenting it on a footing of familiarity—talking to May herself with a certain air of confidential understanding? He had observed this particularly during last night's dinner.

But if, on the other hand, the possibility of Mrs. Dobbs being mistaken on this question were once admitted, all sorts of other possibilities poured in after it as by a sluice-gate, and lifted Mr. Bragg's hopes to a higher level. At any rate, he resolved to take some decisive step. Time had been lost already. He had told Mrs. Dobbs that he was too old to trust to the day after to-morrow; and that was now three months ago! Hence his visit to Mrs. Dormer-

Smith by appointment—an appointment made verbally the preceding evening, with the request that she would mention it to no one; least of all to Miss Cheffington.

Aunt Pauline was, of course, quite sure beforehand what was to be the subject of their conversation; and was not in the least surprised (although inwardly much elated) when Mr. Bragg broached it.

“Understand me, ma’am,” said Mr. Bragg. “I only wish you to tell me truly whether, according to the best of your belief, Miss C.’s affections are engaged. I ask no questions beyond that. I don’t want to pry.”

“Engaged! Oh dear, no; I assure you——”

“Excuse me, ma’am. But I mean a little more than that,” said Mr. Bragg, slightly hastening the steady stride of his speech, lest she should interrupt him again. “Of course, I don’t expect you to be inside of your niece’s heart. A deal of uncertainty must prevail in what you may call assaying any human being’s feelings. You may use the wrong test for one thing. But ladies are keen observers; specially where they like—or, for the matter of that,

dislike—any one very much. And what I want to know is this : Have you any reason to think Miss C. is in love with any one ? ”

Mrs. Dormer-Smith, who was listening with a bland smile, almost started at this crude inquiry. She felt the need of all her self-command to preserve that repose of manner which she considered essential to good-breeding. But she answered gently, though firmly—

“ My dear Mr. Bragg, that is out of the question. My niece is entirely disengaged. A girl of her birth and breeding is not likely to entertain any vulgar kind of romance in secret ! ”

“ Thank you, ma’am,” said Mr. Bragg. Then he added ponderingly, “ It might not be vulgar, though ! ”

Mrs. Dormer-Smith privately thought Mr. Bragg no competent judge of what might, or might not, be vulgar in a Cheffington. She merely replied, with a certain suave dignity, referring to a former speech of his—

“ Do I understand rightly that you desire to speak with Miss Cheffington yourself ? ”

“ If you please, ma’am. Yes ; I think I should like to go through with it.”

“I will send for her to come here, Mr. Bragg.”

She rang the bell and gave her orders; and during the pause which ensued, neither she nor Mr. Bragg spoke a word. He was absorbed in his own thoughts, and by no means as fully master of himself as usual. She was plaintively regretting that May had refused to change her morning frock for something more becoming. “Not that it can be of vital importance *now*,” thought Mrs. Dormer-Smith, faintly smiling to herself, with half-closed eyes.

Presently the door opened, and May stood on the threshold.

“Come in, darling,” said her aunt. “Mr. Bragg wishes to speak with you. And I will only assure you that he does so with my and your uncle’s full knowledge and approbation.” With that, Aunt Pauline glided into the back drawing-room, and withdrew by a door opening on to the staircase, which she shut behind her, immensely to May’s surprise.

All at once a nameless dread came over the girl, chilling her like a cold wind. They had some bad news to give her of Owen! She turned suddenly so deadly pale as to startle

Mr. Bragg; and looking up at him with piteous, frightened eyes, stammered faintly, "What is the matter?"

"Nothing at all! Nothing is the matter that need frighten you, my dear young lady. Lord bless me, you look quite scared!"

His genuine tone reassured her. And the colour began to return to lips and cheeks. But the wilful blood now rushed too hotly into her face. Her second thought was, "They have found out my engagement to Owen!" And although this contingency could be confronted with a very different feeling, and with sufficient courage, yet she could not control the tell-tale blush.

"Just you sit down there, and don't worrit yourself, Miss Cheffington," said Mr. Bragg. In his earnestness he reverted to the phraseology of his early days. "There's no hurry in the world. If you was startled, just you take your own time to come round."

"Thank you," answered May, dropping into the arm-chair he pushed forward.

"I am very sorry to have alarmed you," she said. "I'm afraid I must be growing nervous! I never thought I should be able to lay claim to that interesting malady."

Although she smiled, and tried to speak playfully, she had really been shaken, and she profited by the advice, which Mr. Bragg repeated, to "sit still, and take her own time about coming round."

By-and-by she said, almost in her usual voice, "Will you not sit down, Mr. Bragg? I am quite ready to listen to you."

Mr. Bragg hesitated a moment. He would have preferred to stand. He would have felt more at his ease, so. But, looking down on the slight young figure before him, it occurred to him that it would be—in some vaguely-felt way—taking an unfair advantage of the girl to dominate her by his tall stature. So he brought himself nearer to her level by sitting down on an ottoman opposite, and not very near to her.

"I suppose," said he, after a little silence, during which he looked down with an intent and anxious frown at the floor, "I suppose you can't give a guess at what I'm going to say?"

May believed she had guessed it already. But she answered, "I would rather not guess, please. I would rather that you told me."

"Well, perhaps it may simplify matters if I

mention that I have had some conversation on the subject with Mrs. Dobbs."

"With Granny?" exclaimed May, looking full at him in profound astonishment.

"Yes; it's some little while ago; now. Mrs. Dobbs spoke very straightforward, and very kind, too; but I'm bound to say she did *not* give me any encouragement."

May stared at him in a kind of fascination. She could not remove her eyes from his face. And she began to perceive a dreadful clear-sightedness dawning above the confusion of her thoughts.

Mr. Bragg was not looking at her. He was leaning a little forward, with his arms resting on his knees, and his hands loosely clasped together. He went on speaking in a ruminating way; sometimes emphasizing his phrase by a slight movement from the wrist of his clasped hands, and as if he were, with some difficulty, reading off the words he was uttering from the Oriental rug at his feet.

"You see, Miss Cheffington, of course I'm aware there's a great difference in years. But that's not the biggest difference in reality. I don't believe myself that I'm so very much

older in some ways than I was at five-and-twenty. I was always a steady kind of a chap, and I never had much to say for myself—never was what you might call lively, you know.”

May sat spell-bound ; looking at him fixedly, and with that dawn of clear-sightedness rapidly illumining many things, to her unspeakable consternation.

“No ; it isn’t the years that make the biggest difference. I’m below you in education, of course, Miss Cheffington, and in a deal besides, no doubt. But I can be trusted to mean all I say—though I’m not able to say all I mean, by a long chalk.”

As he said this he raised his eyes for the first time, and looked at her. She was still regarding him with the same fascinated, almost helpless, gaze. But when she met his clear, honest, grey eyes, with a wistful expression in them which was pathetically contrasted with the massive strength of his head and face, she was suddenly inspired to say—

“Please, Mr. Bragg, will you hear me ? I want to tell you something before you—before you say any more. I think you’ are my friend, and if you don’t mind, I should like to tell you a secret. May I ?”

He nodded, keeping his eyes on her now steadily.

“Well, I—I hope you will forgive me for troubling you with my confidence. I *know* you will respect it. If I had not such a high esteem and regard for you I—I *could* not say it.” She stopped an instant, there was a choking feeling in her throat. She paused, mastered it, and went on. “I have promised to marry some one whom I love very much, and no one knows about it but Granny.”

When she had spoken, she hid her hot face in her hands, and cried silently.

There was absolute stillness in the room for some minutes. At length she looked up and saw Mr. Bragg still sitting as before, with loosely clasped hands and downcast eyes. May rose to her feet, and said timidly, “I hope you are not angry with me for—for telling you?”

Mr. Bragg stood up also, and placing one broad, powerful hand on her head, as a father might have done, looked down gravely at her upturned face.

“Angry! Lord bless you, my child, what must I be made of to be angry with *you*?”

“Oh, thank you, Mr. Bragg! And will you

promise—but I know you will—not to betray me?”

He did not notice this question. His mind was working uneasily. He thrust his hands into his pockets, and walked to the other side of the room and back, before saying—

“This person that you’ve promised to marry, is he one that your people here”—he jerked his head over his shoulder in the direction in which Mrs. Dormer-Smith had disappeared—“would approve of?”

“Oh, yes!” answered May. Then she added, not quite so confidently, “I think so. At any rate, I am very proud to be loved by him.”

“And Mrs. Dobbs——”

“Oh, of course, dear Granny thinks no one could be too good for me,” said May apologetically. “But she knows his worth.”

“Will you please tell me how long Mrs. Dobbs has known of this?” asked Mr. Bragg, with a touch of sternness.

“Known? She knew, of course, as soon as I knew myself—on the twenty-seventh of last September,” answered poor May, with damask-rose cheeks.

Mr. Bragg made a mental calculation of

dates. His face relaxed; and he now replied to May's previous question.

"Yes, of course, I'll promise not to say a word till you give me leave. Especially since Mrs. Dobbs knows all about it. Otherwise, you're young to guide yourself entirely in a matter so serious as this is."

She thanked him again, and dried some stray tear-drops that hung on her pretty eyelashes.

He stood for a moment looking at her intently. But there was nothing in his gaze to startle her maiden innocence, or make her shrink from him; it was an honest, earnest, kindly, though melancholy look.

"Well," said he at last, "you're not so curious as some young ladies. You haven't asked me what it was I was going to say to you."

"I dare say it was nothing serious," she answered quickly. "In any case I am quite sure you will say, and leave unsaid, all that is right."

"That's a—what you might call a pretty large order, Miss Cheffington. I'm an awkward brute sometimes, I dare say, but I'll tell you this much: If I don't say what I was going to say, it isn't from pride. I *have* had that feeling, but I haven't it now, in talking to you. No, it

isn't from pride, but because I want you and me to be friends—downright good friends, you know. And, perhaps, it would be more agreeable for you not to have anything concerning me in your memory that you'd wish to be what you might call sponged out of the record. I appreciate your behaviour, Miss Cheffington. You acted generous, and like the noble-hearted young lady I've always thought you, when you told me that secret of yours. Why now—— Come, come, don't you fret yourself!" he exclaimed softly, for the tears were again trickling down her cheeks.

"You are so—so very kind and good to me!" she said brokenly.

"Lord bless me, what else could I be? There, there, don't you vex yourself by fancying me cast down or disappointed about—anything in particular. A man doesn't come to my age without getting used to disappointments, big and little."

He took up his hat and stopped her by a gesture as she moved towards the bell.

"No; don't ring, please! I've got an appointment in the City, and not much time to spare if I walk it. So I'll just let myself

out quietly, without disturbing anybody. You can mention to your aunt that I shall have the honour of calling on her again very soon. Good-bye, Miss Cheffington."

May held out her hand. He touched it very lightly with his fingers, and then relinquished it silently.

"You are sure," she said pleadingly, "you are quite sure you are not angry with me?"

"There ain't a many things I'm so sure of as I am of that," answered Mr. Bragg, in his ordinary quiet tones. And then he opened the door and was gone.

He went down the stairs, and through the hall, and into the street without being challenged. He shut the street door softly behind him, with a kind of instinct of escape; and marched away rather quickly, but square and steady as ever.

After a while he looked at his watch, hesitated, and finally hailed a hansom cab.

"Poultry! You can take it easy. I'm not in a hurry," he said to the driver, as he got into the vehicle.

Then Mr. Bragg leaned back, and began to think. He had a habit of frequently closing

his eyes when meditating, and this habit it was which had impelled him to get into a cab, since a pedestrian in the streets of London could only indulge in it at the risk of his life; and Mr. Bragg had no—not even the most passing—temptation to suicide. He shut his eyes tight now, tilted his hat backward from his forehead, and reviewed the situation.

He had behaved very well to May, and was conscious of having behaved well to her; she deserved the best and most considerate treatment; but Mr. Bragg was no angel, and he was extremely angry with Mrs. Dormer-Smith. He felt some irritation—very unreasonably, as he would by-and-by acknowledge—against Mrs. Dobbs—she had been rather exasperatingly in the right. But Mrs. Dormer-Smith had been most exasperatingly in the wrong, and he was very angry with her. Why had she not confessed that she knew nothing at all about her niece's feelings? It was clear she was quite ignorant of them. She had only to say that she could not undertake to answer for May; that would at least have been honest!

“I dare say I might have spoken, all the same,” Mr. Bragg admitted to himself. “I

think p'r'aps I should. I'd got to that point where a man *must* know for himself what the answer is to that question, and when 'likely' or 'unlikely' won't serve his turn. But I could ha' managed different. I needn't have looked like a Tomnoddy. Trottled out there—making a reg'lar show of a man; not a doubt but what that flunkey knew all about it. Woman's a fool!"

Mr. Bragg's indignation rolled off like thunder in these broken growlings. And beneath it all—deeper than all—there lay an aching sorrow. It would not break his heart, as he knew; it might not even spoil his dinner; but it was a real sorrow, nevertheless. In the moment of assuring him that he must not hope to win her, May had seemed to him better worth winning than ever; her soft touch had opened a long sealed-up spring of tenderness. There was some rough poetry within him, none the less pathetic because he knew thoroughly, sensitively, how unable he was to give it expression, and how ridiculous the mere suggestion of his trying to do so would seem to most people. He resolutely refrained as much as possible from letting his mind busy itself with these hidden feelings;

his very thoughts seemed to hurt them at that moment.

He preferred to nurse his wrath against Mrs. Dormer-Smith, and to resent her having betrayed him into an undignified position. Mr. Bragg had been prosperous and powerful for many years, and the sense of being balked was very irksome to him; more irksome than in the days of his poverty, when youth and hope were elastic, and battle seemed a not unwelcome condition of existence.

But before he reached the end of his eastward journey Mr. Bragg began to speculate about the man whom May loved. In spite of Mrs. Dobbs's emphatic denial, he could not dismiss the idea that Theodore Bransby was the man. He had gathered the impression that Mrs. Dobbs did not like Theodore, and he remembered May's deprecating words, "Granny would not think any one too good for me!" which seemed to indicate that Mrs. Dobbs had not hailed the engagement with rapture. Thinking over the dates, he concluded—quite correctly—that May's lover, whoever he might be, had declared himself not long after his (Bragg's) interview with Mrs. Dobbs. Now, Theodore Bransby had

been in Oldchester at that time, as he well remembered.

Why Theodore, if it were he, should keep his engagement secret from the Dormer-Smiths, was not easily explicable. But Mr. Bragg knew the young man's political projects; and it might be that Theodore would wish to approach May's family armed with all the importance which a successful electoral campaign would give him. One thing Mr. Bragg felt tolerably sure of—that Aunt Pauline would regret acutely the declension from a nephew-in-law with fifty thousand a year, to one whose income did not count as many hundreds! It was, perhaps, rather agreeable to Mr. Bragg to think of this. It was certainly a comfort to him to be able to dislike May's lover on independent grounds. He had always entertained an antipathy towards the young man; and, however sincere and tender his interest in May Cheffington might be, it did not modify, by a hair's breadth, his opinion of young Bransby.

“And, after all, it may not be him!” said Mr. Bragg, reflectively and ungrammatically. “But if it isn't him, it can't be anybody I know.”

The person he had appointed to meet in the City was an Oldchester man; and when the business part of their interview was concluded, he said to Mr. Bragg—

“There’s bad news from Combe Park. Haven’t you heard? Oh! why they say Mr. Lucius Cheffington can’t live many days. So that scamp, What’s-his-name, the nephew, will come in for it all. The old lord’s awfully savage, I’m told. Shouldn’t wonder if it balks young Bransby’s hopes of getting his seat. Old Castlecombe won’t like paying election expenses for him *now*. Great pity! He’s a very rising young man, and a credit to Oldchester.”

## CHAPTER II.

WHEN Mr. Bragg was gone, May felt a cowardly temptation to run away to her own room, and there recover her composure in solitude. But she reflected that that would be scarcely fair to her aunt, who, no doubt, was waiting with some impatience to hear the result of the interview. So she dried her eyes, and resolutely ascended the stairs to her aunt's room.

The gentle, refined voice which had once so charmed her (but which, as she had long since learned, could utter sentiments singularly at variance with its own sweetness) answered her tap at the door by saying, "Is that dear May? Come in." May entered, and saw her aunt reclining in a lounging chair by the fireside. A book lay open beside her; but she evidently had not been reading recently. She looked up at May's flushed face and tear-swollen eyes, and

these traces of emotion seemed to her satisfactory indications of what had passed. "He has spoken! It's all right!" she said to herself. Then aloud, with a tender smile, holding out both her hands, "Well, darling?"

The softness of her tone had a perversely hardening effect on May. If her aunt had expected her to accept Mr. Bragg—and May was not dull enough to doubt this, now that her eyes were illumined by that dawn of clear-sightedness which had been so amazing to her—the least she could do was to be quiet and common-sensible about it. Any assumption of sentiment seemed to May to be sickening under the circumstances. So she answered dryly—

"Mr. Bragg desired me to tell you that he will have the honour of calling on you again before long."

"Is he gone?" asked Mrs. Dormer-Smith, with a momentary twinge of anxiety.

"Yes; he is gone. He had an appointment in the City, and was rather pressed for time; so he could not stay to take leave of you."

"Oh!" exclaimed her aunt, sinking back among her cushions with a smile, "I forgive him." Then seeing May turn away as if to

leave the room, she suddenly sat up again, and said with an air of gentle reproach, "And have you nothing to say to me, dear May?"

"Nothing particular, Aunt Pauline."

"Nothing particular! I do not think that is very kindly said, May."

May's conscience told her the same thing. She had yielded to a movement of temper. The most sensitive chords in her own nature had been jarred, and were still quivering. But that was no reason why she should be unkind or uncivil to her aunt; she repented, and, with her usual impulsive candour, said—

"I beg your pardon, Aunt Pauline. I ought not to have answered you so."

"You have been agitated, dear child. Come here, and sit down by me. Now tell me, May—you surely will tell *me*—Mr. Bragg has proposed to you, has he not?"

"No, Aunt Pauline."

"*What?*"

Mrs. Dormer-Smith would have been shocked if she could have seen her own face in the glass at that moment. The vulgarest market-woman's countenance could not have expressed surprise and consternation more unrestrainedly.

“I think he, perhaps, would have asked me to marry him : but I stopped him.”

“You stopped him?” echoed her aunt, with clasped hands. But a little gleam of hope revived her. The matter had been mismanaged in some way. May was so deplorably devoid of tact! All might yet be well. “And why, for pity’s sake, May, did you stop him?”

“Because, as I could not accept him, Aunt Pauline, I wished to spare him as much as possible.”

“Could not accept him! Good heavens, May, this is frightful! Have you lost your senses? Do you know who and what Mr. Bragg is?”

“He is a good, honest man; and I esteem him and like him.”

“And is not that enough? Do you know that there are girls of—I won’t say better family, but—higher rank than yours, who would give their ears to be—— But it can’t be! You are a foolish, inexperienced child, who don’t understand your own good fortune. You cannot be allowed to throw away this splendid opportunity. I will write to Mr. Bragg myself, and——”

“Stay, Aunt Pauline. Please to understand that I will never, under any circumstances, dream of marrying Mr. Bragg. He is quite persuaded of this. He and I understand each other very well, and we mean to continue good friends; but pray do not lower your own dignity by writing to him on this subject!”

Mrs. Dormer-Smith burst into tears. “Go away, you ungrateful child,” she said, from behind her pocket-handkerchief. “I could not have believed you would have behaved in this manner after all I have done for you!”

May would have been more distressed than she was had the spectacle of her aunt’s tears been rarer. But she had seen Mrs. Dormer-Smith weep from, what seemed to her, very inadequate motives:—even once at the misfit of a new gown. Nevertheless, she tried to soothe her aunt.

“Please don’t cry, Aunt Pauline. I can’t bear you to think me ungrateful. But, after all, what have I done? I dare say—I am sure, indeed, that you are only anxious for my welfare. And what sort of a life could I expect if I married a man I could not love?”

“I beg you will not talk such nursery-maid’s

nonsense to me, May," returned her aunt, sprinkling some rose-water on her pocket-handkerchief, and dabbing her wet cheeks with it. "Could not love, indeed! Why could you not love him? Do you expect to rant through a *grande passion* like a heroine on the stage? I am shocked at you, May! Girls in your position owe a duty to society."

May knew that her aunt was unanswerable when she broached these mysterious dogmas about "society"—unanswerable, at all events, by her. She could as soon have attempted a theological argument with a devotee of Mumbo Jumbo. So she held her peace, and stood still, anxious to escape, and yet fearful of seeming to be unfeeling by going away at that moment. One idea at length suggested itself to her as a possible consolation for her aunt, and she proceeded to offer it with unreflecting rashness.

"But, Aunt Pauline," she said, "after all, you know, Mr. Bragg is a very low-born man. He was once a common artisan in Oldchester. And you remember you even thought Theodore Bransby presumptuous——"

The immediate reply to this well-meant suggestion was a fresh burst of tears. "You

are too insupportable, May. One might suppose you to be an idiot! What has been the use of all my care, and my endeavours to make you look at things as a girl of your condition ought to look at them? Mr. Bragg could have placed you in a brilliant position. Now, I dare say, he will marry Felicia Hautenville. I have no doubt he will, and it will serve you right if he does. You think of no one but yourself. What do you suppose that worthy woman, Mrs. Dobbs, will say when she hears of your behaviour? After all the money she has spent on sending you to London!"

May turned round suddenly. "What do you say, Aunt Pauline?" she asked, almost breathlessly. "Granny has spent money to send me to London?"

Mrs. Dormer-Smith caught at a forlorn hope. Might it not be possible, even now, to influence May through her affection for her grandmother?

"Of course, May," she replied, with an injured air. "Where do you suppose the money came from? Your uncle and I, as you must be well aware, find it difficult enough to keep up our position in society, with Cyril to place in

the world, and those two little boys to provide for!"

"But papa!" gasped May. "I thought my father was paying——"

"You chose to assume it. I never told you so. Mrs. Dobbs particularly wished us to keep the arrangement secret, and we did so. I appreciate her wisdom *now* in keeping it secret from you, May; for your conduct to-day shows you to be destitute of the most ordinary tact and prudence."

"And Granny—dear old Granny—has been depriving herself of money to keep me in town!" exclaimed the girl, still entirely possessed with this new revelation.

Mrs. Dormer-Smith gallantly tried to improve her opportunity. She raised herself into an upright posture in her chair, and said solemnly, "Yes, May; and a nice return you make for it! The good old creature, no doubt, has been pinching herself for years on your account. She has paid for your schooling, your dress, and everything; she even contrives, I dare say, by enduring some privations" (Mrs. Dormer-Smith did not in the least suppose this to be the case, but she felt it was a rhetorical "point,"

and likely to affect her niece), “she even contrives to give you a season in town, with charming toilettes from Amélie, and a presentation dress that a duke’s daughter might have worn, and everything which a right-minded girl ought to appreciate—and this is her reward! You refuse one of the finest matches in England! I cannot believe you will persist in such *wicked* perversity, May,” continued Pauline, rising to new heights of moral elevation. “No, I cannot believe you will be so ungrateful to that good old soul, and, indeed, I may say, to Providence! Really, there is something almost impious in it. Mrs. Dobbs does all she can to counteract the results of your father’s unfortunate marriage—we *all* do all we can; circumstances are so ordered by a Superior Power as to give you the chance of catching—of attracting the regard of a man of princely fortune—*you*, rather than a dozen other girls whose people have been looking after him for the last three seasons, and all this you reject! Toss it away, like a baby with a toy! No, May; you *are* a Cheffington—you *are* my poor unfortunate brother’s own flesh and blood, and I will not believe it of you.” Then, sinking back in her chair, she added in a

faint voice, "Go away now, if you please, and send Smithson to me. I shall have to speak to your uncle when he comes in, and I really dread it. He will be so shocked—so astonished! As for me, I am utterly *hors de combat* for the day, of course."

May willingly escaped to her own room, and locked herself in. Her thoughts were in a strange tumult, busied chiefly with this news about Mrs. Dobbs. Why had she not guessed it before? Was there any one in the world like that staunch, generous, unselfish woman? This explained her giving up her old, comfortable home in Friar's Row. This explained a hundred other circumstances. May thought, between laughing and crying, of Jo Weatherhead's eccentric eulogy on her grandmother as compared with classical heroines, and she longed to tell him that he was right. The full tide of love and sympathy and gratitude towards "Granny" rose in her breast above all other emotions, and, for the moment, even Mr. Bragg's wonderful proposals, and her aunt's still more wonderful reception of them, were forgotten. It even overflowed and temporarily obliterated impressions and feelings far keener

than any which poor Mr. Bragg had power to awake in her heart.

What a fool's paradise had she been living in! And what a mistaken image of her father she had been cherishing all this time! He had contributed nothing to her support; he had coolly left the whole care of her to others; he had been thoroughly selfish and indifferent. Every one seemed selfish but Granny! One thing she hastily resolved on: not to remain another week in London at her grandmother's expense.

When Mr. Dormer-Smith came home, and was duly informed by his wife of May's incredible conduct, his dismay was nearly as great as Pauline's. Perhaps his surprise was even greater; for he had accepted his wife's assurances that May was quite prepared to give Mr. Bragg a favourable answer. He could not bring himself to regard May's behaviour with such lofty moral reprobation as his wife did, but he certainly thought the girl had acted foolishly, and even blameably.

Mr. Dormer-Smith was extremely anxious not to offend or disgust Mr. Bragg. To have a man of that wealth in the family might be the making

of all their fortunes. Already Mr. Bragg's advice and assistance had profited him. He and his wife had even privately reckoned on Mr. Bragg's doing something handsome (in a testamentary way) for their younger children. May was very fond of her cousins, and what would a few thousands be to Mr. Bragg? Now the unexpected news which met him broke up all these glittering hopes, as a thaw melts the frost-diamonds.

"You must speak with her, Frederick. I have said all I can, and I really am not equal to another scene," said Pauline.

She had subsided into an attitude of calm despondency, and seemed to be supported chiefly by the sense of her own unappreciated merits. She did not mention that she had already written a private and confidential letter to Mr. Bragg, and despatched it by special messenger to the hotel where he usually stayed when in London.

Mr. Bragg had no town house, and the choosing and furnishing of a suitable mansion for him and his bride had been one of the rewards of virtue which Mrs. Dormer-Smith had, for some time past, been anticipating for

herself. May was so young and inexperienced, and Mr. Bragg—dear, good, rich man!—had so little knowledge of the fashionable world, that Pauline confidently expected to be for some years to come the presiding genius of the elegant entertainments to which they would invite only the very best society. For—giving the rein to her fancy—Pauline had resolved that Mr. and Mrs. Bragg were to be extremely exclusive. A well-born girl who, without fortune or title, had succeeded in marrying a millionaire, might surely—if there were any poetical justice at all in the world—indulge herself in the refined pleasure of social selection, and quietly decline to receive those doubtful “Borderers” who made society, as Mrs. Griffin often complained, so sadly mixed!

All this was not to be relinquished without a struggle. Mrs. Dormer-Smith would do her duty to the last. Duty had commanded her to make an immediate appeal to Mr. Bragg not to take May’s answer as final; but duty did not, she considered, require her to tell her husband anything about it until she saw how it turned out.

“You *must* see her, Frederick,” repeated Mrs.

Dormer-Smith. And Frederick accordingly sent for May to come and speak with him.

He awaited her in the drawing-room; and when May entered the room her eye fell on the easy-chair which Mr. Bragg had placed for her, standing out just where she had left it. The whole scene came back to her mind as vividly as if she saw it in a picture before her bodily eyes; and the colour rose to her forehead.

Her uncle went to her, and took her hand kindly. "Well, May," said he, "what is all this I hear?" He was leading her towards the armchair; but May avoided it, and took another seat, and Mr. Dormer-Smith dropped into the armchair opposite to her, himself.

In considering what could have been the motives which had induced her to reject Mr. Bragg, he had prepared himself to listen to some — perhaps foolishly — romantic talk on May's part. Mr. Bragg certainly could not, by any stretch of friendship, be considered romantic. But Uncle Frederick would try to show his niece how much sounder and solider a foundation for domestic happiness Mr. Bragg was able to offer her than any amount of the qualities which go to make up a young lady's hero of romance.

What he was not at all prepared for was May's saying earnestly, as she leant forward with clasped hands, "Oh, Uncle Frederick what is all this *I* hear? My dear, good grandmother has been impoverishing herself to pay for keeping me in London! Why did you not tell me the truth? Nothing should have induced me to accept such a sacrifice!"

Mr. Dormer-Smith was not a ready or flexible man by nature; and it took him a minute or so to alter the sight, so to speak, of the big gun he had been getting into position to mow down May's resistance against making a splendid marriage.

"Why—eh? Oh, Mrs. Dobbs's allowance! Oh yes. Well, my dear, you have pretty well answered your own question. If you had known, you would not have consented to come to town, and take your proper place in society. Your aunt considered it most important that you should do so. And I'm sure, May, you must allow that she has done her very best for you in every way."

"*Her* very best!" thought May; "yes, perhaps!" Then she said aloud, "Aunt Pauline has been very kind to me. But how

could there be any 'proper place' for me in society, unless I could honestly afford to take it? To get it by imposing privations on my grandmother, who is not bound, except by her own abundant goodness, to do anything for me at all—this surely could not be right or just, could it?"

Mr. Dormer-Smith was not prepared with a cogent answer on the spur of the moment. So he fell back on murmuring some faint echoes of his wife's maxims about "duty to society." But he had not Pauline's sincere convictions on the subject, and did it but feebly.

"And, oh, Uncle Frederick," proceeded May; "what a mean impostor I have been all this time!"

"Impostor, my dear? No, no; that's nonsense, you know."

He was rather relieved to find May talking nonsense. That seemed much more normal and natural in a girl of her age than being so deuced logical and high-strung, and that sort of thing.

"That," he repeated firmly, "is really nonsense."

"But, Uncle Frederick, I was appearing

before everybody under false pretences. People thought—I thought myself—that my father supplied all my expenses.”

Mr. Dormer-Smith pursed up his mouth and puffed out his breath with a little contemptuous sound. Then he answered—

“Your father! My dear May, your father hasn’t paid a penny piece for you since you were seven years old.”

May was silent for a minute or so. She could not help some bitter thoughts of her father, but it was not for her to utter them. At length she said—

“I cannot go on accepting my grandmother’s sacrifice, Uncle Frederick. I will not.”

It occurred to Mr. Dormer-Smith, as it had occurred to his wife, that May’s affection for Mrs. Dobbs might supply the fulcrum they wanted for their lever. He answered—

“Well, my dear, I don’t blame your feeling, though it is a little overstrained, perhaps. But you have it in your own power to more than pay back all Mrs. Dobbs has done for you.”

“How?” asked May innocently.

“Why, I am sure Mr. Bragg would be only too delighted——”

“Oh, Mr. Bragg! I was not thinking of Mr. Bragg, and I would rather not talk of him just now.”

This was a little too much. Mr. Dormer-Smith's face assumed a very serious, not to say severe, expression as he looked at his niece and said—

“Excuse me, May, but you must think of him, and talk of him also. That was the subject I sent for you to speak about. I don't know how we have drifted away from it. Your aunt tells me that you have not actually refused Mr. Bragg, but merely stopped him from proposing to you. Now, if that is the case, the matter is not past mending. No doubt Mr. Bragg may feel a little offended.”

“He is not in the least offended,” interposed May.

“Ah! Well, so much the better. But you can hardly expect me to believe that he particularly enjoyed the interview! Mr. Bragg is a person of a great deal of importance in the world, and not accustomed to be treated as if he were of no consequence. However,” proceeded Mr. Dormer-Smith, relaxing into a milder tone, “I dare say he can make allowances for a young

lady taken by surprise—it seems you did not expect his proposal?”

“Expect it! How on earth could I have expected it?”

“Some girls would. However, let us stick to the point. I don’t think it is too late for you to make everything well again.”

“Uncle Frederick, I am bound to assure you most positively that I can never marry Mr. Bragg.”

“Now, don’t be obstinate, May. What is your objection to him?”

The girl hesitated. Then she replied, looking up with pleading eyes, “How can I say, Uncle Frederick? One does not marry a man simply because one has no particular objection to him. Mr. Bragg is old enough to be my grandfather!”

“No; scarcely that. Look here, May, I have a great affection for you. You have been very good and kind to my little boys, and they doat on you. I am not ungrateful for all you have done for the children, although I may not have said much about it.”

May was melted in an instant by these words of kindness, and said warmly, “And *I* am not

ungrateful, Uncle Frederick. I know you mean well by me, and Aunt Pauline, too."

"Certainly we do. Naturally so! Well now, just listen to me, my dear. If you were my own daughter I should give you just the same advice. I should be very glad and thankful for a daughter of mine to marry Mr. Bragg. I know a great deal more of the world than you do—or ever will, please God!—for it isn't a very pleasant kind of knowledge—and I tell you honestly, there are very few men, young or old, in the society we frequent, whom I'd choose for your husband rather than Mr. Bragg. He is a little uneducated, and unpolished, of course. We needn't pretend not to know that. But he is a man of sound heart and sound principles—a man whose private life will bear looking into. I'm talking to you as if I really were your father, May; and I do assure you that I would not urge you to marry a man twice as rich as he is, if I knew him to be—to be what some men are, and what you in your innocence have no idea of. I want you to believe that, May."

"I do believe it, Uncle Frederick," sobbed May, taking his hand, and kissing it.

“There, there, my dear, don’t cry! I couldn’t talk in this way to many girls of your age; but you have so much sense and right feeling! I wanted you to understand that I’m not an altogether hard, worldly kind of man, ready to offer you up to Mammon—eh? Look here, May; I would stand by you against—against every one, if I thought you were going to be sacrificed. But you must trust a little to the experience of those older than yourself, my dear. Come, come, there now, don’t distress yourself! You are not to be pressed and hurried, you know. You will think it all over quietly. Go to your own room and lie down a while. I will take care that you are not disturbed or worried in any way.”

He led her gently to the door. She was now sobbing uncontrollably. She longed to tell her uncle the truth about her engagement, but she thought that loyalty to Owen and to her grandmother forbade her to speak out fully without their leave. As she was quitting the room, she turned round, and, making a strong effort to speak firmly, said—

“Uncle Frederick, I shall never, as long as I live, forget the kind words you have said to

me. And, whatever happens, don't believe I am ungrateful."

"Well, Frederick?" said Mrs. Dormer-Smith, when her husband re-appeared in her room.

Frederick walked to the window, took out his pocket-handkerchief, and answered from behind it, rather huskily—

"Well, I don't know. I almost hope it may come right."

"Do you? Do you really? Well, that is a feeble ray of comfort. But it is rather too bad to have to undergo all this wear and tear of feeling, in order to secure that perverse child's fortune in spite of herself!"

There was a long pause, during which Mr. Dormer-Smith continued to look out of the window, and to blow his nose in a furtive kind of way. "I wonder——" he began slowly, and then stopped himself.

"You wonder—Frederick? Pray speak out! I assure you I am not able to stand much more suspense and anxiety."

"I was merely going to say, I wonder if there can be any one else."

"Any one else?"

"Any man she cares for."

“ Good Heavens, Frederick, who should there be? Really, you are not very considerate to startle me with such extraordinary suppositions without the least preparation. There is no one, of course.”

“ You are sure?”

“ I am sure there is no one *possible*. I know, of course, every man she has danced with, or who has paid her the smallest attention, and there is not one who could be thought of for a moment, even if Mr. Bragg did not exist. I should not hesitate to speak very strongly if I suspected her of any culpable folly of that kind. A girl without a farthing in the world! And her father, my poor unfortunate brother Augustus, in Heaven knows what dreadful position! That May, under all the circumstances, can behave in this way, is too intolerable. The more one thinks of it the more flagrant it seems. No sense of duty! No consideration for her family! I shall be compelled to say to her——”

Suddenly, in the midst of these fluent, softly uttered sentences, Mr. Dormer-Smith turned round, wiped his eyes, blew his nose defiantly, and said, with an explosion of feeling—

“ The girl’s a fine creature, and, by God, I won’t have her baited!”

## CHAPTER III.

EACH mortal's private feelings are the measure of the importance of events to him. And it often happens that while our neighbours are pitying or envying us, on account of some circumstance which, all the world agrees, must have a weighty bearing on our fate, we are mainly indifferent to it, and are occupied with some inner grief or joy, which would seem to them very trivial.

To have received and rejected an offer of marriage from a man worth fifty thousand a year would have been deemed by most of May Cheffington's acquaintance about as important an event as could have happened to her—short of death! But to her it was absolutely as nothing, compared with the facts that Owen was on the point of returning to England, and that he was to live in Mrs. Bransby's house.

Why did this second fact seem to embitter the sweetness of the first?

No, it was not the fact, she told herself, that was bitter; the bitterness lay in the manner of its coming to her knowledge. Why had not Owen written to her? There could be no reason to conceal it! Of course, none! Owen was doing all that was right, no doubt. But to allow her to hear of this step for the first time from Theodore Bransby at a dinner-table conversation—this it was which irked her. So, at least, she had declared to herself last night. Then the tone in which her uncle and all of them had spoken of Mrs. Bransby and Owen had jarred upon her painfully. Theodore had not joined in the tasteless banter; but then Theodore's way of receiving it—with a partly stiff, partly deprecatory air, as though there could possibly be anything serious in it—was almost worse!

The pathway of life which had stretched so clear and fair before her but a short while ago, seemed now to have contracted into a tangled maze, in which she lost herself. The events of the morning had made May resolve that all secrecy as to her engagement must come to an

end. She must see Owen immediately on his arrival in London. But how to do so? She did not know whether he was or was not in England at that very moment! Well, at all events she knew Mrs. Bransby's address, and could write to him there.

This thought gave her a pang. And the pang was intensified by the sudden and vivid perception—as one sees a whole landscape by a lightning-flash out of a black sky—that it was caused by jealousy!

Jealousy! She, May Cheffington, jealous—and of Owen? Yes; it might be painful, humiliating, incredible, but it was true. The flash had been inexorably sharp and clear.

To young creatures, every revelation that they—even *they*—are subject to the common woes, pains, and passions of humanity about which they may have talked glibly enough, is an amazement and a shock. Still earlier in our earthly course we doubt that Death himself can touch us. What child ever realizes that it must die? It is only after many lessons that we begin to accept our share of mortal frailties and afflictions as a matter of course.

Poor May felt sick at heart. Oh, if she could

but see Granny! She longed for the motherly affection which had never failed her since the day her father left her—a rather forlorn little waif, whom no one seemed ready to love or welcome—in the old house in Friar's Row. She thought that to sit quite still and silent by Granny's knee, while Granny's kind old hand softly stroked her hair, would charm away all her troubles, or at least lull them to sleep.

But for the present she could not rest. When she left her uncle, and felt secure from interruption in her own room, she sat down and wrote two letters. The first was to Owen, begging him to come and see her without delay, and at the same time telling him that circumstances had arisen which made it desirable to declare their engagement. The second letter was to Granny.

To Granny she poured out her gratitude. She thanked her and scolded her in a breath. Who had ever been so generous, and so careful to conceal their generosity? And yet Granny had done very wrong to make such a sacrifice as was involved in giving up the old home in Friar's Row.

“Had I known this a week ago,” wrote May,

“I do believe I should have tried to coax Mr. Bragg into breaking the lease, and *making* you go back to the old house which you loved. But I cannot ask any favour of Mr. Bragg now!” Then she told her grandmother all about her interview with Mr. Bragg, and her aunt’s bitter disappointment, and her uncle’s kind behaviour, although she could see that he was disappointed too. “I wonder,” she added, “if you will be as astonished as I was? Perhaps not. I remember some things you said when I told you my grand scheme for marrying Miss Patty! Oh, dear me, I feel like some one who has been walking in his sleep—calmly and unconsciously tripping over the most insecure places. But now I have been suddenly awakened, and I feel chilly, and frightened, and all astray.”

When she had written them, she resolved to post the letters herself. Since she had volunteered to take her little cousins out for a walk occasionally, the stringent rule which forbade her to leave the house unattended by a servant had been relaxed—it was so very convenient to get rid of the little boys for an hour or two at a time! It left Cécile free to do a great deal of needlework, a large proportion of it expended

on the alteration and re-trimming, and so forth, of May's own toilettes. Mrs. Dormer-Smith was strictly conscientious as to that; and since May never went beyond the limits of the neighbouring square, there could be no objection to the arrangement. One point, however, Aunt Pauline had insisted on—that these walks should always take place in the morning, or, at all events, during that portion of the day which did duty for the morning in her vocabulary. The proprieties greatly depend, as we know, on chronology; and many things which are permissible before luncheon become *taboo* immediately after it.

By the time May had finished her letters, however, it was well on in the afternoon. Carriages were rolling through the fashionable quarters of the town, and the footman's rat-tat-tat sounded monotonously like a gigantic *tam-tam*, sacred to the worship of society.

May went downstairs, and, opening the hall-door, found herself in the street alone, for the first time since she had lived under her aunt's roof. There was a pillar letter-box, she knew, not far distant. To this she proceeded, and dropped her letters into it. It had been a fine day for a

London winter ; but the last faint glimmer of daylight had almost disappeared as she turned to go back home.

There was an assemblage of vehicles waiting before a house which she had passed on her way to the post-box. Now, as she returned, there was a stir among them. Servants were calling up the coachmen, and opening and shutting carriage doors. A number of fashionably dressed persons, mostly women, came down the steps of the house and drove away. May paused a moment to let a couple of ladies sweep past her on their way to their carriage. As she did so, she heard her name called ; and, looking round, she saw Clara Bertram's face at the window of a cab drawn up near the kerbstone.

“Is it really you ?” exclaimed Clara, as they shook hands. “I could scarcely believe my eyes ! What are you doing here alone ?”

“I have been posting some letters.” Then, reading an expression of surprise in the other girl's eyes, she added quickly, “You wonder why I should have done so myself. For a simple reason : I did not wish the address of one of them to be seen. But Granny knows all about it.”

“I am quite sure, dear, you have some good reason for what you have done,” answered Clara, in her quiet, sincere tones.

“And you?” asked May. “What are *you* doing here?”

“I have been singing at a *matinée* in that house. I was just about to drive off, when I caught a glimpse of you. I was not sure that it was not your ghost in the dusk!”

“I suppose you are constantly engaged now?”

“Yes; I have a great deal to do.”

“Oh, I hear of you. Your praises are in every one’s mouth. Lady Moppett declares you are rapidly becoming the first concert singer of the day. She is as proud of you as if she had invented you! Indeed, she does say you are her ‘discovery’: as if you were a Polynesian island! I could find it in my heart to envy you, Clara. It must be so glorious to be independent, and earn one’s own living!”

Clara smiled a faint little smile. “I am thankful to be able to earn something,” she said. “But I don’t think I should care so much about it if it were only for myself.”

“No, of course, dear! I know,” rejoined

May quickly. She had been told that the young singer entirely supported an invalid father and sister. Then she added, "Your voice is a great gift. There are so few things a woman can do to earn money."

"Why, one would suppose that *you* wanted to earn money!" said Clara, smiling.

"Perhaps."

Clara looked more closely at her friend. The street lamps were now lighted, and she could see May's face distinctly. "You are not looking well, dear," she exclaimed. "You seem fagged."

"I am sick of London. I want to go home to Granny and be at peace," answered May wearily. Then she went on quickly, to stave off any possible questionings as to her state of mind. "But I must return for the present to my aunt's house. Good-bye."

"Stay!" cried Clara. "Will you not get into the cab, and let me drive you home?"

"Drive! It is an affair of some two or three minutes at most."

"Well, then, if you have half an hour to spare, let me drive you round the square, and then drop you at home. I have been wanting

for three or four days past to speak to you quietly. I can't bear to lose this rare opportunity. We do not meet very often." Then seeing that her friend hesitated, she asked, "Are you thinking about the cost of the cab for me?"

"Yes," answered May frankly.

"I thought so! That is just like you. But, indeed, you need have no scruples. The cab is engaged for the afternoon. When I sing at people's houses, unless they send a carriage for me, the cab-fare is 'considered in my wages.' Do come in!"

May complied, and the cab moved away slowly.

When they had proceeded a few yards, Clara said, "I wanted to tell you—I think it right to tell you—something I have learned on good authority. Your father—I hope it won't distress you—is really married."

May's first thought was that here again her Aunt Pauline had deceived her!

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Yes, I think I may say so."

"And how did you learn it?"

"From Valli."

“Oh, from Signor Valli! But you told me he was not to be trusted.”

“In some ways not. But I do not doubt what he says on this subject. He has no motive to invent the information. He cares nothing about the matter—except that I think he rather likes La—Mrs. Cheffington than not.”

“Is she a foreigner?” asked May, with a little more interest than she had hitherto shown. Her listless way of receiving the news had surprised her friend.

“Yes, an Italian. At least, she is Italian by language, if not by law; for she comes from Trieste. But she is almost Cosmopolitan; for she has travelled about the world a great deal. She is—or was—an opera-singer. Her name in the theatre is Bianca Moretti. She was rather celebrated at one time.” Clara paused a moment, and then added, “I hope this news does not grieve you, dear?”

“No,” answered May dreamily, “it does not grieve me. If my father is content, why should I grieve? He and I have been parted—in spirit as well as body—for so many years, that his marriage can make but little difference to me.”

“I was afraid you might feel—— Of course, Captain Cheffington’s family will look on it as a dreadful *mésalliance*.”

May was silent for a few minutes. Then she said a very unexpected thing—

“Poor woman ! I hope he is good to her !”

“I suppose,” said Clara, rather hesitatingly, “that the reason why Captain Cheffington has not announced his marriage to his relations is that he thinks they would object to receive an opera-singer.”

“Possibly,” answered May. (In her heart she thought, “The reason is that he cares nothing for any of us.”)

“It must be that,” proceeded Clara. “For as far as I can make out there seems to be no concealment about it in Brussels.”

Then they arrived at Mrs. Dormer-Smith’s house, and May alighted and bade her friend farewell.

“Thank you, Clara,” she said, “for telling me the truth. I loathe mysteries and concealments. When one thinks of it, they are despicable.”

“Unless when one conceals something to shield others,” suggested Clara gently.

She had told her friend what she believed to be the truth so far as the fact of her father's marriage was concerned. But she had not given her all the details and comments which Signor Valli had imparted to her on the subject. His view of the matter was not flattering to Captain Cheffington. Valli declared, with cynical plainness of speech, that Captain Cheffington had married La Bianca merely to have the right to confiscate her professional earnings. Latterly these had become very scanty. La Bianca did not grow younger, and her voice was rapidly failing her. A good deal of gambling had gone on in her house at one time. But it had been put a stop to—or, at least, shorn of its former proportions by the ugly incident of which Miss Polly Piper had brought back a version to Oldchester. Since that, things had not gone well with the Cheffington *ménage*. Captain Cheffington had become insupportable, irritable, impossible! He was, moreover, a *malade imaginaire*; a querulous, selfish, tyrannous fellow; always bewailing his hard fate, and the sacrifice he had made in so far derogating from his rank as to marry an opera-singer. La Bianca was a slave to his caprices. To be sure she was not pre-

cisely a lamb. There were occasions when she flamed up, and made quarrels and scenes.

“But,” said Signor Valli, “he is an enormous egoist, and, with a woman, the bigger egoist you are, the surer to subjugate her. La Bianca would have stabbed a man who loved her devotedly, for half the ill-treatment she endures from that cold, stiff ramrod of an Englishman.”

Such was Vincenzo Valli’s version of the case; and Clara Bertram, in listening to him, believed that, in the main, it was a true one. Valli had recently been in Brussels, where he had seen the Cheffingtons; and one or two other foreign musicians whom she knew had come upon them from time to time, and had given substantially the same account of them. As to persons in the rank of life to which Captain Cheffington still claimed to belong, they were no more likely to come across him now than if he were living on the top of the Andes.

May went into the house wearily. In the hall she met her uncle Frederick, who had just come in, and had seen the cab drive away.

“Who was that with you, May?” he asked, in some surprise.

“It was Miss Bertram,” she answered. Then

she asked her uncle to step for a moment into the dining-room. When he had done so, and closed the door, she said quietly, "My father is married to a foreign opera-singer; they are living in Brussels. Did you and Aunt Pauline know this?"

"Know it? Certainly not!"

May was relieved to hear this, and drew a long breath. The sensation of living in an atmosphere of deception had oppressed her almost with a feeling of physical suffocation. She then told her uncle all that Clara Bertram had said.

Mr. Dormer-Smith puckered his brows, and looked more disturbed than she had expected. "This will be another blow for your aunt," he said gloomily.

"I don't see why Aunt Pauline should distress herself," she answered coldly; "my father is not likely to trouble her. Married or unmarried, my father seems determined to keep aloof from us all." Then she went to her own room.

Mr. Dormer-Smith shrank from communicating this news to his wife, and as he went upstairs he anticipated a disagreeable scene. He did

not very greatly care about the matter himself, for he agreed with May that it was unlikely Augustus would trouble any of the family with his presence; and to keep away was all that he required of his brother-in-law. On entering his wife's room, he found her still in a morning wrapper, reclining on her long chair; but her hair had been dressed, and she announced her intention of coming down to dinner. Her countenance, too, wore an unexpected expression of placidity, almost cheerfulness. The country post had arrived, and there were several letters scattered on a little table by Mrs. Dormer-Smith's elbow.

Her husband went and placed himself with his back to the fire, which was burning with a pleasant glow in the grate. "Well," he said, in a sympathizing tone, to his wife, "how are you feeling now, Pauline?"

They had not met since his outburst about May, and he had been rather nervously uncertain of his reception. Pauline never sulked, never stormed, and rarely scolded. But when she felt herself to be injured, she would be overpoweringly plaintive. Her plaintiveness seemed to wrap you round, and damp you, and

chill you to the bone, like a Scotch mist, and when used retributively was felt—by her husband, at all events—to be very terrible. But on this occasion, as has been said, there was a certain mild serenity in her face which was reassuring.

“Thanks, Frederick,” she answered. “There seems to be a *little* less pressure on the brain. Smithson bathed my forehead for three-quarters of an hour after you were gone.”

Mr. Dormer-Smith hastened to change the subject. “Post in, I see,” he said. “Any news?”

“I have a very nice letter from Constance Hadlow,” answered Pauline, with her eyes absently fixed on the fire. “How thoughtful that girl is! What tact! What proper feeling! Ah! the contrast between her and May is painful at times.”

Mr. Dormer-Smith made a little inarticulate sound, which might mean anything. Despite her beauty, which he admired, Miss Hadlow was no great favourite of his. But he would not imperil the present calm in his domestic atmosphere by saying so.

“Misfortunes,” pursued Pauline, still gazing

at the fire, "never come singly, they say; and really I believe it."

"Does Miss Hadlow announce any misfortune?"

"Oh no!—at least, we are bound not to look on it as a misfortune. Who could wish him to linger, poor fellow? She is staying near Combe Park, and she says Lucius has been quite given up by the doctors. It is a question of days—perhaps of hours."

"No? By George! Poor old Lucius!" returned Mr. Dormer-Smith, with a touch of real feeling in his tone.

"Of course, this will make an immense difference in May's prospects. I don't mean to say that she will easily find another millionaire, with such extraordinarily liberal ideas about settlements as Mr. Bragg hinted to me this morning; *that* is, humanly speaking, not possible," said Mrs. Dormer-Smith solemnly. "Still, the affair may not be such an irretrievable disaster as we feared."

"How do you mean?" asked Frederick, whose mind, as we know, moved rather slowly.

"It *must* make a difference to her," repeated his wife in a musing tone. "The only child

and heiress of the future Viscount Castlecombe, of course——”

“By George! I didn't think of that at the moment. Yes, Gus is the next. I suppose that's quite certain?”

Mrs. Dormer-Smith did not even condescend to answer this query, but merely raised her eyebrows with a superior and melancholy smile.

Frederick pondered a minute or so; then he said, “You say ‘heiress,’ but I don't think your uncle would leave Gus a pound more than he couldn't help leaving him.”

“I fear that is likely. Still, there is much of the land that must come to Augustus, and Uncle George has enormously improved the estate. Do you know I begin to hope that I may see my poor unfortunate brother come back and take his proper place in the world? When I remember what he was five-and-twenty years ago, it does seem cruel that he should have been absolutely eclipsed during all this time. I recollect so well the day he first appeared in his uniform. He was brilliant. Poor Augustus!”

Mr. Dormer-Smith felt that the difficulty of telling his wife what he had just heard assumed a new shape. He had feared to add to the load

of what Pauline considered family misfortunes ; now it seemed as if his news would dash her rising spirits, and darken roseate hopes. He passed his large hand over his mouth and chin, and said, with his eyes fixed uneasily on his wife, who was still contemplating the fire with an air of abstraction—

“Ah! Yes. But—there may be a Lady Castlecombe to find a place in the world for.”

“Not improbable. I hope there may be. Augustus is little past the prime of life. It would compensate for much if——”

“I’m sorry to say, Pauline, that there’s no chance of that—I mean of such a marriage as you are thinking of. I came upstairs on purpose to tell you. In one way it won’t make any difference to *us*. And I’m sure your brother has never deserved much affection or consideration from you. But still, I know it will worry you.”

Mrs. Dormer-Smith sat upright, with her hands grasping the two arms of her chair, and said, with a sort of despairing calm, “Be good enough to go on, Frederick. I entreat you to be explicit. I dare say you mean well, but I do not think I *can* endure much more suspense.”

“ Well, you know the rumours we’ve heard from time to time about that disreputable Italian woman in Brussels—opera-singer, or something of the kind? Well—I’m afraid there’s no use deluding ourselves; I think it comes on good authority—your brother has married her.”

## CHAPTER IV.

ALTHOUGH the little house in Collingwood Terrace had not, perhaps, fully justified Martin's cheery prophecy that it would turn out an "awfully jolly little place when once they got used to it," yet there, as elsewhere, peace, goodwill, order, and cleanliness mitigated what was mean and unpleasant. Mrs. Bransby's love of personal adornment rested on a better basis than vanity, although she was, doubtless, no more free from vanity than many a plainer woman. She had an artistic pleasure in beauty and elegance, and an objection to sluttishness in all its Protean forms, which might almost be described as the moral sense applied to material things. Her delicate taste suffered, of course, from much that surrounded her in the squeezed little suburban house. But, far from sinking

into a helpless slattern, according to the picture of her painted by Mrs. Dormer-Smith's commonplace fancy, she exerted herself to the utmost to make a pleasant and cheerful home for her children. Her life was one of real toil, although many well-meaning ladies of the Dormer-Smith type would have looked with suspicion on the care Mrs. Bransby took of her hands, and would have been able to sympathize more thoroughly with her troubles if her collars and cuffs had occasionally shown a crease or a stain.

Mr. Rivers's room had been prepared with the most solicitous care. It was a labour of love with all the family. Martin and his sister Ethel did good work, and even the younger children insisted on "helping," to the irreparable damage of their pinafores, and temporary eclipse of their rosy faces by dust and blacklead. The young ones were elated by the prospect of seeing their playfellow Owen once again; Martin relied on his assistance to persuade Mrs. Bransby that he (Martin) should and could earn something; and even Mrs. Bransby could not help building on Owen's arrival to bring some amelioration into her life beyond the substantial assistance of his weekly payments.

He arrived in the evening, and was received by the children with enthusiasm, and by Mrs. Bransby with an effort to be calm and cheerful, and to suppress her tears, which touched him greatly, seeing her, as he did for the first time, in her widow's garb. He was touched, too, by her almost humble anxiety that he should be content with the accommodation provided for him, and earnestly assured her that he considered himself luxuriously lodged.

And, indeed, for himself he was more than satisfied; but he could not help contrasting this mean little house with Mrs. Bransby's beautiful home in Oldchester, and he found it singularly painful to see her in these altered circumstances. In this respect, as in so many others, his feeling differed as widely as possible from Theodore's. For Theodore, although fastidious and exacting as to all that regarded his own comfort, sincerely considered his step-mother's home to be in all respects quite good enough for her, and had privately taxed her with insensibility and ingratitude for showing so little satisfaction in it.

All the family, including Phœbe, who grinned a recognition from the top of the kitchen stairs,

agreed in declaring Owen to be looking remarkably well. He was somewhat browned by the Spanish sunshine, and he had an indefinable air of bright hopefulness. In Oldchester he used to look more dreamy.

“It is business which is grinding my faculties to a fine edge,” he answered laughingly, when Mrs. Bransby made some remark to the above effect. “I shall become quite dangerously sharp if I go on at this rate.”

“I don’t think you look at all sharp,” replied Mrs. Bransby gently.

Whereupon Martin told his mother that she was not polite; and Bobby and Billy giggled; and they all sat down to their evening meal very cheerfully.

When the table was cleared, and the younger children had gone away to bed under Ethel’s superintendence, Mrs. Bransby said, “You smoke, do you not, Mr. Rivers?”

“Not here, in your sitting-room.”

“Oh, pray do! It does not annoy me in the least.”

Owen hesitated, and Martin thereupon put in his word. “Mother does not mind it, really. Not decent, human kind of tobacco such as

gentlemen use. That beast, old Bucher, used to smoke a great pipe that smelt like double-distilled essence of public-house tap-rooms."

"Well, a cigarette, if I may," said Owen, pulling out his case. Then, drawing the only comfortable easy-chair in the room towards the fireside, he asked, "Is that where you like to have it?"

"That is your chair," said Mrs. Bransby timidly.

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Owen, genuinely shocked, "what have I done to make you suppose I could possibly be capable of taking your seat?"

He gently took her hand and led her to the chair. Then, looking round the little parlour, he spied a footstool, which he placed beneath her feet. As he looked up from doing so, he saw her sweet pale face, with the delicate curves of the mouth twitching nervously in an endeavour to smile, and the soft dark eyes full of tears. "You must not spoil me in this fashion," she began. But the attempt to speak was too much for her. She broke down, and covered her face with her trembling hands.

Martin instantly crossed the room, and stood

close beside her, placing one arm round her shoulders, and turning away from Owen, so as to fence his mother in. The boy's protecting attitude was pathetically eloquent. And so was the way in which his mother presently laid her head down upon his shoulder. They remained thus for a little while. Owen stood by the fire with his elbow on the mantelpiece, and his forehead resting on his hand. And all three were silent.

At length, when Martin felt that his mother was no longer trembling, and that her sobs were subsiding, he looked round and said, "Mother's upset by being treated properly. No wonder! It's like meeting with a white man after living among cannibals. If you had ever seen that beast Bucher, you'd understand it."

"Shall I go away?" asked Owen.

Mrs. Bransby quickly held out one hand entreatingly, while she dried her eyes with the other. "Please stay!" she said. "And please light your cigarette! And please draw your chair near the fire, and make yourself as comfortable—or as little uncomfortable—as you can! Forgive me. I do not often break down in this way; do I, Martin?"

“No,” answered Martin, moving the lamp so as to throw his mother’s tear-stained face into shadow, and then squeezing his own chair into the corner beside hers, “no; you were cheerful enough with Bucher. Well, of course one *had* either to take Bucher from the ludicrous side, or else shoot him through the head, and have done with him!”

“I see,” said Owen, nodding, and not sorry to hide his own emotion under cover of a joke. “And Mrs. Bransby was unable to make up her mind to justifiably homicide him?”

“Yes. He *was* a beast, though, and no mistake! Phœbe was in such a rage with him once, that she threatened to throw a hot batter. pudding at his head. I’m sorry now she didn’t,” added Martin, with pensive regret.

Then they talked quietly. Mrs. Bransby, with womanly tact, led Owen to speak about himself and his prospects. There was little to tell in the way of incident. He had been working steadily, and did not dislike his work. And he had been well contented with his treatment by Mr. Bragg. Mr. Bragg had made him an offer to send him, in the spring, to Buenos Ayres. It might be an opening to fortune.

“I suppose you will go? Of course, you will go!” said Mrs. Bransby.

She could not help her voice and her face betraying some disappointment. They did not, however, betray all she felt; for the prospect of Owen’s going away again so soon sent a desolate chill to her heart. Owen looked at her quickly, and then as quickly looked away and tossed the end of his cigarette into the fire, before lighting another.

“I don’t know,” he answered, bending down over the flame; “it will require some consideration. I believe the alternative is open to me of remaining in Mr. Bragg’s employment in England. Anyway, there is time enough before I need decide—several months, I hope.”

Mrs. Bransby breathed a low sigh of relief; then she said, in a perceptibly more cheerful tone, “It seems so odd to think of you writing business letters, and making up accounts, and being altogether turned into a—a——”

“A clerk.”

“No; not precisely that. You are Mr. Bragg’s secretary, are you not?”

“What I am aiming at—what I hope to be—is a clerk, you know. If I called myself a field

marshal or an archbishop it would not alter the fact; but it does seem odd to me, too, when I think of it. Better luck than I deserve, as my shrewd old friend Mrs. Dobbs said to me."

"Talking of Mrs. Dobbs, May Cheffington came to see me here."

Owen had heard regularly from May every week; he carried her last letter in his breast-pocket at that moment (not the note which she had posted herself—that had not yet reached Collingwood Terrace), so that he was not starving for news of her. Nevertheless, he felt a wild temptation to cry out, "Tell me about her! Talk of nothing else!" But he answered composedly, "That was quite right; she ought, of course, to have come to see you."

"She only came once," observed Martin.

"That was not her fault," said his mother. "She could not, as I told you all, make frequent journeys here—she could not command her time or her aunt's servants; she goes out a great deal."

"Her aunt lives for the world, you see," said Owen apologetically.

"Oh, there is no reason why May should not enjoy her youth and all her advantages,"

answered Mrs. Bransby softly ; “ she is a very sweet, lovable creature—much too good for—— ” Mrs. Bransby here checked herself, and stopped abruptly.

“ Oh, mother ! that’s all bosh ! ” cried Martin, flushing hotly. “ I mean that notion of yours. Now, I ask you, Mr. Rivers, is it likely that May Cheffington would *think* of marrying Theodore ? Ah ! you may well look flabbergasted ! Anybody would who knew them both. You see, mother, Mr. Rivers takes it just as I did. You don’t think it likely, do you, Mr. Rivers ? ”

Owen had recovered from the first startling effect of hearing those two names coupled together ; but he was inwardly raging and lavishing a variety of the most unparliamentary epithets on Theodore.

“ If you ask my candid opinion, I *don’t* think it likely,” he answered curtly.

“ Of course not ! ” exclaimed the boy. “ It’s only Theodore’s bounce ; I told mother so.”

“ Why, you don’t mean that Bransby has the confounded impudence to say—— ”

“ No, no,” interposed Mrs. Bransby. “ Don’t let us exaggerate. Theodore has never made

any explicit statement on the subject. But he meets May very frequently in society. He is constantly invited by Mrs. Dormer-Smith. They are thrown a great deal together. May has evidently become much more kind and gracious to him of late—for I remember when she used positively to run away from him!—and as for him, he is as much attached to her as he can be to any human being. I do believe that.”

“Attached your granny!” cried Martin, apparently unable to find a polite phrase strong enough to convey his deep disdain. “Theodore is much attached to number one, and that’s about the beginning and the end of *his* attachments!”

“Hush, Martin,” said his mother severely. “You are talking of what you don’t understand. And you know how much I dislike to hear you use that tone about—your brother.”

She brought out the word “brother” with an obvious effort. In truth, she had a repugnance to speaking, or even thinking, of Theodore as her children’s brother. But it was a repugnance for which she blamed herself.

“I think,” she added, “that you had better go to bed, Martin.”

The boy rose with an instant obedience, which had not always characterized him in the happy Oldchester days, and bent over his mother to kiss her.

“I’m very sorry. I did not mean to vex you, mother,” he whispered. “You’re not angry with me, are you?”

“I *can’t* be angry with you, my darling boy. But I must do my duty. You know *he* would say, I was right to correct you.”

Martin lifted up his face cheerfully, with the happy elasticity of boyish spirits. “All right, mother. Good night. Good night, Mr. Rivers.”

“Good night, old fellow,” responded Owen, grasping the boy’s hand heartily. He felt very strongly in sympathy with Martin, just then.

Martin lingered. “May I ask just one thing, mother?” he said wistfully.

“You know we agreed not to tease Mr. Rivers with our affairs immediately on his arrival, Martin,” replied his mother. Then, unable to resist his pleading face, she said, “If it really is only one question, perhaps Mr. Rivers would not mind——?”

“What is it you want to know, Martin? Speak out,” said Owen.

“It’s about the question I asked in my letter,” replied Martin, blushing and eager. “Don’t you think I ought to try and help mother? And don’t you think I might have a chance of earning something?”

“That’s two questions,” said Owen, with a smile. “But I’ll answer them both. To number one, yes, undoubtedly. To number two, perhaps; but we must have patience.”

“There, mother!” cried Martin, triumphantly turning his glowing face and sparkling eyes towards her. Then he shut the door, and rushed upstairs: his round young cheeks dimpled with smiles, and his heart so full of joyous hopes, that he was impelled to find some vent for his overflowing spirits by hurling his bolster at Bobby and Billy, who were sitting up in bed, broad awake. Thereupon there ensued smothered sounds of scuffling and laughter, mingled with the occasional thud of a bolster against the wall; until Phœbe, sharply rapping at the door, announced that unless Mr. Martin was in bed in two minutes, she would take away the light, and leave him to undress in the dark.

When the widow was alone with Owen she began to pour forth the praises of her eldest

boy. She hoped Mr. Rivers did not think her selfish in letting the boy share so much of her cares and anxieties. But although only a child in years he was so helpful, so loving, so sensible—had such a manly desire to shield her and spare her! And then, after asking Owen's advice about the boy, she added, naïvely—

“Only, please, don't advise me to make a drudge of him. He is so clever, he ought to be educated. His dear father looked forward to his doing so well at school and college.”

“If I am to advise, really,” said Owen, “I ought first to understand the state of the case with as much accuracy as possible.”

Mrs. Bransby at once told him the details of her circumstances as succinctly as she could. There was a small sum secured to her, but so small as barely to suffice for finding them all in food. Theodore had made himself responsible for the rent during one twelvemonth. He had also (or so she had understood him) promised to send Martin to his old school for a couple of years. But it now appeared that his offer was limited to paying for Martin's being taught at a neighbouring day school of a very inferior kind. And even this seemed precarious.

“I thought at one time,” said Mrs. Bransby, “that I might, perhaps, earn a little money by teaching. But I must do what I can to educate Ethel and Enid and the younger boys until they get beyond me. I fear I could not find time to go out and give lessons, even if I succeeded in getting an engagement. So I am trying to get some sewing to do. I can use my needle, you know, while I hear Ethel say her French lesson, and make Bobby and Billy spell words of two syllables.”

Poor Mrs. Bransby spoke with much diffidence of her plans and projects. She had a very humble opinion of her own powers, and was touchingly willing to be ruled and directed. Owen suggested that it might have been better for her to have remained in Oldchester, where she was among friends. But she answered that she had had scarcely any choice in the matter. It was Theodore who had decided that she was to remove to London. It was Theodore who had chosen that house for her. In the first days of her loss she had blindly accepted all Theodore's directions.

“Perhaps I was to blame,” she said. “But I was so overwhelmed, and I felt so helpless; and

it seemed right to listen to Theodore. But—although I never say a harsh word about him to strangers, nor to the children if I can help it—I cannot pretend to you, who know us all so well, that he is kind to us. Martin resents his behaviour very much. I do my best, but it is impossible to make my boy feel cordially towards his half-brother.”

“Of course it is!” said Owen. Then he closed his lips. He would not trust himself to talk of Theodore at that moment.

It was a comfort to Mrs. Bransby to speak openly to a sympathizing listener, and one whom she could thoroughly trust. She talked on for a long time; and at length, looking at her watch, accused herself of selfishness in keeping Owen so long from the rest which he must need after his journey. As she returned the watch to her pocket, she said deprecatingly—

“Perhaps you think I ought not to possess so handsome a watch under the present circumstances? Theodore was quite displeased when he saw it, and said it ought to be sold. But, you see, I need some kind of watch; and this is an excellent time-keeper; and—and my dear

husband gave it to me on the last birthday we spent together."

She turned away to hide the tears that brimmed up into her eyes; and, going to a little side table, lit her chamber candle.

Owen rose from his chair. "Look here, Mrs. Bransby," he said. "Of course we must have more talk together, and more time to consider matters; but it seems to me that Martin is right in wishing to earn something. Young as he is, it might be possible to find some employment for him which should bring in a weekly sum worth having. And as to his education—it has occurred to me that I could, at least, keep him from forgetting what he has learnt already; and, perhaps, coach him on a little further. An hour or two every evening, steadily occupied, would do a good deal. It would be a great pleasure to me to be able to do this small service for you. That is to say," he went on quickly, in order to check the outburst of thanks which trembled on her lips, "if you are good enough to allow me the advantage of continuing to occupy a room here. I hope you will be able to put up with me. I don't *think* that Phœbe will want to throw a hot batter-pudding at my head.

But that may be my vanity! Good night. Don't say any more now, please. We will think it over on both sides. I will smoke one more cigarette, if I may, before I turn in."

He opened the door, and held it open for her. As she passed him, she paused an instant, and said in a low, trembling voice, "God bless you!"

## CHAPTER V.

THE next morning's post brought Owen May's note. She had written it hurriedly—not so much from stress of time as under the influence of that kind of hurry which comes from thronging thoughts and eager emotions. The sight of her handwriting was a joyful surprise to Owen; and he wondered, as he tore open the cover, how she could have learned his arrival so quickly. But he found that she had written simply in the hope that he might get her letter as soon as possible, and without any knowledge of the fact that he was already in London.

The contents of it did not much disquiet him. She had something to say to him: he must come and speak with her as soon as possible after his arrival. She was safe and well, he knew; and, with that knowledge, he thought that he could defy fortune. As to urging him to go to her

quickly—that was, he told himself with a smile, a superfluous injunction. What need of persuasion to do that which he ardently longed to do?

He rapidly planned out the hours of his day. At ten o'clock he must be with Mr. Bragg in the City. He had received a telegram in Paris making that appointment. He would probably find duties to detain him there until the afternoon. Between two and three o'clock, however, he thought he could reach Mrs. Dormer-Smith's house at Kensington. From what he knew of the habits of the household, he judged that May would be at home at that hour.

He had much to think of regarding the future. A momentous decision lay with him. Had Mr. Bragg's offer of sending him to Buenos Ayres come a couple of months earlier, he might have accepted it. It was not, of course, a certain road to success; and it had many drawbacks—chief among them being banishment from England. But, as he had told Mrs. Dobbs, he was ready to face that if it were required of him, understanding that he who starts late in a race must needs run hard. But latterly he had come to think that it might not be best for May

that he should go ; and to do what was best for her was the supreme aim of his life. He discovered from her letters that she was not happy and contented in her aunt's house. The necessity of concealing her engagement was already painful and oppressive. How could she endure it for two years ? Truly, she might announce it, and go back to Oldchester to her grandmother's house (for Owen had more than a suspicion that the Dormer-Smiths would be very unwilling to keep her with them as the betrothed bride of Mr. Bragg's clerk !)

But there were other objections. Theodore Bransby, Owen was inwardly convinced, was his rival. He might try to injure him in his absence. The absent are always in the wrong. Or Theodore might annoy May with persecutions. If he and May were to wait for each other, had they not better wait, at all events, in the same hemisphere ? Owen knew very well that *some* money—a decent competency—was indispensable to his marriage. But that he might now reasonably hope to obtain in England. The balance of his judgment, the more he reflected on the situation, inclined the more decisively towards remaining.

Other considerations than what was due to May could not have inclined the scale one hair's breadth in these deliberations. But when he thought over his last evening's interview with Mrs. Bransby, it pleased him to believe that his stay, if he stayed, would be very welcome to her and hers.

He felt a profound and tender compassion for the widow. He admired her patience, and the simple way in which she tried to do hard duties; accepting them as matters of course. And he was filled with indignation against Theodore Bransby. To these sentiments may be added the sense that Mrs. Bransby relied on him; and the recollection of that day in the Oldchester garden, when he had solemnly promised to be a friend to her and her children at their need. All these were powerful incentives to help her and stand by her.

There was in Owen a somewhat unusual combination of heat and steadfastness. He seldom belied his first impulse—the mark of a rarely sincere character, swayed only by honest motives. The offer he had made last night to teach Martin he was not inclined to repent of in the “dry light” of next morning. It was

plain, too, that his contribution to the weekly income was a matter of serious importance to the family ;—far more so than he had any idea of when he first proposed to board with them, although the offer had been made in the hope of assisting them. He turned over in his mind various projects on their behalf as he walked down to the City. It occurred to him that he might do well to speak to Mr. Bragg on the subject. It was even possible that Mr. Bragg might find some place for young Martin. Owen had a high opinion of his employer's rectitude and good sense ; and he thought him, moreover, a kindly disposed man. But he had no glimpse of the tenderness which was hidden under Mr. Bragg's plain, unattractive exterior, nor of the yearning for some affection in his daily life, which sometimes made the millionaire look back regretfully on the days when he and his comely young wife toiled together ; and when he, Joshua Bragg, in his fustian working suit, had been the dearest being on earth to a loving woman.

Mr. Bragg appeared that day at his place of business looking as usual. He was clean shaven, and soberly and appropriately attired. He was

attentive to the matter in hand, mindful of details, accurate, deliberate—all as usual. And yet, so subtle is the quality of the spiritual atmosphere which we all carry about with us, there was not a junior clerk in the place who did not feel that there was a cloud on Mr. Bragg's mind, and did not wonder "what was up with the governor."

One wag opined that "Old Grimalkin had caught him at last." By which irreverent phrase the profane fellow meant that the Most Noble the Dowager Marchioness of Hautenville had succeeded in arranging an alliance between Mr. Bragg and her daughter, the Lady Felicia. For it was an open secret in the office, and the theme of infinite jest there, that Lady Hautenville pursued this aim with an indomitable, and even ferocious, perseverance worthy of the Berseker race from which she professed to trace her descent. Her ladyship's hired barouche might often be seen during the season, floating like a high-beaked ship of the Vikings on the busy tide of commercial life, and coasting down towards that plebeian shore of Tom Tiddler, where Mr. Joshua Bragg picked up so much gold and silver. She would willingly have

made as clean a sweep of all his treasure as any piratical Scandinavian who ever carried off the peaceful wealth of Kentish 'villages. Neither craft nor valour were wanting to her. She made ingenious excuses to see him :—sometimes she wanted to consult him as to the investment of non-existent sums of money ; sometimes to engage his presence at some fashionable gathering, where he was, of course, peculiarly fitted to shine. She sent in to his office little perfumed notes, directed by the fair hand of Felicia in Brobdingnagian characters. Felicia herself, bright-eyed and crowned with gorgeous bonnets—spoil gallantly wrested from some lily-livered West End milliner, who had not the courage to refuse her credit,—sat by her mother's side, and smiled with haughty fascination on Mr. Bragg, whenever he could be coaxed forth to speak with their ladyships at the carriage door. And every creature in Mr. Bragg's wholesale office, down to the sharp Cockney urchin who sprinkled and swept the floors, perfectly understood why Lady Hautenville did all these things, and watched her proceedings as a spectacle of very high sporting interest.

Thus it was that when the wag before-mentioned opined that "Grimalkin had caught the governor," by way of accounting for Mr. Bragg's low spirits, it was received with the benevolence due to a deserving old jest which has seen service. But when a younger man ventured to suggest—more than half seriously—that, "perhaps the governor was in love," the suggestion was received with genuine hilarity, and the originator of it immediately took credit for having fully intended a capital joke.

Owen Rivers, arriving punctually, was shown into Mr. Bragg's private room. There he was greeted with the invariable grave, "How do you do, Mr. Rivers?" And then, after a moment, Mr. Bragg added, "So you've got over punctual. I thought you *might* manage without an extra day in Paris. But you must have put your shoulder to the wheel to do it." A speech expressive, in Mr. Bragg's mouth, of very marked approbation.

Then Owen proceeded to report what he had done in Paris, and to lay letters and papers before Mr. Bragg; and for some time they attended to various matters of business. When these were over, Owen said—

“When could I speak to you about some affairs of my own?”

“Well, now, p'raps; if you don't want to be long.”

“Half an hour?”

Mr. Bragg looked at his watch, nodded, and, leaning his head on his hand, prepared to listen with quiet attention.

Owen began by saying that he was inclined towards remaining in England rather than accepting the opportunity of going abroad; whereat Mr. Bragg looked thoughtful, but waited to hear him out without interruption. Then Owen went on to speak of Mrs. Bransby and her altered circumstances, and of his wish and intention to assist and stand by her.

When he ceased Mr. Bragg, having heard him with careful attention, said—

“The first point to be considered is your own position. Concerning the situation we spoke of, I think I can promise to keep you on as my—what you might call *business* secretary. As to a private secretary, I don't have much private correspondence, and what I have, I can pretty well manage myself. I should expect you to take a journey now and then into foreign parts

if necessary. Terms as before. But I tell you frankly, I see no immediate prospect of a rise for you. If you went to Buenos Ayres you might have a chance—only a chance, of course—of getting into something on your own account. One 'ud be steady as far as it went; the other 'ud be like what you might call a throw of the dice at backgammon—chance *and* play. It's for you to choose. With regard to Mrs. Bransby, I—of course—— Look here, Mr. Rivers, I'm a deal older than you—old enough to be your father—and I should like to give you a little word of advice, if I could do it without offence.”

“I shall take it gratefully, Mr. Bragg, whether I act upon it or not.”

“Oh! as to acting upon it,” said Mr. Bragg slowly; “it's a great thing to be sure that your advice won't be picked up and pitched back at your head like a stone. Well, you must understand that I don't mean any disrespect to Mrs. Bransby, who is an excellent lady, I've no doubt. I haven't much acquaintance with her, though I have dined at her table. Her husband, Martin Bransby, I knew for years. I was his client, and had reason to be well satisfied with him in all respects. So, you

understand, my feeling is quite friendly. But I would just drop a word of warning. You're a young man, and Mrs. Bransby, though she's older than you are, is still a young woman. And what's more, she's a very handsome woman. And—— Ah, I see you're making ready to shy back that stone, by-and-by. But just listen one moment. For you, at your age, to get entangled in that sort of engagement, and to undertake the charge of a ready-made family of hungry boys and girls, would be simply ruin. You'd repent it; and then she'd repent it because you did, and you'd all be miserable together; that's all."

Owen's mouth was set, and his eyes sparkling with a rather dangerous look. But he answered quietly, "Thank you, Mr. Bragg. I am sure you mean well, or why should you trouble yourself to speak at all on the matter?"

"Just so; I'm glad you see that."

"But may I ask what put the idea of any—any 'entanglement,' as you call it, between me and Mrs. Bransby into your head?"

"Understand me, Mr. Rivers; I meant all in honour, you know."

Owen winced. The very assurance was

almost offensive, but he returned, "I spoke very stupidly and awkwardly; I'll amend my phrase. I should have said, what put it into your head that I was likely to marry Mrs. Bransby?"

"Put it into my head? Well, when a young man feels a soft sort of compassion for a beautiful woman who—who throws herself a good deal on his sympathy, and looks to him for help and advice and all the rest of it, and when the young man and the beautiful woman have opportunities of seeing each other pretty constantly, why then I believe such a thing has been heard of in history as their falling in love with each other. It don't need much 'putting into your head' to see that when you've come to my years."

"Are you quite sure," persisted Owen, "that no suggestion of this kind was made to you by any third person? I have a particular reason for wishing to know."

Mr. Bragg pondered. He had, in fact, heard Theodore's hints and innuendos at the Dormer-Smiths, and although he was not consciously moved by them in what he had now said, there could be no doubt that the idea had been originally suggested to him by young Bransby

and Pauline; Owen's words to-day had merely revived those impressions. After a long pause, he answered—

“Well, I think I *have* heard it spoken of; but, if so, all the more reason for you to be cautious.”

“I thought so!” said Owen. “Spoken of by——”

“Why, by Mrs. B.'s stepson for one; so you may suppose there was nothing said against the lady. *He'd* think it an uncommon good thing, I dare say; it would relieve him of a burthen. He might wash his hands of the family if she was to marry again.”

“Relieve him of a burthen!” cried Owen, starting up from his chair. “Have you any idea what he does for his father's widow and children, Mr. Bragg? Theodore Bransby is a liar. I know him. There's nothing too base for him to insinuate against his stepmother, who is, I declare to God, one of the best and most innocent women breathing! Theodore has a grudge against her and her children—a jealous, petty, despicable kind of grudge; and he's a mean-minded scoundrel!” He checked himself in walking furiously about the room, and turned

to Mr. Bragg with an apology. "I beg your pardon, but I *cannot* talk coolly of that fellow."

"I'm inclined to agree with you, and yet I wish I could think better of him; or rather, I wish he was somebody else altogether," said Mr. Bragg enigmatically, thinking of May.

"Mr. Bragg," said Owen, with a sudden inspiration, "will you come to Collingwood Terrace and see Mrs. Bransby? You will learn more about them all with your own eyes and ears in ten minutes than I could convey to you in an hour. You shall take them unprepared. If you would look in this evening about their tea-time you would find them all at home; it would be a kind and natural act on your part, and would need no explanation. Do come."

"Well, yes; I will," answered Mr. Bragg. "Perhaps I ought to have done so before. Any way, I'll come; just put down the address."

"Thank you. Shall I write those Spanish letters now?"

"Ah! you'd better. Mr. Barker, there, will give you a seat for the present in his room."

And so they parted.

Mr. Bragg was by no means re-assured as to

his secretary being in considerable danger from the widow's fascinations. He remarked to himself that Rivers had not said one word explicitly denying any attachment between them, but he felt a new bond of sympathy with Rivers. It was agreeable to meet with such thorough fellow-feeling about Theodore Bransby. Perhaps a mutual dislike is a stronger tie than a mutual friendship, because our hatreds need more justifying than our affections.

By the time Owen's business was transacted, and he had eaten some food at a neighbouring chop-house, it was past two o'clock, and then he set out for Mrs. Dormer-Smith's house on foot. It was a long way off, but it seemed to him more tolerable to walk than to jog along on the top of an omnibus, or to burrow underground in the crowded railway. In his impatient and excited frame of mind the rapid exercise was a relief.

It was barely three o'clock when he reached the house in Kensington. The servant who opened the door murmured something in a low voice, about the ladies not receiving visitors in consequence of a family affliction. Being further interrogated, he believed that Mrs. Dormer-

Smith's cousin, Lord Castlecombe's son, was dead.

"Tell Miss Cheffington that I am here," said Owen. "Give her this card, and say I am waiting to see her."

His manner was so peremptory that, after a brief hesitation, the man took the card, and ushered Owen into the dining-room to wait. The room was dimmer than the dim wintry day without need have made it, by reason of the red blinds being partly drawn down, and filling it with a lurid gloom.

The servant had not been gone many seconds before the door opened, and a rather pale face, not raised very high above the level of the floor, peeped into the room. The eyes belonging to the face soon made out Owen's figure in the dimness, and a childish voice said, in a subdued and stealthy tone, "Hulloa!"

"Hulloa!" returned Owen, in a tone not quite so subdued, but still low; for there was a general hush in the house which would have made ordinary speech seem startling.

"Do you want May?" asked the child.

"Yes; I do."

"I heard you tell James to give her your card. Who are you?"

“I’m Owen. Who are you?” replied Owen, listening all the while for the expected footfall.

“I’m Harold.”

Upon this, a second rather pale face, still nearer to the ground, peeped in at the door; and a second childish voice piped out faintly, “And I’m Wilfred.” Then the two children marched solemnly into the room, shutting the door behind them, and stared at Owen with judicial gravity.

“May’s my cousin,” said Harold, after contemplating the stranger for a while in silence.

“And May’s my cousin, too,” observed Wilfred.

“I’m fond of her,” pursued Harold.

“So am I,” exclaimed Owen, walking across the room impatiently. “But why doesn’t she come? Where is she? Do you know?”

“Yes,” replied Harold, with deliberation; “I know.”

“What can that man be about? He can’t have given her the message!” said Owen, speaking half to himself, his nervous impatience rising with every minute of delay.

Harold looked profoundly astute, as he answered, with a series of emphatic nods, “No;

he didn't. He took the card to Smithson; and I know what Smithson will do; she'll read it first herself, and then she'll take it to mamma, and then perhaps mamma will tell May—if you're a—what is it?—a proper person. *Are you a proper person?*”

“I say,” said Owen suddenly, “will you go and fetch May? Tell her Owen is here waiting. Do go, there's a good boy!”

“Is May fond of you?” inquired Harold hesitating.

“May will be pleased with you if you go and fetch her. Run! Be off at once now—quick!”

After one searching look at Owen's face, the child disappeared swiftly and silently. In less than two minutes a light footstep was heard descending the stairs at headlong speed. The door opened, and May, almost breathless with haste and surprise, half stumbled into the dark room, and he caught her in his arms.

“Is it really you?” she exclaimed, looking up at him with one hand on his shoulder, and the other pushing back the hair from her forehead.

Owen took the hand which rested on his shoulder, and pressed it to his lips. “It is very

really I," he said, with his eyes fixed on her face in a tender rapture.

"It seems like a dream! So unexpected!"

"Unexpected! Why, you summoned me, and of course I am here!"

"Yes, it really does seem as if my note had been a spell to bring you across the seas."

"Over seas, over mountains,  
Love will find out the way!"

It doesn't alter that truth, that I happened to arrive in England only last night."

"Only last night! How strange it seems! And you never let me know——"

"Darling, by the time it was quite certain what day I should be in England, a letter would not have outstripped me. I got my orders by telegram. Oh, my love, what a long, long time it seems since I looked on your dear face!"

"Tell me all about yourself, Owen. I want to hear everything."

"So you shall. But you must explain first the meaning of your note. Tell me now—sit down here—what has happened?"

"I have so many things to say, I scarcely know where to begin!"

“Begin with what was in your mind when you wrote that note.”

May sat down close to him, and began in a low voice, little above a whisper, and with some confusion, to narrate the story of Mr. Bragg’s wooing, and its effect on her aunt and uncle. As he listened, Owen’s face expressed the most unbounded amazement.

“Oh, it can’t be!” he exclaimed. “It’s impossible! There must be some mistake!”

May laughed, though the tears were in her eyes. “You are not very civil,” she said. “Nobody else seemed to think it impossible.”

“But *old Bragg!*” repeated Owen incredulously.

“Perhaps he was temporarily insane, but I really think he meant it,” answered May, blushing so bewitchingly, that Owen could not resist the temptation to kiss the glowing cheek so close to his lips.

At this point, Harold called out in a resolute tone, “You mustn’t kiss May.”

The lovers started. They had forgotten the children—had forgotten everything in the world except each other. But the two little boys had followed May into the room, and had been wit-

nessing the interview in dumb astonishment. It was characteristic that they now held each other by the hand, as though seeking support from union, in the presence of this stranger, who might, they instinctively felt, turn out to be a common enemy.

“Halloa!” said Owen. “Here’s another rival. Their name seems to be Legion.”

“It was Harold who told me you were here,” said May.

“Yes; I sent him to fetch you,” answered Owen. Then he added ungratefully, “They might as well be sent off now, mightn’t they?”

“Oh, let them stay. There are no secrets now. At least, I hope you will agree with me that we ought to say out the truth. Come here, Harold and Wilfrid. You must love Owen, for my sake.”

Harold advanced and stood in front of them.

“I say,” he said, with a curious look at Owen, “I’m going to marry May when I grow up.”

“*Are you?* That’s a little awkward.”

“Why is it a little awkward?” demanded Harold gravely.

“Well, because, to tell the truth, I was rather hoping to marry her myself.”

The child had evidently intended to draw forth this explicit statement, for he looked full at Owen, and said doggedly, "I just thought you were!" Then he suddenly turned away and hid his face on May's lap. Upon which Wilfred, conscious of a cloud in the air, began to cry softly.

"Don't be angry with them, poor little fellows!" said May, checking some manifestation of impatience on Owen's part. Then she coaxed the children, and soothed them, and the childish emotion, brief though poignant, soon passed. And at length Harold lifted up his face, and, after a short struggle, said—

"I will shake hands with him, if you like, but I won't love him—not if he kisses you."

"All right, old fellow," said Owen, taking the child's hand. "I sympathize with your feelings."

Wilfred, of course, put out his small paw to be shaken like his brother's, and peace once more reigned.

May then hurriedly—for she knew not how long they might remain uninterrupted—repeated what Clara Bertram had told her of her father's marriage; and, lastly, she spoke in terms of deep affection and gratitude of "Granny's"

generosity. But on this point, as we know, Owen was already informed.

All that he now heard strengthened and justified the strong inclination he already felt to abandon the idea of Buenos Ayres and to remain in England at all costs. With her father more completely cut off from his family than ever by this new marriage, her aunt hostile, her uncle, to say the least, dissatisfied, and sure to oppose her engagement when it should be announced, and no one friend in the world to rely upon except her grandmother, May's position would be very desolate if he, too, were far away on the other side of the world. Mrs. Dobbs was the trustiest and most devoted of parents, but she was old; and, moreover, she would have no power to insist on keeping May with her should her father take it into his head to decide otherwise. No; he must and would remain at hand to protect and watch over her. These were the sole considerations which decided him to come to this resolution then and there. But as soon as he had taken his resolution the thought arose pleasantly in his mind that it would bring some cheerfulness into the household at Collingwood Terrace, and he

expressed it impulsively by saying all at once—

“I have made up my mind, darling, to stay in London. Poor Mrs. Bransby will be overjoyed. She is in such need of some one to stand by her.”

May felt a little chill, like the breath of a cold wind. In the first warm delight of seeing her lover again, all the lurking jealousy, which she hated herself for feeling, but which was alive in spite of her hate, had been forgotten. But his words revived it. “Is she?” she answered.

“Oh yes; I have not had time to tell you—haven’t even *begun* to say the thousand things I want to say to you.”

“You could not have written them, I suppose?” said May, withdrawing her chair slightly from its close proximity to his, and thereby allowing Harold, who had been watching for this opportunity, to wedge himself in between them.

“No; I could not have written all about *her*, because I have only just heard many of the details.”

“All about ‘*her*’? You mean about Mrs. Bransby?”

“Of course. Poor soul, she has been so harshly, so cruelly treated! Theodore’s conduct is——”

“You know I have no partiality for him,” interrupted May. “But I think you are a little unjust, or at least mistaken, in this instance. Theodore Bransby has done a great deal for his stepmother.”

“Done a great deal for her! Good Heavens, my dear child, you can’t conceive with what meanness he treats her! It’s dastardly. A woman who was so idolized, so tended, so petted—— And what a sweet creature she is! And as lovely as ever! Her sorrows seem only to have spiritualized her beauty.”

“Yes,” said May. And the dry monosyllable cost her a painful effort to utter it. Perhaps the constraint of her tone, the deadness of her manner—naturally so warm and cordial—would have aroused Owen’s surprise, and led to an explanation. But they were interrupted here by the door being thrown open, not violently, but very wide open, and the appearance of Mrs. Dormer-Smith on the threshold.

## CHAPTER VI.

EVEN in the moment of her first dismay, that admirable woman Pauline Dormer-Smith was true to the great social duty of keeping up appearances. She turned her head over her shoulder to James, who was hovering uneasily in the background, and said softly, "Oh yes; it *is* Mr. Owen Rivers. That is quite right"—as if Mr. Owen Rivers's presence were the most natural and welcome thing in the world. Then, shutting the door on James and on society, she advanced towards the two young people, who had risen on her entrance, and said, with a kind of reproachful feebleness, conveying the impression that she was reduced to the last stage of debility, and that it was entirely their fault, "I had scarcely credited the footman's statement that you were here having a private interview with my niece, Mr. Rivers. He tells me that

he informed you of the family affliction which has befallen us. Under the circumstances, you must allow me to say that I think you have shown some want of delicacy in insisting on being admitted."

May glanced at Owen, but as he did not speak on the instant, she did. She took her aunt's passive fingers in her own, and said, "Aunt Pauline, he had a right to insist on seeing me, because——"

"Excuse me, May," interrupted Mrs. Dormer-Smith, waving the girl off, "I beg you will go to your own room; *I* will speak with this gentleman."

Her tone would have suited the announcement that she was prepared to undergo martyrdom; and she sank into a chair in an attitude of graceful exhaustion.

"No, Aunt Pauline, I *cannot* go away until I have spoken," cried May pleadingly. "Please to hear me. I wished to tell you the truth long ago, but I was bound by a promise; now we are both agreed that it is right to speak out, are we not?" she said, looking across at Owen. It seemed to her that he was less eager to claim her, less proud of her affection, less ardently

loving, than her imagination had pictured him. There was something in the quietude of his attitude which depressed and mortified her; it was like—almost like indifference. An insidious jealousy was discolouring everything which she looked on with her “mind’s eye.” It is not always a sufficient defence against a poison of that sort to have a noble, candid nature, any more than it is a sufficient defence against foul air to have sound, healthy lungs; it will fasten sometimes on the worthiest qualities: a humble opinion of ourselves, a high admiration for others. The hinted slanders which May had heard had aroused no baser suspicion in her than that Owen perhaps did not love her so entirely as he at first had fancied—that his sympathy and compassion and admiration for Louisa Bransby were strong enough to compete with his attachment for *her*. And she knew by her own heart that if this were so his love was not such a love as she had dreamed of—not such a love as she had given to him. And yet all the while she was struggling against the influence of this subtly-penetrating distrust, and trying to shake it off, like an ugly dream.

“I am engaged to marry Owen Rivers,” she

said abruptly, after a pause which lasted but an instant, but which had seemed long to her.

“No, no; I must beg you to retire. I cannot hear this sort of thing,” returned her aunt, waving her hand again, and turning away her head. “*You*, at least, must understand, Mr. Rivers, that it is entirely out of the question. How you can have entertained so preposterous an idea I cannot imagine. You must have seen something of the world, I presume? You ought to be able to perceive that—but, in short, the thing is preposterous, and cannot be seriously discussed for a moment.”

May Cheffington’s blood was rising. “I do not intend to discuss it,” she said haughtily.

“Dearest, since your aunt addresses me, let me reply to her,” said Owen. He spoke in a quiet tone, although inwardly he was excited and indignant enough. “I must tell you, Mrs. Dormer-Smith, that we are neither of us acting on a rash impulse. We have been parted for more than three months, during which time May has been free to give me up without breaking any pledge, or incurring—from me, at least—any reproaches. If she had wavered—if she had found that she had mistaken her own feel-

ings—she was free as air. I should have made no claim, and laid no blame, on her.”

“Made no claim on her!” repeated Mrs. Dormer-Smith. Then she laughed the low laugh which, with her, indicated the very extremity of provocation. “Oh, really! Ha, ha, ha! This is too monstrous. The whole thing appears to me like insanity.”

“To marry without loving—*that* appears to me like insanity,” said May scornfully.

“May! I beseech you! Really, in the mouth of a young girl of your breeding that sort of thing is inconceivable—I am tempted to use a harsher word. *This* then, is the reason why you have rejected one of the most brilliant prospects! Are you aware, Mr. Rivers, that this school-girl nonsense has prevented——” She caught herself up hastily, and changed her phrase—“might have prevented Miss Cheffington from obtaining one of the most splendid establishments in England?”

“Aunt Pauline!” cried May with hot indignation. “How can you say so? I would never have thought of marrying Mr. Bragg, even if Owen had not existed!”

“But apart from that,” pursued Mrs. Dormer-

Smith, ignoring the interruption, "your pretensions would have been quite inadmissible. You have heard of the death of my poor cousin Lucius. You had probably calculated on it. I do not mean to bring any special accusation against you there. Of course, in the case of a person of poor dear Lucius's social importance all sorts of calculations were made by all sorts of people. My brother Augustus is now the next heir to the family title and estates. Under these circumstances I leave it to your own good sense to determine whether he is likely to consent to his daughter's marrying—really I am ashamed to speak of it seriously!—a person who, in however praiseworthy a manner, is filling the position of a hired clerk!"

This shaft fell harmless, since both May and her lover were honestly free from any sense of humiliation in the fact of Owen's being a hired clerk, and sincerely willing to accept that position for him.

Owen answered calmly, "You can probably judge far better than I, as to what your brother is likely to think on that subject." Then turning towards May, he said, "I think, my dearest, that you had better leave your aunt and me to

“speak quietly together. You have been sufficiently pained and agitated already. You look quite pale! Go, darling, and leave me to speak with Mrs. Dormer-Smith.”

“Agitated!” echoed that lady. “We have all been sufficiently agitated. What I have endured from pressure on the brain is unspeakable. Certainly you had better go away, May, I have said so several times already.”

May walked slowly to the door. “I will do as you wish,” she said to Owen.

“You see I am right, dear, do you not?”

“Yes; I suppose so.”

The listlessness of her tone, he interpreted as a sign of her being weary and over-wrought. And, in truth, it was partly due to that cause.

As she moved across the room, two little figures crept out from a dark corner, behind an armchair, and followed her.

“Good gracious!” cried Mrs. Dormer-Smith faintly. “What is that? Have those children been here all the time?” She always spoke of Harold and Wilfred as “those children,” in a distant tone as though they were somebody else’s intrusive little boys. On this occasion, however, she did not altogether disapprove of

their presence. It was certainly less *inconvenable* that they should have been known by the servants to be present at the interview, than if May had been without even that small amount of *chaperonage*. She had no idea that it was Harold who had brought about the interview, or he might not have got off so easily!

“Go away, little boys,” she said, in her sweet, soft voice. “Go away upstairs. Cannot Cécile find some lessons for you to do? You really must not prowl about this part of the house in the afternoon.”

The children trotted after their cousin willingly enough. They never wished to stay with their mother.

“We shall meet again soon, my dear one,” whispered Owen, as he opened the door. And then, with Mrs. Dormer-Smith’s eyes fixedly regarding him, he took May’s cold little hand in his own, and kissed it, before she passed out.

Pauline observed his demeanour with an unbiassed judgment. She would, in the cause of duty, willingly have had him kidnapped and sent off to New Caledonia at that moment. But she said to herself, “He has the manner of a gentleman. It is most disastrous!” For she

felt that this circumstance increased her own difficulties.

“Now, Mrs. Dormer-Smith,” said Owen, when the door was shut, “I can answer you with more perfect frankness than I should have liked to employ in May’s presence. You were so kind as to say that you would leave it to my good sense to determine whether Captain Cheffington was likely to consent to my marriage with his daughter. My answer is quite simple. I do not intend to ask his consent.”

“You do not intend—to ask—his consent?” ejaculated Pauline, leaning back in her chair, and, in the extremity of her astonishment at this young man’s audacity, letting fall a hand-screen which she had been using to shield her face from the fire.

Owen picked it up and restored it to her before repeating, “No; I do not intend to ask his consent.”

“And do you hope to persuade my niece to disregard her father’s authority?—Not to mention other members of the family who have a right to be heard!”

“There is only one member of the family who

has a right to be heard—Mrs. Dobbs. And her consent I hope I have obtained.”

Pauline was for the moment stricken speechless by hearing Mrs. Dobbs mentioned as a member of the family. “The family!” Good heavens, what was the world coming to? She pressed her hand to her forehead with a bewildered look.

Owen went on resolutely. “As to parental authority—Mrs. Dormer-Smith, your brother has abdicated all parental authority over May. He abandoned her—pardon me, I *must* use that word; for it is the only one which expresses what I mean—when she was a young, motherless child. He went away to his own occupations, or pleasures—any way, he went to live his own life in his own way, utterly careless of May’s welfare and happiness. You may tell me that he was sure of her finding the tenderest treatment under her grandmother’s roof. He was not sure of it; for he never troubled himself to consider the question. But if he had been sure, he had no right to leave his child as he did. At any rate, having done so, it is too late to pretend that she is morally bound to consider his wishes.”

Pauline put her handkerchief to her eyes. "My poor brother Augustus is much to be pitied," she murmured. "Allowances must be made for a man in his position. That unfortunate marriage——"

"I have never been told," said Owen, "that Miss Susan Dobbs seized upon Captain Cheffington and compelled him by main force to marry her. And—judging from what I know of her mother and daughter—I should think it unlikely."

"Oh, one understands that sort of thing," returned Pauline, with languid disdain. "A young woman in her class of life is not to be judged by our standards. No doubt she thought herself justified in doing the best she could for herself."

"It strikes me that she did very badly for herself—lamentably badly. I do not wish to say anything needlessly offensive, but we are in the way of plain speaking, and I must point out to you that so far from any consideration being due to your brother, he is—from the point of view of an honest man wishing to marry May—a person to be decidedly ashamed of. There are in the city of Oldchester, his late wife's

native place, many tradesmen, and even mechanics, who would strongly object to connect themselves by marriage with Captain Cheffington."

To say that Mrs. Dormer-Smith was astonished by this speech would be but faintly to express her sensations. She was bewildered. She had often heard Augustus severely blamed. She had been compelled to blame him herself. Of course he ought not to have thrown away his career as he had done. They had agreed as to that. But all this blame had assumed that Augustus had chiefly injured—firstly, himself; and in the second place, and more indirectly, the whole Cheffington family.

Persons who live exclusively in any one narrow sphere are apt to have a strange simplicity, or ignorance, as one may choose to call it, as to large sections of their fellow-creatures outside that sphere. And in no class is that kind of *naïveté* more commonly found than in the class to which Mrs. Dormer-Smith belonged, where it is often intensified by the conviction that they possess what is called "knowledge of the world" in a supreme degree.

It was far too late in the day to bring much

enlightenment to Mrs. Dormer-Smith. Owen's words merely struck her mind with a shock of wonder and dismay, and then glanced off again. The impression of having received a shock, however, did remain with her, and made her as resentful as was possible to her placid nature. In speaking of Mr. Rivers afterwards to her husband, she said—

“I believe him, Frederick, to be a Nihilist.”

But for the present her mind was concentrated on the aim of breaking off what Owen chose to call his engagement to her niece, and she was not to be turned aside from it. She addressed herself to argue the case with Owen. In argument she possessed the immense advantage—if it be an advantage to reduce one's adversary to silence—of supposing that the statement of any one truth on her part was a sufficient answer to any other truth which might be advanced against her. As, for instance, when Owen insisted on Captain Cheffington's having forfeited all moral claim to May's duty and affection, she replied that it was a dreadful thing to set a child against a parent; and when Owen denied the right of May's relatives to prevent her from making a marriage of affection,

she retorted that Mr. Rivers came of undeniably gentle blood himself, and ought to understand her (Mrs. Dormer-Smith's) strong family feeling.

But when even this powerful kind of logic failed to make any impression on Owen's obduracy, she changed her attack, and inquired what he was prepared to offer to her niece, in exchange for the magnificent prospect of being Mrs. Joshua Bragg, with settlements and pin-money such as every duke's daughter would desire, and very few dukes' daughters achieved.

"But, my dear madam," said Owen, "why speak of that alternative when May has assured you, in my presence, that nothing would induce her to marry Mr. Bragg?"

"Oh, Mr. Rivers, I am surprised you know so little of the world! May is a mere child: peculiarly childish for her age. Besides, even supposing she definitively rejected Mr. Bragg, there will be other good matches open to her *now*. The death of my poor cousin Lucius has made a vast difference in all that, as you must be well aware."

"To me, Mrs. Dormer-Smith, it has made no difference. May is herself. That is why I love her. She is not in the least transfigured, in my

imagination, by being the daughter of a man who may, or may not, be Lord Castlecombe at some future day!"

"Oh," said Mrs. Dormer-Smith, shaking her head with the old plaintive air, "you need not entertain any doubts as to my brother's succession. He is the next heir. And the estates—at least the bulk of them—are entailed."

"Good heavens!" cried Owen, in despair, "can you not understand that I care not one straw whether they are entailed or not? That I would proudly and joyfully make May my wife—she being what she is—if her father trundled a barrow through the streets?"

Whether Mrs. Dormer-Smith could, or could not, understand this, at any rate she certainly did not believe it. She merely shook her head once more, and said softly—

"I think you ought to consider her prospects a little, Mr. Rivers. It appears to me that your views are entirely selfish."

This seemed very hopeless. With a last effort to come to an understanding, Owen took refuge in a plain and categorical statement of facts. He had loved May when she was penniless. So far as he knew, she was so still. He

hoped to be able to offer her a modest home. She had not been accustomed to luxury or show—the season in London having been a mere episode, and not the main part of her life. Absolute destitution they were quite secure from.

He possessed one hundred and fifty pounds a year of his own. (Pauline gave a little shudder at this. It positively seemed to her worse than nothing at all. With nothing certain in the way of income, a boundless field was left open for possibilities. But a hundred and fifty pounds a year was a hard, hideous, circumscribing fact, like the bars of a cage!) He was receiving about as much again for his services as secretary. Moreover, he had tried his hand at literature, not unsuccessfully. He had earned a few pounds by his pen already, and hoped to earn more. That was the state of the case. If May, God bless her! were content with it, he submitted that no one else could fairly object.

Mrs. Dormer-Smith rose from her chair, to signify that the interview was at an end. Indeed, what use could there be in prolonging it?

“I confess,” she said, “you have astonished me, Mr. Rivers. If May—an inexperienced young girl not yet nineteen—is content, you think no one else has a right to interfere! At that rate, if she chose to marry the footman, we must all stand by without raising a finger to prevent it. That is, certainly, very extraordinary doctrine.”

Owen drew himself up, and looked full at her with those blue eyes, which could shine so fiercely upon occasion as he answered—

“I have already admitted the right of one person to be consulted about May’s future:—the benevolent, unselfish, high-minded woman, who befriended her, and cherished her, and was a mother to her, when she was deserted by every one else. As to her marrying the footman—it is clear, madam, that she might have married the hangman, for all the effort *you* would have made to prevent it, until Mrs. Dobbs bribed you to take some notice of your niece! But in marrying a Rivers of Riversmead I need not, I suppose, inform you that she will confer on you the honour of a connection with a race of gentlemen compared with whom—if we are to stand on genealogies—half the names

in the Peerage are a mere fungus-growth of yesterday."

It was the first word he had said to her which was less than courteously forbearing. And it was the first word which gave her a momentary twinge of regret that his suit was altogether inadmissible. She contrasted his bearing with that of May's two other wooers:—Bransby the smooth, and Bragg the unpolished; and she said to herself with a sigh, that there was no doubt about this young man's pedigree, and that "*bon sang ne peut mentir.*" But not therefore did she flinch from her position. She answered him in the same words she had used years ago to her brother, in that very room.

"It will not do, Mr. Rivers. I assure you, it will not do!"

Then she bent her head with quiet grace, and moved to go away.

"One instant, Mrs. Dormer-Smith!" Owen said, following her to the door of the dining-room. "I wish, if you please, to speak with May again before I go away."

"Impossible. I cannot, compatibly with my duty, consent to your seeing her now, or at any future time."

“Am I to understand that you forbid me your house?”

“If you please. Unless, indeed, you consent to come in any other character than as my niece’s suitor. In that case it would give me great pleasure to receive you as I have done before.”

He stood looking at her rather blankly. The position was undeniably awkward. It was impossible—for May’s sake, if from no other consideration—to make a scene of violence, and insist upon seeing her. And, even if he did so, Mrs. Dormer-Smith might still resist. She was mistress of the situation so far. Even in his vexation and perplexity, the ludicrous side of the affair struck him.

“Well,” said he, after a moment, taking up his hat, “I cannot intrude into your house against your will. Our only resource must be to meet elsewhere. I warn you we shall do so. Of course, it is idle to suppose that you have the power to keep us apart.”

Mrs. Dormer-Smith shook her head, and repeated with gentle obstinacy, “It will not do, Mr. Rivers. I really am very sorry, but it will *not* do.”

“War, then, is declared between us?”

“Oh, I hope not! I trust you will think better of it,” she said in a mildly persuasive tone, as though she were suggesting that he should leave off tea, or take to woollen clothing. “*I*, at least, have no warlike intentions, Mr. Rivers; for I am going to ask you to do me a favour. Be so very kind as to wait until I ring, and let my servant show you out in a civilized manner. It is quite unnecessary to publish our differences of opinion to the servants’ hall.”

Accordingly she rang the bell, and, when James appeared, said sweetly, in an audible voice, “Good-bye, Mr. Rivers.” Whereupon Owen made her a profound bow, and departed.

As he passed through the hall, he looked about him wistfully in the hope that May might be lingering near—might possibly be looking down from the upper part of the staircase. But she did not appear. The house was profoundly silent. James stood waiting with the door in his hand. There was no help for it. He strode away with various conflicting feelings, thoughts, projects, and hopes struggling in his mind—of which the uppermost at that special moment was a strong inclination to burst out laughing.

## CHAPTER VII.

It was not until Owen had nearly reached Collingwood Terrace that the thought struck him, "What if Mr. Bragg should withdraw his countenance from him, and dismiss him from his employment, when he learned that he was betrothed to May?"

The idea of Mr. Bragg in the light of a rival disconcerted and confused all his previous conceptions of his employer. At the first blush it had appeared ludicrous—incredible; but, on reflection, there was, he found, nothing so extravagant in it. Mr. Bragg had a right to seek a wife to please himself; he was but little past middle life, after all; and as to the disparity in years between him and May, that was certainly not unprecedented. He had taken his rejection well, and manfully—even with a touch of chivalry; but he might not, any the more,

be disposed to continue his favour towards Owen when he should discover the state of the case. He might even suspect that there had been some kind of plot to deceive him! That was a very uncomfortable thought, and sent the blood tingling through Owen's veins.

There was clearly but one thing to be done—to tell Mr. Bragg the truth at all hazards. As he walked along the pavement within a few hundred yards of Mrs. Bransby's door, he reflected that the revelation would come better and more gracefully from May than from himself he was not supposed to be aware of what had passed between May and Mr. Bragg—it was best that he should still seem to ignore it. He had a sympathetic sense that Mr. Bragg's wounded feelings might endure May's delicate handling, while they would shrink resentfully from any masculine touch.

Owen regretted now more than ever that he had not seen May again before leaving her aunt's house; they had had no time to consult together, or to form any plan of action for the future. Their interview seemed, in Owen's recollection, to have passed like a swift gleam of light in a sky over which the clouds are flying.

(It had, in sober fact, lasted above half an hour before Mrs. Dormer-Smith's appearance on the scene.) And now he was forbidden the house! Forbidden to see her! And yet he told himself over and over again that he could not have acted otherwise than he had acted at the time. Well, it was too absurd to suppose that she could be treated as a prisoner. They must meet soon, and meanwhile there was a penny post in the land, and her letters, at least, would not be tampered with. He would write to her the moment he got home; she would receive his letter the next morning, and by that same afternoon she could put Mr. Bragg in possession of the fact of her engagement.

And after she had done so——

The "afterwards" seemed hazy, certainly. But at least there was no doubt as to the plain duty of both of them not to keep their engagement any longer secret from Mr. Bragg. It was a comfort to see clearly the right course as regarded the steps immediately before them. For the rest—they had youth and hope, and they loved each other!

Owen let himself into the house with his latch-key, and went straight to his own room to

write to May. When the note was finished, he took it out and posted it, and then proceeded to the sitting-room.

The table was spread for tea; all the tea equipage bright and glistening as cleanliness could make it. A cheerful fire burned in the grate. Bobby and Billy, seated side by side on a couple of low stools in one corner, were occupied with a big book full of coloured pictures. Ethel was sewing. Martin stood leaning against the mantelpiece close to his mother's arm-chair. And in a chair at the opposite corner of the hearth sat Mr. Bragg, with Enid on his knee!

When Owen entered, Mr. Bragg said, "Well, Mr. Rivers, you see I've found my way to Mrs. Bransby's. I ought to have come and paid her my respects before now. But *you* know I've had my hands pretty full since I came back to England."

Something in his tone and his look seemed to convey a hint to be silent as to their conversation of that morning; and accordingly Owen made no allusion to it.

"It is so pleasant to see an Oldchester face, is it not?" said Mrs. Bransby.

"*Some* Oldchester faces," returned Owen, laughing. Then he said, "Well, Enid, have you not a word to say to me? Won't you come and give me a kiss?"

Miss Enid, who was a born coquette, and who was, moreover, greatly interested in Mr. Bragg's massive watch-chain and seal, replied with imperious brevity, "No; don't want to."

Mr. Bragg looked down gravely on the small creature, and then up at Owen, as he said—half shyly, and yet with a certain tinge of complacency, "Why, she *would* come and set on my knee, almost the first minute she saw me."

"Perhaps you had better get down, baby," said Mrs. Bransby. "I am afraid she may be troublesome."

"Troublesome? Lord, no! Why, I don't feel she's there, no more than a fly. Let her bide," said Mr. Bragg.

"Ah, *I* know what she is:—she's fickle," observed Owen, drawing up his chair.

"*Not* pickle!" declared Miss Enid, with great majesty.

"Yes, you are! False, fleeting, perjured Enid!" said Owen.

He was delighted to perceive that the little

home and its inmates had evidently made a favourable impression on Mr. Bragg. Observing that gentleman in the new light of May's revelation, he saw something in his face which he had not seen there before :—a regretful, far-away look, whenever he was not speaking, or being spoken to. It was wonderfully strange, certainly, to think of him as May's wooer! And yet not absurd, as it had appeared at first. In Mr. Bragg's presence, the absurdity, somehow, vanished. The simplicity and reality of the man gave him dignity. Owen even began to feel something like a vague and respectful compassion for Mr. Bragg; and every now and then the peculiarity of their mutual position would come over him with a fresh sense of surprise.

“ We have been having a little conversation, Mrs. Bransby and me, about her boy here,” said Mr. Bragg, glancing across at Martin, who coloured, and smiled with repressed eagerness. Mr. Bragg continued to observe him thoughtfully. “ He tells me he wants to help his mother; and he's not afraid or ashamed of work, it seems.”

“ Ashamed!” broke out Martin. “ No, I hope I ain't such a cad as that!”

“Martin!” cried his mother anxiously. She was nervous lest he should give offence.

But Mr. Bragg answered with a little nod, which certainly did not express disapprobation, “Well, the boy’s about right. To be ashamed of the wrong things, does belong to—what you might call a cad. I expect,” pursued Mr. Bragg musingly, “that if we could always apply our shame in the right place, we should all of us do better than we do.”

“I suppose I dare not offer you any tea at this hour?” said Mrs. Bransby gently. “You have not dined, of course.”

“Well, no; not under the *name* of dinner, I haven’t! But I ate a hearty luncheon; and I believe that’s about as much dinner as I want; to do me any good, you know. I’ll have a cup of tea, please.”

Mrs. Bransby certainly felt no misapplied shame as to the humbleness and poverty of her surroundings; and was far too truly a gentlewoman to think of apologizing for them. Ethel, who was growing to be quite a notable little housewife, quietly fetched another cup and saucer from the kitchen; and that was all the difference which Mr. Bragg’s presence made in the ordinary arrangements.

Enid insisted on having her high chair placed close to Mr. Bragg at table; and, but for her sister's watchful interposition, she would have demonstrated her sudden affection for him by transferring sundry morsels of bread-and-butter which she had been tightly squeezing in her small fingers from her plate to his, with the patronizing remark, "Oo have dat. I can't eat any more."

While the meal was still in progress there came a knock at the street door. It was a very peculiar knock; consisting of two or three sharp raps, followed by one solemn rap, and then—after an appreciable interval—by several more hurried little raps, as if the hand at the knocker had forgotten all about its previous performances, and were beginning afresh.

"Who can this be?" said Mrs. Bransby, looking up in surprise. Visitors at any time were rare with her now; and at that hour, unprecedented.

"Old Bucher come back to say he can't live without us," suggested Martin.

Whereupon Bobby and Billy, with consternation in their faces, exclaimed simultaneously, "Oh, I *say!*" And Enid, perceiving the

general attention to be diverted from her, took that opportunity to polish the bowl of her spoon, by rubbing it softly against Mr. Bragg's coat sleeve.

The family were not kept long in suspense. As soon as the door was opened, a well-known voice was heard saying volubly, "Ah! at tea, are they? Well, never mind! Take in my card, if you please, and—— Dear me! I haven't got one! But if you will kindly say, an old friend from Oldchester begs leave to wait on Mrs. Bransby."

"Why, it's Simmy!" cried the children, starting up, and rushing to the door. "Here's a lark!" exclaimed Bobby. While Billy, tugging at the visitor's skirt, roared out hospitably, "Come along! Mother's in there. Come in! Mother, here's Simmy!"

Mrs. Sebastian Bach Simpson it was. She appeared on the threshold—rubicund visage, glittering spectacles, filmy curls, and girlish giggle, all as usual; and began to apologize for what she called her "unauthorized yet perhaps not wholly inexcusable intrusion," with her old amiability and incoherency. She had come prepared to keep up a cheerful mien, having decided, in her own mind, not to distress the

feelings of the family by any lachrymose allusions. But when Mrs. Bransby rose up to welcome her, and not only took her by the hand, but kissed her on the cheek, and led her towards the place of honour in the arm-chair, this proceeding so overcame the kind-hearted creature that she abruptly turned her back on them all, pulled out her pocket-handkerchief, and burst into tears.

“I really must apologise,” she sobbed, still presenting the broad back of a very smart shawl to the company—an attitude which made her elaborate politeness extremely comical; for she addressed her speech point-blank to the wall-paper, with abundance of bows and gestures. “I am ashamed, indeed. Pray excuse me! The suddenness of the emo—emotion, and the sight of the dear children, coupled with—I believe—a slight touch of the prevalent influenza, but nothing in the least infectious, dear Mrs. Bransby! But pray do not allow me to disturb the harmony of this fest—festive meeting with ‘most admired disorder,’ as our immortal bard puts it! Although what there is to admire in disorder, and who admired it, must probably remain for ever ambiguous.”

By the end of this speech—the utterance of which had been interrupted by several interludes of pocket-handkerchief—Mrs. Simpson was sufficiently composed to turn round, and take the chair offered to her. The children were grinning undisguisedly. “Simmy” was associated in their minds with many pleasant and many comical recollections. Mrs. Bransby was smiling too. But perhaps it was only the warning spectacle of Mrs. Simpson’s emotion which enabled her to choke down her own inclination to cry.

“This is a most pleasant surprise,” she said. “When did you arrive in London?”

“Why, the fact is——” began Amelia. But suddenly interrupting herself, she jumped up from her seat, and made Mr. Bragg a sweeping curtsey. “Pardon me,” she exclaimed, “if, in the first moment, I was oblivious of your presence! Although not personally acquainted, Oldchester people claim the privilege of recognizing Mr. Bragg as one of our native products. An unforeseen honour, indeed! And—do my eyes deceive me, or have I the pleasure of greeting Mr. Owen Rivers? What an extraordinary coincidence! I had *heard* you were

residing here in the character of a boarder," she added, as emphatically as though that were an obvious reason for being surprised to see him there. "Really, I seem to be transported back into our ancient city; and should scarcely start to hear the cathedral chimes, or the steam-whistle from the brewery, or any of the dear familiar sounds—although the steam whistle, I must admit, is trying, and, in certain forms of nervous disorder, I believe, excruciating."

It was not easy, at any time, to obtain a clear and collected answer to a question from Mrs. Simpson. But in her present state of excitement the difficulty was immensely increased. Her language—partly in honour of Mr. Bragg—was so flowery, and she kept darting up every discursive cross-alley which opened out of the main line of talk in so bewildering a fashion, as to become at moments unintelligible. And it was a long time before any of the party elicited from her how it was that she came to be in London. At length, however, it appeared that "Bassy" was entrusted with a commission to buy a pianoforte; and having found a substitute to take his organ and attend to his pupils for a week, he and his wife had sud-

denly resolved to take a holiday in London together.

“I had, of course, intended to seek you out, dear Mrs. Bransby,” she said; “ever mindful, as I must be, of the many kind favours I have received from you and”—here she gulped dangerously; but recovered herself and went on—“from all the family. But we came away in such a hurry at the last, a cheap excursion train being, in fact, our immediate motive.”

“Locomotive,” put in Martin jocosely.

“Quite so,” said Amelia, with the utmost suavity. “A very proper correction.” Then, seeing his mischievous face dimpling with laughter, she exclaimed, “Oh, of course!—*locomotive*. Very good, Martin! Ah, I am as absent as ever, you see!” Here she playfully shook her head until sundry metallic bobs upon her bonnet fell off, and had to be hunted for and picked up. “Well, so it was. I was hurried away by Bassy’s impetuosity—although, in justice to him, I must state that the time bills were peremptory, and there was no margin for delay or deliberation—almost without a carpet bag! I had no opportunity, therefore, of inquiring of any mutual friend in Oldchester for your address.”

“There are scarcely any who know it, or care to know it,” said Mrs. Bransby, in a low voice.

“Oh, pardon me, dear Mrs. Bransby! No, no; that must not be said, for the honour of Oldchester! Your memory is affectionately cherished by all the more refined and sympathetic souls among us. Only last week Mr. Crump, the butcher, was respectfully inquiring for news of you. You remember Crump! A worthy man, whose spirit—notwithstanding the dictum of the Swan of Avon—is by no means ‘subdued to what it works in,’ beyond a transient greasiness, which lies merely on the surface.”

“Yes; I remember him very well. But who, then, was it who directed you to this house?” asked Mrs. Bransby, hoping that her guest was not aware why Martin had suddenly retired behind the window curtains in a paroxysm of laughter.

“Ah! That, again, is one of the most extraordinary circumstances! Who do you think it was?”

“I cannot tell at all.”

“Guess!”

“Miss Piper, perhaps,” suggested Ethel.

“Not *exactly* Miss Piper,” said Mrs. Simpson, with strong emphasis on the qualifying adverb, as though her informant’s identity were only barely distinguishable from that of Miss Piper. “But you burn, Ethel! You are very near. However, I will not keep you longer in suspense. It was Miss Clara Bertram.”

“Oh! I might have thought of her, for she is a neighbour of ours,” said Mrs. Bransby.

“Is she?” asked Owen.

“Yes; she lives in a house with a rather good garden, not far from here. The situation is a little inconvenient for her profession, I fancy. But she has invalid relatives, to whom the garden is a great boon. We met accidentally in the street one day, and she recognized me at once. I was surprised that she did so.”

“Nay, *I* should rather have been surprised had she forgotten you,” said Mrs. Simpson, “‘For the heart,’” dear Mrs. Bransby, “‘that once truly loves, *never* forgets, but as fondly loves on to the——’ Not, of course, that there was anything beyond the very slightest acquaintance between you and Miss Bertram in Oldcnester. Bassy is, in fact, at her house now,

with a few musical professors, whom she kindly invited us to meet—the artistic element which is so akin to Bassy's soul—combined with the seductions of the Indian weed, of which Miss Bertram's papa is quite a devotee—so that, you see, finding you were so near, I slipped away to see you; and I have promised to return before it is time to go back to the boarding-house where we are staying."

At this point Mr. Bragg got up to take his leave.

"I shall look in again before long, Mrs. Bransby, if you'll allow me," he said; "and we'll have a little more talk about my young friend there. Good night to you, ma'am," turning to shake hands with Mrs. Simpson.

This brought that lady "to her legs" in more senses than one. She favoured Mr. Bragg with a long and enthusiastic address, embracing an extraordinary variety of topics, from the proud pre-eminence of British commerce, to the force of friendship as portrayed in the classical example of Damon and Pythias.

"I will not ask, in the beautiful words of the Caledonian ditty, 'Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and days o' lang syne?' for I am certain

that you are entirely incapable of doing anything of the sort, as is proved by your presence beneath this refined roof-tree," said Mrs. Simpson. "But I *must* bear my humble testimony to the eminent virtues of our exquisite friend—if I may be allowed the privilege of calling her so. I have seen her basking in prosperity, and unspoiled by the smiles of fortune, and now in the cold shade of comparatively untoward circumstances, she beams with the same congenial lustre. In short," cried Amelia, suddenly abandoning what Bobby and Billy called her "dictionary" style for a homelier language which came straight from her heart, "a better wife and mother, a gentler mistress, a kinder friend there never was, or could be, in this world."

Owen offered to accompany Mr. Bragg in order to show him the way to the nearest cabstand, and they left the house together.

"She's a sing'lar character," observed Mr. Bragg, after they had walked a few steps.

"You mean Mrs. Simpson?"

"Ah, yes; Mrs. Simpson. There's too much clack about her; and her talk's puzzling from being—what you might call of a zigzag sort of a nature; and she's cast in a queer kind of

a mould altogether. But I think she rings true, and that's the main thing, in mortals or metals."

"I'm quite sure her praise of Mrs. Bransby is true, at any rate," said Owen warmly.

"H'm!" grunted Mr. Bragg, and walked on in silence. When they came within view of a cab-stand, he turned round, and said he would not trouble Owen to come any further with him. And just as the latter was about to say "Good-night," Mr. Bragg observed meditatively, "She has that little place beautifully neat, and as clean as a new pin. Seems to be bringing up those children in the right way, too. Poor soul! it's a heavy charge for a delicate lady like her. I think I shall be able to do something for that eldest boy. But p'r'aps you'd better not say anything at present—eh? It's cruel to raise up false hopes; and some folks build such a wonderful high scaffolding of expectations on a word or two; and if there's not bricks enough to do anything adequate to the scaffolding—why, then that's awkward. Good night, Mr. Rivers."

Owen well knew that hopes had already been aroused by the mere presence of the rich man in that poor little home. But he knew, also,

that there was no danger of Mrs. Bransby's hopes turning into claims ; and that she would be humbly grateful for very small help. He felt almost elated on her behalf as he returned to Collingwood Terrace. "I only hope," he said to himself, "that Mr. Bragg won't visit any of my sins on Mrs. Bransby's head, when he finds them out! But no ; to do the old boy justice, I believe he is above that."

Meanwhile, Amelia Simpson had been imparting a budget of Oldchester news. After many discursive sallies she came to the topic of Lucius Cheffington's recent death. He had died since the Simpsons' departure from Oldchester, but his case had been known to be hopeless for several days previous. The old lord was said to be dreadfully cut up ; more so, even, than on the death of his eldest son. But Lucius had always been understood to be his father's favourite.

"And they do say," continued Mrs. Simpson, "that to a certain fair young friend of ours the blow will be very severe."

"A young friend of ours! Do you mean May Cheffington?"

"Ah, no! Our dear Miranda knew scarcely

anything of her noble relatives at Combe Park. And even the *most* affectionate disposition—and I'm sure our dear Miranda is imbued with every proper feeling—can scarcely cling with personal devotion to an almost total stranger, although united by the ties of kindred! No; I was speaking of Miss Hadlow."

"Constance!"

"Yes, although I have never been on terms to address her by her baptismal appellation, that, I confess, is the young lady I *do* mean."

Then Mrs. Simpson went on to tell her astonished listener how that Constance Hadlow had been visiting some county magnates in the near neighbourhood of Combe Park during the latter part of Lucius's illness; how she had been admitted to see and talk with the invalid, when other persons had been excluded with scant courtesy; how she had rapidly come to be on a footing of intimacy at the great house, which astonished the neighbourhood; and how at length that fact was explained by the current report that if Lucius had recovered—which at one time appeared not unlikely—he would have married her, with his father's full approbation.

“I did not venture to allude to the subject before Mr. Rivers—how brown he has become! Quite the southern hue of romance!—because, you know, he was said at one time to be desperately in love with his cousin; and I feared to hurt his feelings.”

“Oh, I don’t think it would hurt his feelings,” said Mrs. Bransby; “I really do not believe he cares at all for his cousin, in that way.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t!” cried Ethel, who took a thoroughly feminine interest in the subject.

“Ethel! I scarcely think you know anything at all about the matter. And I am sure it is not for a little girl like you to give an opinion.”

“No, mother. Only—Martin and I know who we should *like* him to marry. Don’t we, Martin?”

Martin was rather shamefaced at being thus brought publicly into the discussion, and rebuffed his sister with a lofty air.

“Oh, don’t talk bosh and silliness,” he rejoined. “Girls are always bothering about a fellow’s getting married. Leave him alone. He’s very well as he is.”

“He is certainly most affable, and thoroughly

the gentleman," observed Mrs. Simpson, with her universal, beaming benevolence.

"Oh, he is good!" cried the widow, clasping her hands. "So delicately considerate! Such a true, loyal friend!"

In her own mind she was convinced that Mr. Bragg's visit was entirely due to Owen's influence. And her heart was overflowing with gratitude.

A new idea darted into Mrs. Simpson's imagination, always ready to accept a romantic view of things. How charming it would be if young Mr. Rivers were to marry the beautiful widow! They would make a delightful couple. Considerations of ways and means entered no more into Mrs. Simpson's calculations than they would have entered into little Enid's. The building of her castles in the air was entirely independent of money.

But there was, at bottom, a more common sensible reason which made the idea that Owen might marry Mrs. Bransby, agreeable to Amelia Simpson. In spite of the sympathy of Mr. Crump, the butcher, and other congenial spirits, it could not be denied that some rumours of a very unpleasant sort had recently been circu-

lated in Oldchester to the discredit of Mrs. Bransby. When it became known that young Rivers, on his return from Spain, was to live in her house, the rumours began to take a more definite shape. No one could trace them to their source—perhaps no one tried very seriously to do so.

People asked each other if they had not always thought there was something a little odd—not quite becoming and *nice*—in the way that young Rivers used to be running in and out of Martin Bransby's house, at all times and seasons. Even during poor Mr. Bransby's lifetime, strange things had been said—at least, it now appeared so; for very few of the gossips professed to have heard any whispers of scandal *themselves*, while Martin lived. There was a strange story of young Rivers being caught kissing Mrs. Bransby's hand in the garden. There might be no harm in kissing a lady's hand. But, under the circumstances, there was something, almost revolting, was there not? And, then, why was Mrs. Bransby in such a hurry to run away from Oldchester?—away from all her friends and all her husband's friends? Surely she would have done better to remain there! At all

events Mr. Theodore Bransby had been much annoyed by her doing so; and had replied to old friends, who spoke to him on the subject, that he could not control his step-mother's actions; could only advise her for the best; and should endeavour to assist her and her children, *if she would allow him to do so*. Of course people understood when he said that, that Mrs. Bransby was acting contrary to his judgment. And now, Mr. Rivers was actually going to reside in her house! It positively was not decent! No wonder Theodore looked distressed, and avoided the subject. It must be altogether a very painful affair for him.

This kind of scandal, with its inevitable *crescendo*, had been very differently received by Sebastian Simpson and his wife. He could not be said to encourage it; but neither did he repudiate it indignantly. But Amelia was true and devoted to Mrs. Bransby, and incurred some unpopularity by her enthusiastic praises of that absent lady. But there were also people who said what a good creature Mrs. Simpson was, and that—although she was a goose, and had probably been quite taken in—they liked to see her stand up for those who had been kind to her.

Under these circumstances, it was a great triumph for Amelia to find Mr. Bragg—the respectable, the influential, the *rich* Mr. Bragg—visiting Mrs. Bransby on a friendly footing, and treating her with marked kindness and respect. Simple though she might be, Amelia was not at all too simple to understand that the millionaire's approbation would carry weight with it. But now the idea of a marriage between Owen and the widow seemed still more delightful than the mere clearing of Mrs. Bransby's character from all aspersions. People had said that, as for *him*, the young man was probably suffering under a temporary infatuation. And that, even supposing the best, and taking the most charitable view of this—*flirtation*, it was out of the question that he should think of marrying a woman of Mrs. Bransby's age, and with five children to support!

Why should it be out of the question? Amelia said to herself. The few years' difference in their ages was of no consequence at all. And as to the family—Mr. Bragg would probably take Owen into partnership. He was evidently devotedly fond of them both! She had privately arranged the details of the wedding in her own

mind before Owen returned from conducting Mr. Bragg to his cab.

When he did so, Mrs. Simpson declared it was time for her to go, and got up from her chair. But between that and her actual departure a great many words had still to intervene. She reverted to the death in the Castlecombe family; made a brief excursion to the report of Captain Cheffington's second marriage, "truly deplorable! But still, or dear Miranda is happily launched among the *élite* of the *beau monde*, so, perhaps, it is not so bad after all!" And then suddenly added—

"By the way, dear Mrs. Bransby, it *was* reported that your stepson, Mr. Theodore, intended to withdraw his candidature at the next election. But I am told on the *best* authority—Mr. Lowe, the political agent—that that is a mistake. So I hope we may see him among the legislators. Quite the figure for it, I'm sure. However, of course, you must know all that news far better than I. I hope to *see* our dear Miranda before leaving town."

Owen observed, with indignation, that the mention of Theodore appeared to have suggested May to her mind. Nor did the circumstance escape Mrs. Bransby.

“Do you say you shall see May Cheffington?” she asked.

“Yes; I purpose calling. Although well aware of Mrs. Dormer-Smith’s high social position, still I think our dear Miranda’s warm heart will welcome one who has so recently seen her beloved grandmamma. Ah, we do not easily relinquish the fond memories of childhood. Thank you, my dear Ethel. *Is* that my pocket-handkerchief? Really! I wonder how it came there!” (Ethel had picked it up from under the tea-table.) “I believe that even in the princely halls—I *think* I left my umbrella in the passage. Eh? Oh, Bobby has found it—in the princely halls of Castlecombe her memory will revert to Friar’s Row. In the words of the poet, ‘though strangers may roam, those hills and those valleys I once called my home’—although, of course, Oldchester is *not* mountainous. And as to roaming, I presume that hills and valleys are always more or less liable to be roamed over by strangers, whether one calls them one’s home or not.”

By this time Mrs. Simpson had got herself out of the room into the narrow outer passage; and, seeing Owen put on his great coat again,

in order to escort her, she stopped to protest against his taking that trouble.

“Oh, pray! *Too* kind! It is but a stone’s throw from here, and I am not at all afraid. Sure of the way? Well, no; not *quite* sure. I took two wrong turnings in coming. But I can easily inquire for Marlborough House. Eh? Oh, Blenheim Lodge is it? To be sure! Marlborough House is the august residence—— However, *historically* speaking. I was not so far wrong, was I? Well, if you insist, Mr. Rivers, I will accept your polite attention with gratitude. Good-bye, once more, dear children. If I possibly can come again before leaving London, dear Mrs. Bransby——”

At this point Owen perceived that decisive measures were necessary, if the good lady’s farewells were not to last until midnight. He took Mrs. Simpson’s arm, signed to Phœbe to open the door, and led his fair charge outside it, almost before she knew what was happening.

“Excuse me for hurrying you,” he said; “but the night is cold; Mrs. Bransby is not very strong; and I thought it imprudent—for both of you—to stand talking in that draughty passage.”

“Oh, *quite* right. Thank you a thousand times. She is deserving, indeed, of every delicate care and attention.”

A slighter circumstance would have sufficed to confirm Mrs. Simpson's romantic fancies. She said to herself that Mr. Rivers's devotion was chivalrous indeed. And she forthwith proceeded to sound Mrs. Bransby's praises, in an unbroken stream of eloquence, all the way to Blenheim Lodge. Owen had intended to ask her one or two questions—about Mrs. Dobbs, and as to when she thought of calling at Mrs. Dormer-Smith's house. He had even held a half-formed intention of entrusting her with a message for May. But it was hopeless to arrest her flow of speech—unless by making his request in a more serious fashion than he thought it prudent to do. Amelia's goodwill might be relied on. But she was absolutely devoid of discretion. And, at all events, if he said nothing, there would be no ground for her to build a blunder on.

He little knew!

## CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN Mrs. Dormer-Smith practised any deception—a necessity which unfortunately arose rather frequently in the prosecution of her duty to society—she was wont to call it diplomacy. She called it so to herself, in her most private cogitations. She was not a woman whose conscience could be satisfied by any but the best chosen phraseology.

In speaking to May of her conversation with Owen, she gave a “diplomatic” version of it. It was May herself who innocently suggested the line her aunt took. When she found that Owen had left the house without any further farewell to her, she said not a word, she demanded no explanation; but the disappointed look in her eyes, the drooping curves of her young mouth, were sufficiently eloquent. Had she fired up into indignation against her aunt,

assuming as a matter of course that Owen had been refused permission to see her again, that would have seemed quite in accordance with her character. This was, in fact, what Pauline had prepared herself to meet. But this quietude was strange. It seemed as though May were *ready* to be wounded. Her aunt thought that it would not have occurred to the girl—who was high-spirited enough in certain directions—to suspect that her lover might be less eager to see her again than she was to see him, unless some previous fact or fancy had put the suspicion into her head. Fact or fancy, Mrs. Dormer-Smith thought it mattered little which, so long as the suspicion were there.

Of course it would not do to pretend that Owen had not asked to see her. That would be a clumsy falsehood, sure of speedy detection; and, besides, Mrs. Dormer-Smith wished to avoid explicit falsehood. She was only diplomatic.

“I was obliged, I need scarcely tell you, May,” she said, “to refuse Mr. Rivers’s request for some more words with you. It would have been a gross dereliction of duty on my part to permit it.”

“He did ask to see me, then?” said May, with a bright eager look in her eyes. It was a look her aunt was well acquainted with, and usually presaged some speech which had to be deplored as being “odd,” or “bad form.”

“Oh yes,” replied Mrs. Dormer-Smith wearily. “Of course, he asked; I had to go through all that. Under the circumstances he could scarcely do less.”

The shadow of the eyelashes suddenly drooped down over the bright eyes; and Aunt Pauline saw that her shot had told.

“Has it ever occurred to you, May,” Mrs. Dormer-Smith went on, “that you are prejudicing the future of this gentleman?”

May looked up quickly, but made no answer.

“Of course, it cannot be allowed to go on—this *engagement*, as he absurdly terms it.”

“It *is* an engagement,” interrupted May in a low voice.

Her aunt passed over the interruption, and continued. “But I think that in justice to him you ought to reflect that meanwhile you are injuring his prospects. I do not mean,” she added with gentle sarcasm, “that you will injure him by preventing him from marrying

the Widow Bransby ; because I cannot honestly say that I think *that* a good prospect for any young man."

"All those stories are malicious falsehoods," said May resolutely ; but her throat was painfully constricted, and her heart felt like lead in her breast.

"My dear child, one scarcely sees why people should trouble themselves to *invent* stories about this lady and gentleman, who, after all, are persons of very small importance. But at any rate the stories are circulated, and believed. Under these circumstances it seems to me a—well, to say the least, an indiscreet proceeding, that Mr. Rivers, the moment he returns to England, should rush to Mrs. Bransby's house, and take up his abode there ! However, it may be quite a usual sort of thing among persons in their position. Very likely. I only know that in *our* world it would not do. We are less Arcadian. When I spoke of injuring Mr. Rivers's prospects, I meant as between him and his employer."

"Oh !" cried May, turning round with a pale indignant face. A confused crowd of words seemed to be struggling in her mind ; but she

was unable, for the moment, to utter one of them.

“*Dear May,*” said her aunt, “do not, I beg and implore you, do not be tragic! I don’t think I *could* stand that sort of thing. It would be the last straw.”

“Do you think—do you mean that Mr. Bragg would turn Owen away, out of spite?” asked May in a quiet tone, after a short silence.

“We need not employ such a word as that. But Mr. Bragg made you an offer of marriage, and we can hardly expect him to find it pleasant when he is told ‘the young lady refused you in order to marry your clerk.’”

“Not ‘in order to——’ You know I have assured you that under no circumstances would I have married Mr. Bragg.”

“Yes, May; you have assured me so. But you are not yet nineteen; and I—alas!—was nineteen more than nineteen years ago. It struck me that Mr. Rivers was desirous that you should take your full share of responsibility in the matter. And he seemed a little anxious about his place. At all events he brought forward the salary he is earning with Mr. Bragg as an important element in the financial

budget with which he favoured me. (How the man could think for a moment that your family would consent!) I gathered that he was decidedly unwilling to lose it."

"He only took it for my sake."

"Ah! That was particularly kind of him. Well, it strikes me that he would now like to keep it for his own. Of course I must write to your father. I presume you will admit that it is proper to inform him of the state of the case?"

"You can write if you choose, Aunt Pauline. It will make no difference, *now*."

"I think you will find it will make a considerable difference! Circumstances have entirely altered your father's position in the world. You will be daughter and heiress to a peer of the realm."

There was a long pause. May stood with one foot on the fender before a bright fire in her aunt's dressing-room, her elbow on the mantel-shelf, and her cheek resting in her hand.

Then Mrs. Dormer-Smith resumed softly, "Perhaps I deceive myself—the wish may be father to the thought—but I confess I got the impression that it might not be hopeless to

induce Mr. Rivers to withdraw, voluntarily, from his false position. Of course he could do no less than stand to it so long as you appeared resolved to stand to it; but—— I hope and trust, May, that if it should be as I think, you would not insist on being obstinate?"

"You know, as well as I know it myself, Aunt Pauline, that I would die sooner than hold him bound for one instant, unless—— But I won't answer you as if I took your words seriously."

Upon that she managed to walk out of the room with dignity and dry eyes. But the poor child, for all her brave words, did take her aunt's hint so seriously as to throw herself on the bed in her own room, and lie sobbing there for an hour.

To her husband, Mrs. Dormer-Smith had reported the interview with Owen as accurately as she could. She did, indeed, declare her belief that the young man was a Nihilist. But that was said genuinely enough. A man of gentle birth, who deliberately stated—apparently with sympathetic approval—that there were mechanics who would be ashamed to own Captain Cheffington as a father-in-law, was, in

her opinion, evidently prepared to demolish the existing bases of human society.

Mr. Dormer-Smith was very sorry for his niece : more sorry than he thought it necessary to express at that moment to Pauline. But still he agreed with his wife that every effort ought to be made to prevent her marrying so disastrously. It might have been supposed, perhaps, that Mr. Dormer-Smith, not having found his own mode of life productive of unalloyed felicity, in spite of a fair income, aristocratic connections, and a wife devoted to keeping up their position in society, would have been not unwilling to let May try her fate in a different fashion. But it is a common experience that, although the possession of certain things gives them not the smallest gleam of happiness, yet, to a large class of minds, the thought of doing without these things suggests misery. The unusual is a terrible scarecrow, and keeps many weak-minded birds from the cherries.

Mr. Dormer-Smith was to go down to Combe Park to attend the funeral of his deceased cousin-in-law. He had some liking for Lucius, and thought, as he sat in the railway carriage speeding down to the little wayside station

beyond Oldchester, where he was to alight, that it was a truly inscrutable dispensation which took away Lucius—a man at least harmless, and of honourable principles—and left Augustus alive; and he could not help regretting the death of Lucius on May's account. Lucius had been, in his dry, peculiar manner, very kind towards his young cousin. He had resented her father's neglect of her; and he treated her, when they met, with a certain air of protection, and almost tenderness, such as one might assume towards a child or an animal that one knew to have been hardly used. Frederick thought it not impossible that, had Lucius lived, his influence might have been brought to bear on May for her good. But Lucius was gone; and Augustus remained to disgrace the family and annoy his relations more than ever.

This, however, was not Pauline's idea. Although her brother's second marriage had, apparently, receded into the background, in consequence of these new troubles about May, yet it had really been occupying many of Mrs. Dormer-Smith's thoughts. She certainly considered it to be not *quite* so terrible a business now that Lucius—poor dear Lucius!—was out

of the way, as it would have been had he lived. A Viscountess Castlecombe might be floated, Pauline said to herself, where a Mrs. Augustus Cheffington would stick in the mud. They could live chiefly abroad—not, of course, in a shabby street in Brussels; but on the Riviera, for instance. A warm climate had always suited Augustus. And as for herself, she, Pauline, would never willingly pass an hour in England between the first of November and the last of April. It really would not be at all disagreeable to spend one or two of the winter months with one's brother and sister-in-law—thank Heaven that, at least, she was not English! So many deviations from “good form” might be got over on the plea of foreign manners—at some charming, sunny place, say St. Raphael! That was not so far from Nice as to preclude the enjoyment of some little gaiety and society. They would have a villa of their own, of course. Perhaps, Augustus might build himself one. That sort of life would enable them to catch a good many travellers on the wing. And, with sufficient tact and *savoir faire* (which Pauline flattered herself she could supply), it might be possible

to fill their house with a succession of "nice" people. The "nicest" people were sometimes rather less exigent on the other side of the Channel! At any rate, there would be less difficulty in "floating" Lady Castlecombe on the stream of society abroad than at home. Augustus would be rich; Uncle George could not prevent that, let him do what he would with his savings and his investments. For the estates were strictly entailed; and Uncle George had nursed them into something like treble their value when he succeeded to the property. Mrs. Griffin heard from Lady Mary, the Dean of Oldchester's wife, who had it from the Rector of Combe, that Lord Castlecombe was crushed by the loss of Lucius. Augustus might not have to wait very long for his inheritance. How strangely things turn out! Well, she would write very kindly and gently to her brother. There was the excuse of addressing him about May; and she would take the opportunity of sending a civil word to his wife. It must be done delicately, of course. But Augustus should see that there was no disposition to be hostile, on the part of his sister, at any rate.

It was in the forenoon of the day after Owen's

visit that Mrs. Dormer-Smith was thus meditating. Her husband had started for Combe Park. The house was very quiet; the fire in her dressing-room was very warm; several budgets of gossip had arrived by the post from various country houses, and lay unopened within reach of her hand. Mrs. Dormer-Smith felt that there was a certain "luxury of woe" in a family affliction which justified one in saying "not at home," and sitting in a wadded dressing-gown, without causing one either heart-ache or anxiety. And she had been softly rocking herself in the day-dreams recorded above, when they were interrupted as suddenly, if not as fatally, as those of La Fontaine's milkmaid. James stood before her with a visiting card on a salver, and a cloud of depression—which was the utmost revelation of ill-humour his well-trained visage ever allowed itself, above-stairs—on his shaven countenance.

"What is this, James? What do you mean by bringing me cards here—and now?"

"I *said* 'not at home,' ma'am, but the—the party didn't seem to understand; and, unfortunately, Miss Cheffington happening to pass through the hall at that moment——"

“ Who is it? Where is the person ? ”

Mrs. Dormer-Smith took the card and examined it through her eyeglass with a sinking heart. Could that subversive young man have returned? Or was there, perchance, some other suitor in the field? An anarchical shoemaker, possibly! Pauline’s confidence in Mrs. Dobbs had been completely blown into the air by learning that she had approved and encouraged May’s engagement to a young man who calmly avowed that he possessed one hundred and fifty pounds a year of his own; and she felt that any dreadful revelation might be made at any moment. But the name on the card was not a masculine one, at any rate. Mrs. Something-or-other Simpson, she read on it.

“ Is the—lady with Miss Cheffington now, James ? ”

“ Yes, ma’am. Miss Cheffington took her into the dining-room. I thought that, as last time—I mean as Smithson wasn’t in the way—I’d better let you know, ma’am.”

“ Did the lady ask for me ? ”

“ N-no; I—well, I really hardly know, ma’am.”

“ You hardly know ? ”

“ Well, ma’am, she talked a great deal, and

so—so—— It was uncommonly difficult to follow what she said. At first I thought she announced her name as being Oldchester. I *did* say ‘not at home’ twice, but it was no use; and then Miss Cheffington happening to pass through the hall——”

“That will do.”

James retired with an injured air, and Mrs. Dormer-Smith was left to consider within herself whether duty required her to be present at the interview between May and this unknown Mrs. Simpson, or whether she might indulge herself by sitting still and reading Mrs. Griffin’s last letter in comfort and quietude. After a brief deliberation, she resolved to go downstairs. There was no knowing who or what the woman might be. James had said something about Oldchester. No doubt she came from that place. Perhaps she was an emissary of Mr. Rivers! Pauline, as she rose and drew a shawl round her shoulders, before facing the chillier atmosphere of the staircase, breathed a pious hope that her brother Augustus might sooner or later compensate her for all the sacrifices she was making on behalf of May.

Before she reached the dining-room, she

heard the sound of a fluent monologue. May was not speaking at all, so far as Mrs. Dormer-Smith could make out. When she entered the room, she found the girl sitting beside a stout, florid woman, dressed in *trente-six couleurs*—as Pauline phrased it to herself—who was holding forth with a profusion of “nods, and becks, and wreathed smiles.”

Mrs. Dormer-Smith made this stranger a bow of such freezing politeness as ought to have petrified her on the spot; and, turning to May, inquired with raised eyebrows, “Who is your friend, May?”

But Amelia Simpson had not the least suspicion that she was being snubbed in the most superior style known to modern science. She rose, with her usual impulsive vehemence, from her chair, and said smilingly—

“Mrs. Dormer-Smith? I thought so! Permit me to apologize for a seeming breach of etiquette. I am well aware that my call ought properly to have been paid to *you*, the mistress of this elegant mansion; but, being *personally* unknown—although we are not so ‘remote, unfriended, melancholy, or slow’—not that I use the epithet in a slang sense, I assure you!

—in Oldchester, as to be unaware that Mrs. Dormer-Smith, the accomplished relative of our dear Miranda, is in all respects ‘a glass of fashion and a mould of form.’ Only I wish our divine bard had chosen any other word than ‘mould,’ which somehow is inextricably connected in my mind with short sixes.”

“Oh!” ejaculated Pauline, in a faint voice, as she sank into a chair; and she remained gazing at the visitor with a helpless air.

At another time, May would have had a keen and enjoying sense of the comic elements in this little scene; but although she saw them now as distinctly as she ever could have done, she was too unhappy to enjoy them. She said quietly—

“This is Mrs. Simpson, Aunt Pauline. Her husband is professor of music at Oldchester; and they are both very old friends of dear Granny.”

Now, Pauline was not prepared to break altogether with Mrs. Dobbs. Mrs. Dobbs had behaved very badly in that matter of young Rivers; but something must be excused to ignorance; and her allowance for May continued to be paid up every quarter with ex-

emplary punctuality. Let matters turn out as well as possible, there must still be a "mean-time" during which Mrs. Dobbs's money would be valuable—and, indeed, indispensable—if May were to remain under her aunt's roof. It occurred to Pauline to invite this incredibly attired person to share Cécile's early dinner in the housekeeper's room, and then to withdraw herself and May on the plea of some imaginary engagement. She was just about to carry out this idea when the reiteration of a name in Mrs. Simpson's rapid talk struck her ear, and excited her curiosity: "Mrs. Bransby." Amelia was talking volubly to May about Mrs. Bransby. She had resumed what she was pleased to call her "conversation" with May, having made some sort of incoherent apology to Mrs. Dormer-Smith, to the effect that she had a very short time to remain, and "so many interesting topics of mutual interest to discuss."

She rambled on about her last evening's visit to Collingwood Terrace. Mr. Rivers and dear Mrs. Bransby would make a charming couple; and as to the difference in years—what did years signify? And the difference was not so great, after all. Mr. Rivers was very steady and staid

for his age; and Mrs. Bransby looked so wonderfully youthful!—not a line in her forehead, in spite of all her troubles. And then Mr. Bragg's friendship and countenance would be so valuable! He evidently approved it all. And if he gave Mr. Rivers a share in his business—"even a comparatively small share," said Amelia, feeling that she was keeping well within the limits of probability, and even displaying a certain business-like sobriety of conjecture—considering how colossal an affair *that* was, everything would be made smooth for them. Mrs. Bransby's children evidently adored Mr. Rivers—which was *so* delightful! And as for Mr. Rivers's devotion to Mrs. Bransby, no one could doubt that who saw them together. (This was said rather to a shadowy audience of Oldchester persons, who had declared that, however ridiculous Mrs. Bransby might make herself, young Rivers was not likely to tie himself for life to a middle-aged woman with a family, than to Amelia's present hearers.) And after all the unkind things which had been reported in Oldchester, it would be a heartfelt joy to Mrs. Bransby's friends to see her widowhood so happily brought to a close.

“What unkind things have been reported in Oldchester? What do you mean?” asked May. She spoke eagerly, but quite firmly. There was no tremor in her voice, no rising of unbidden tears to her eyes. Her whole heart and soul were concentrated on getting at the truth.

Amelia pulled herself up a little. She had been running on rather too heedlessly. Some things had latterly been said of Mrs. Bransby which could scarcely be repeated with propriety to a young lady—at least, according to Amelia’s code of what was proper.

“Oh, my dear Miranda,” she stammered, “the world is ever censorious; but as the lyric bard so beautifully puts it—

‘I’d weep when friends deceive me,  
If *thou* wert like them, untrue.’

Although why it is taken for granted that friends—in any true sense of the word—should be expected to deceive, I must leave to metaphysics to determine!”

Mrs. Dormer-Smith here put in her word. “Oh, we had already heard of these scandals,” she said. “My niece was inclined to doubt their existence, I believe. I hope you are convinced now, May!”

“Really!” exclaimed Mrs. Simpson, glancing with growing uneasiness from May to her aunt. Something, she perceived, was wrong—but what?

“Dear Mrs. Simpson,” said May, “I am very sure that whoever else was unkind and scandalous, you were not.”

“Ever the same sweet nature!” murmured Amelia; “but, perhaps, it was not so much that people were unkind, not exactly unkind, but mistaken. You see, when a person tells you a thing, positively, there is a certain unkindness in not believing it! And yet, on the other hand, one would not willingly accept evil reports of a fellow-creature. There is a difficulty in harmoniously blending the two horns of this dilemma—if I may be allowed to say so—which, to some extent, excuses error.”

The good lady’s habitual confusion of ideas was increased by the nervous fear that she had said something unfortunate. She brought her visit to an end earlier than she otherwise might have done; and in taking effusive leave of May she whispered—

“I trust I did not commit any solecism against the code of manners which belongs to the *élite*

of the *haut ton*, in alluding to our fair friend, Mrs. B——?”

“No, no,” answered May gently; “don’t vex yourself by thinking so.”

Mrs. Simpson brightened up a little, and asked aloud, “And what message shall I give to grandmamma?”

May scarcely recognized “Granny” under this appellation, adopted in honour of Mrs. Dormer-Smith’s social distinction. But after an instant she said—

“Oh, give her my dear love; I shall write to her to-morrow. And, please, my love to Uncle Jo.”

“Ah, I recognize our dear Miranda’s affectionate constancy there!” cried Amelia. “Mr. Weatherhead will be much gratified.”

“Gratified! I think he would have a right to be disgusted if I forgot him! Dear, good, honest, kind-hearted Uncle Jo!”

“*Who* is this person?” demanded Pauline, genuinely aghast at the idea that some hitherto unknown brother of Susan Dobbs was in existence. The one extenuating circumstance in that unfortunate marriage had always appeared to her to be the fact that Susan was an only child.

“He is a certain Mr. Joseph Weatherhead,” answered May, with great distinctness. “He was originally a bookbinder’s apprentice, and then a printer and bookseller in a small way of business at Birmingham. He is my grandmother’s brother-in-law, and one of the best men in the world. He used to give me shillings when I went back to school; and once I remember—that was just before my father left me on granny’s hands—he noticed that my boots were disgracefully shabby, and took me out and bought me a new pair.”

Then Mrs. Simpson went away in a nervous flutter, and with the positive, though puzzled, conviction that there was something very wrong indeed between the aunt and niece.

## CHAPTER IX.

OF course Mrs. Dormer-Smith availed herself to the utmost of Mrs. Simpson's revelations. They were most valuable. And they had the effect of confirming her own vague suspicions in an unexpected manner. That which had been merely "diplomatic" colouring in her presentment of the situation to May, turned out to be real, solid, vulgar fact!

The state of things was certainly very singular. But she did not doubt that she had discovered the true explanation of it. Mr. Rivers had probably been infatuated with Mrs. Bransby before her husband's death. Such infatuations were by no means rare at their respective ages. The lady had been willing to coquette after a sentimental fashion: which, also, was not unprecedented! There had probably been no serious intention of evil-doing on either side.

“At all events we can give them the benefit of the doubt!” reflected Pauline charitably. Meanwhile, Mr. Rivers had met with May. He had been thrown a great deal into her society, had been encouraged by her stupid old grandmother, had thought her connections and prospects desirable, and had probably admired herself a good deal. Pauline did not see why not. It was very possible for a man to admire more than one woman at a time! Mr. Rivers makes love to May, persuades her to enter into a clandestine engagement, and goes abroad. But then something unforeseen happens: *the husband dies*; and all the old feeling is revived. Mr. Rivers hastens back to England. The widow is pathetic—helpless—throws herself on his advice and support. He goes to live under her roof, and the mischief is done! A handsome, scheming woman, under these circumstances, might well be irresistible. As to him, of course he had behaved badly in a way. But, after all, one must accept men as they are. And, as Pauline said to herself, the folly of young men in such matters, and their invincible tendency to sacrifice themselves to the wrong woman, are simply unfathomable! At any rate whether

her cousin's death had made Rivers more willing to fulfil his engagement to May ; or whether he would be glad of a pretext to break with her in order to marry Mrs. Bransby and her five children ; May must clearly perceive that *she* could have nothing more to say to him.

All these considerations, and the conclusion to which they led, Mrs. Dormer-Smith administered to her niece, in larger or smaller doses, during the remainder of the day. Sometimes it was by way of a few drops at a time :— a hint, a word, perhaps merely a sigh, accompanied by an expressive shrug of the shoulders. Sometimes it was a copious pouring forth of the evidence. Sometimes it was an appeal to May's pride : sometimes to her principles.

The girl was worn out with fighting against shadows. And, though they might be shadows, they were gathering darkly.

The worst was that she was, in one sense, as solitary as though she had been alone on a desert island. There was absolutely no communion of spirit between her and her aunt on this subject. Had her uncle been there, she thought that even he would have understood her better. She could write, of course, to

granny; and of course granny would answer her. But another whole long day must elapse before she could have the comfort of granny's letter: even supposing it were sent without a post's delay. She could not see Owen. She was not sure, at moments, whether she wished to see him. And then again, with a sudden revulsion of feeling, she would long for his presence.

She had in her pocket the note he had written on the previous evening, begging her to inform Mr. Bragg of their engagement. It had reached her hands only an hour or two before Amelia Simpson's visit; and was, as yet, unanswered. The note had been dashed off quickly, as we know. And to May, disheartened and confused as she was already by her aunt's version of the interview with Owen, it seemed needlessly brief and dry.

He begged May to tell Mr. Bragg of their engagement at once. Under the circumstances he thought Mr. Bragg ought to know it, and the announcement would come best from her. He had not had a moment in which to speak of it during their hurried interview. But he did not doubt that May would feel as he felt on this point. She had better, if possible, send her

communication so that Mr. Bragg should receive it that same afternoon ; since he certainly ought to know the truth soon, at any cost.

These last words had reference to the possibility that the revelation might affect the fortunes of the Bransby family. But May knew nothing of that ; and they jarred on her. Why should Owen speak to her of the "cost" ? It was almost like a boast that he was ready to sacrifice himself. In talking to Aunt Pauline he had shown that he was anxious not to lose his situation. For her sake ? Oh yes ; no doubt for her sake. But the words jarred on her. The lightest touch will jar upon a bruise.

And then the loneliness of spirit was so trying ! Solitude may sometimes be a good counsellor for the brain. But it is rarely so for the heart. Nothing so strengthens our best impulses, faiths, and affections as to see them reflected in the soul of a fellow-creature. To the young especially, want of sympathy with their emotions is like want of daylight to a flower. Those who have travelled half way along life's journey are apt to forget how much diffidence is often mingled with a young girl's acceptance of love. The gift seems so unspeak-

ably great! A trembling sense of unreality sometimes comes with the recognition of its preciousness and beauty.

“Can it be? Am *I* really loved so much? Dare I believe it?” These questions are often asked by sensitive young hearts. Happiness begets humility in the finer sort of nature.

Elder spectators, looking on at the old, ever-new story, find it clear and simple enough. But to the actors it may seem complex and difficult. Lookers on, in any case, see but a small portion of the drama of our lives. The intensest part of it—the most poignant tragedy, the sunniest comedy—is played within ourselves by invisible forces. Truly, and in dread earnest, “we are such stuff as dreams are made of.”

All the day May kept Owen's note in her pocket, and when evening came, she had neither answered it, nor written to Mr. Bragg. Owen was right, no doubt, in saying that Mr. Bragg ought to know the truth. But what *was* the truth? In the whirlpool of her agitated thoughts sometimes one answer would float uppermost, and sometimes another. Could her aunt be right in saying that she would prejudice Owen's future by holding him to his word? Holding

him! But it was rather for Owen to hold her. He could not suspect that his claim would be disallowed. He, at least, had no reason to doubt the completeness of her love for him. And then a scarlet blush would burn her cheeks, and hot tears would be forced from her eyes, by a thought which touched her maiden pride to the quick:—was he not leaving it to her to claim him? If she wrote that letter to Mr. Bragg, she would, in fact, be claiming him.

She had told Mr. Bragg, she remembered, when he asked her if her family approved of the man she had promised to marry, that she, at any rate, was proud to be loved by him. Yes; but too proud to accept a love that was not eagerly given. Oh, it was all weariness, and bitterness, and perturbation of spirit!

Sometimes, for a moment, the recollection of Owen's look and Owen's words would pierce the clouds like a ray of sunshine, and her heart would cry out, "Why am I troubled and tormented by lies and foolishness? Owen is loyal, tender, and true—the soul of truth and honour! I need only trust to him, and all will be well." But then Aunt Pauline would repeat some of poor Amelia Simpson's glowing words about

“the charming couple” in Collingwood Terrace—made all the more impressive by the fact that Aunt Pauline really believed them; and the fog would gather again, and she would ask herself, “How if he should be loyal against his inclination?”

In the evening she said to her aunt, “Aunt Pauline, I will go away from London; I will go to Granny. I could not, in any case, continue to take her money for keeping me here. I will go down to Oldchester; that will be best. And Owen and I can arrange afterwards what we will do.” For not by a word would she betray a doubt of Owen. To her aunt she upheld his faithfulness unwaveringly; she upheld it, indeed, in her own heart, chiding down her doubts as one chides down a snarling dog. But though she could chide, she could not remove them; they were there, crouching. She was conscious of their existence, as pain is felt in a dream.

But it did not at all suit Mrs. Dormer-Smith’s views that her niece should go away in that fashion. “I cannot let you leave my house, May,” she said; “I am responsible for you to your father.”

Then May rebelled. She declared that Granny

had been father and mother and friend to her, and that she did not feel she owed any filial duty except to Granny.

Pauline privately thought that she recognized the influence of Mr. Rivers in this speech. She put her handkerchief to her eyes, and observed plaintively that she was sorry May had no touch of affection for *her* or for her uncle, who had striven to treat her as their own child. She was genuinely hurt, and thought she had reason to complain of the girl's ingratitude. May recognized that her aunt was sincere in this. She, too, felt that Aunt Pauline had meant to do well for her, although it had all turned out amiss. She thought of the day of her first arrival in town, of her aunt's affectionate reception of her, and gentle sweetness ever since, until these last unhappy days. Her thoughts went back farther—to the time when the dowager was alive, and her aunt used to see her in the dreary old house at Richmond, and mourn over her clothes, and kiss her kindly when she went away.

With a sudden impulse she knelt down beside Mrs. Dormer-Smith's chair, and put her arms round her.

“Aunt Pauline,” she said, “I know you have meant to be kind. You *have* been kind. No doubt I have given you trouble and anxiety; partly, perhaps, by my fault, but more by my misfortune. I am not insensible of all that. But, dear Aunt Pauline, I want you to believe—do, pray, believe—that it would be cruel to separate me from Owen. Nothing *shall* part us, except his own will,” she added in a low voice. Then, after an instant, she went on, pressing her soft young face against her aunt’s shoulder, “Perhaps you think I don’t care so very deeply for him? Of course you cannot know; you have never seen us together; it has all come upon you quite suddenly. But, indeed, indeed, if I had to give him up, I think it would break my heart. Oh, dear Aunt Pauline, do be kind to us, and help us! I have no mother. And I—I love him so!”

Pauline folded the sobbing girl in her arms. Perhaps she had never felt the great duty she owed to society so hard of fulfilment as at that moment. It was really frightful to think of the havoc wrought by the selfish recklessness of that Nihilist with his hundred and fifty pounds a year! The recollection of the cold-blooded

effrontery with which he had mentioned the sum made her shudder.

For a little time she held her niece silently in a motherly embrace. Then she said softly, "This is very sad and distressing, dear May." And her own eyes were full of tears. "However much I may disapprove"—(the clinging arms around her shoulders relaxed their hold a little here; but she gently pressed the girl close to her again)—"and—and deplore the state of the case, it is most painful to me to see you suffer. But we must not allow feeling to override all considerations of what is right and proper. We must not forget that we have duties—duties towards society."

May quietly removed one arm from her aunt's neck, and began to dry her eyes.

"I don't say that those duties are easy. Those who have no position in the world to keep up may be enviable in some respects. I'm sure I am often tempted to envy the people one sees riding in omnibuses," said Pauline, with what she felt to be a bold but forcible hyperbole. "But *noblesse oblige*. You and I are both born Cheffingtons. It may be all very well for the *bourgeoisie* to indulge in sentiment, and sweet-

hearts, and that sort of thing; but from us society expects something different. There are certain opportunities which, it appears to me, it is absolutely flying in the face of Providence to neglect. I know perfectly well that if the Hautenvilles had the slightest inkling of an idea that you had refused Mr. Bragg, Felicia would come flying back from Rome like a whirlwind. However, I will not dwell on that now. You are dreadfully worn out, my poor child, and your eyes will not be fit to be seen for a week. Rose-water the last thing before going to bed. There is nothing so soothing. Poor child! I *must* steel myself to do my duty, May; but it really is excessively trying. Go to rest now, dear, and sleep off your agitation. To-morrow we will talk more calmly."

May had gently withdrawn herself from her aunt's embrace, and had risen from her knees. "To-morrow I will go to Granny," she said quietly.

"Ah, no, dearest! that cannot be. It is out of the question. But you may write to Mrs. Dobbs and hear what she says."

Pauline had resolved to write herself to Mrs. Dobbs, detailing all she knew (and a great deal

more which she thought she knew) about Mr. Rivers's conduct, and setting forth the change in May's position as the daughter of the future Lord Castlecombe. Things were very different from what they had been three or four months ago. Even Mrs. Dobbs—although she had turned out so disappointingly foolish as to this preposterous love affair—must see that.

“Good night, dear child; you will get over this distress; and you will acknowledge hereafter, I am quite confident, that you have had a good escape. As to that odious woman, *she* is sure to be miserable, whether he marries her or not, that's one comfort!” said Aunt Pauline.

The sight of May's tearful white face exacerbated her virtuous indignation against Mrs. Bransby; nor was this feeling in the slightest degree mitigated by her strong desire that Mrs. Bransby should marry young Rivers, and take him out of their way for ever.

“Good night, Aunt Pauline,” answered May, bending down, and slightly touching her aunt's forehead with her lips.

Pauline embraced the girl tenderly. “Poor darling!” she murmured. “Don't forget the rose-water.”

## CHAPTER X.

WHEN May went up to her room, she neglected her aunt's advice as to the rose-water. She sat down beside the fire, and tried to think of what she had best do.

Help from her aunt was clearly not to be hoped for. She did not feel anger against Aunt Pauline at that moment. She had felt it some time before, but not now. Would it not be like feeling angry with a Chinese for not comprehending English? They simply did not understand one another. There was a barrier between their minds—at least, on the one subject which May had at heart—which, as it seemed, neither of them could pass or penetrate.

She would go to Granny! There she would find love and sympathy, and the sheltering mother-wings she yearned for. And, at the bottom of her heart, there was the half-uncon-

scious feeling that Granny would be a staunch partisan of Owen's, and would be able to justify her trust in him.

But then Aunt Pauline had refused to let her go, and had said she might write. Write! and lose time, and probably fail to convince Granny of the sick longing, the positive *need* she felt to get away from London. There would be correspondence and discussion, and then her uncle would come back, and there would be more discussion, and she could not see Owen. If she wrote to him and he came, he would not be admitted to the house; and she could not go to him.

Well, then, she would run away. There was nothing for it but to run away to Granny, and she made up her mind to do so. Nothing should prevent her. Nothing! She started up and took her purse out of a drawer. She was but slenderly provided with pocket-money, the bulk of her allowance from Mrs. Dobbs being administered by Aunt Pauline. She counted out the contents of the little smart *porte-monnaie* with deep anxiety. There was half a sovereign and some silver. Only fifteen shillings! That would not suffice to carry her to Oldchester

—and then she must have a cab. She could not find her way to the station on foot: and, besides, it would take such a long time! How much time she did not know exactly; but she remembered that it had seemed a rather long drive from the terminus to Kensington. And even if she could walk the distance, she would not know at what hour to set out in order to catch the express train, which would bring her into Oldchester a little after five o'clock the same evening.

A little thrill ran through her veins as she pictured herself arriving at Jessamine Cottage in one of the station flies, looking from the vehicle at the cheerful firelight which would surely be shining from the parlour window at that hour. And then Martha would come to the door, and not recognize her at first in the darkness; and Granny would cry out in surprise at the sound of her voice; and then there would be the dear motherly arms round her, the dear motherly breast to lay her troubled head upon, the blessed sense of rest, and trust, and comfort!

Feverishly May counted and re-counted her money. The fifteen shillings remained in-

exorably fifteen, and no more. All sorts of schemes passed through her mind. Cécile might perhaps lend her some money—or Smithson! But to ask for a loan from either of them would excite too much wonder and suspicion; it would at once be reported to her aunt.

Suddenly there darted into her mind the recollection that Harold had some money. Uncle Frederick had given the child half a sovereign on his birthday, a day or two ago. That was an inspiration! She would ask Harold to lend her the money, and to keep the secret until she should be gone. She knew that she could trust him; the child was staunch, and would be proud of being confided in. Poor little Harold! She remembered that it was he who had told her of Owen's presence in the house on that day—when was it? *Yesterday?* Impossible! It was weeks—months ago, surely! A large part of her life seemed to have passed since then.

May lay down to rest, tired out with the various emotions of the day, but with her brain so beleaguered by shifting thoughts and images that she was certain she should not be able to sleep. But she might at least rest her body,

which felt bruised and weary, as though she had been walking with a heavy burthen all day long. She dropped off to sleep, nevertheless, almost immediately, but soon awoke again with a start and a sensation of falling swiftly, and a vague terror. But at length, towards morning, she did sleep continuously and heavily; and when she next awoke her watch, and a dull yellowish glimmer through the window-blind, told her it was day.

It was a dismal London morning, wet and cold. The wind was howling among the chimney-pots, and sending down showers of soot and smoke, mingled with sleet. It was the day appointed for the funeral of Lucius Cheffington. Mr. Dormer-Smith was not expected home that night; the trains did not fit conveniently. It had therefore been arranged that he should stay at Combe Park until the following morning. Her uncle's absence made her opportunity, May thought. The train she wished to travel by started from London, she believed, at about two o'clock; but she resolved to be at the terminus much earlier. The departure might be at some minutes before two; it would be too dreadful to miss the train!

She felt an irrational hurry and eagerness to be gone, as if each minute's delay might be fatal. She knew the feeling was groundless, but it mastered her.

Preparations she had none to make, except clothing herself in a warm gown, and putting a few toilet necessaries into a little handbag. Mrs. Dormer-Smith always breakfasted late, and, during the cold weather, in her own room; and May shared the morning meal with her uncle. To-day, at her request, Harold and Wilfred were allowed to come downstairs and breakfast with her. This arrangement suited Cécile, who much preferred breakfasting with Smithson in the housekeeper's room to cutting bread-and-butter and pouring out milk-and-water in the nursery.

As soon as the meal was over, May asked Harold for the loan of his golden half-sovereign. His first reply was a severe blow. "You mean that yellow sixpence papa gave me? I haven't got it, Cousin May."

May felt as though the child had struck her. But the next moment he added—

"Papa put it into that little box with a slit in it. You can't get it out. Nobody can get it

out. It belongs to me, you know ; only I can't buy anything with it. Papa says it's proper—property.”

May coaxed him to bring the box to her room, and found that it was closed by a little cheap lock, which it would be perfectly easy to force open. When she proposed this strong measure to Harold, he demurred at first ; but finally yielded, on his cousin's saying that she wanted the money very much, and would be unhappy if she could not get it. A glove-box lined with quilted satin was offered him by way of immediate compensation ; and he was promised that his yellow sixpence should be repaid with ample interest in the shape of coin which would not share the inconvenient dignity of being “property,” but might be freely spent.

May felt as if she were a criminal as she wrenched open the little money-box, and took out the half-sovereign, which lay glistening amid a small heap of pennies and sixpences. Harold stood watching her intently.

“You do look funny, Cousin May !” he said. “Your cheeks are quite white, and your eyes are queer, and your hand burns. Mine is ever so cold. Feel !” He put his little red, cold

hand on May's forehead, and the touch seemed deliciously refreshing to her.

"My head aches a little, Harold. I shall soon be well, though. I am going to see my dear granny. I have often told you about her. She is so good and kind! She makes people well when they are sick or sorry."

Harold's experience of being made well when he was sick was not of such a nature as to make this praise particularly attractive to him.

"I s'pose she gives you powders?" he said, in a disparaging tone, and then added gloomily, "I wouldn't go to her, if I was you."

May kissed him, and assured him that Granny's methods were all pleasant ones.

Wilfred—who had been kept outside the room during the financial transaction, as being too young to be trusted with a secret of such importance—was now admitted in compliance with his reiterated petition; and the two little fellows stood quietly watching their cousin, as in a hurried, feverish way, she put a few articles into her little bag, and took a fur-lined cloak out of the wardrobe, and laid her hat and gloves ready on the bed.

“I say, Cousin May,” said Harold, all at once, “you’ll come back again, sha’n’t you?”

She looked down at the child’s upturned face, with a start. It had not occurred to her before, but the thought now struck her that it was very likely she should never return to that house.

“I will see *you* again, darlings, if I live,” she said, bending down to kiss and embrace the children.

Wilfred, always inclined to be tearful, showed symptoms of setting up a sympathetic wail. But Harold said, with a dogged little setting of the lips—

“Well, if you don’t come back, I know what I shall do. I’ve got all those pennies left in the box, and I shall buy a stick and a bundle, and run away, and go along the high road ever so far, till I find you.”

“I shall come too,” cried Wilfred. “Papa gave *me* sixpence!”

All three looked, indeed, almost equally childish and innocent: Harold and Wilfred, with their project of running away, derived from a nursery story-book, and May clutching the “yellow sixpence” as a talisman that was to carry her afar from all trouble and persecution!

She did not, of course, mean to leave Aunt Pauline in any anxiety as to what had become of her; but she wanted to get a good start. After some deliberation, she wrote a short note to her aunt, and entrusted it to Harold. His instructions were to keep it until luncheon-time, and then give it to his mother. But, in case he heard them asking for May in the house, and wondering where she was, he might deliver it sooner. In any case, he must not give it to Cécile or Smithson, but place it in his mother's own hand. This latter was a service which Harold felt to be a severe one; but he undertook it, with a feeling akin to that of a knight doing battle with giants and dragons, on behalf of his liege lady. Not that his mother would be harsh or cruel; that was quite out of the question. She would not even scold him much, probably; but she would look at him with that complaining air of disapproval, as if he were an unmerited affliction, and call him and his brother "those dreadful little boys," and send him away to the nursery, all which things the child felt keenly in his heart, although he was entirely unable to analyze them in his brain.

May also wrote to Owen, telling him of her

departure, and confessing that she had not written to Mr. Bragg.

“What is the use of my remaining in London, when we cannot meet?” she wrote. “We are as far apart, really, as when you were in Spain. I am worn out, dear Owen, and feel that I need Granny’s help. Do not be angry with me for taking this step without consulting you. You will know I am safe and well-cared for with Granny, who is your friend, instead of having to fight against the arguments of those who are hostile to you.” Then, in a postscript, she added, “Mrs. Simpson came here yesterday. She said she had seen you. You did not send me any message by her. Perhaps you did not know she meant to see me?” This note she put in her pocket to be posted at the station.

It was now past twelve o’clock; for early hours were not kept in the Dormer-Smith household. May’s nervous impatience to be gone was no longer to be resisted. She took the children into the little back room where she had been accustomed to give them their lessons, and on her own responsibility gave them a book full of coloured pictures which Cécile never entrusted to their mischievous little fingers

without her personal supervision. And this unusual indulgence delighted them and absorbed their attention. Then she stole back to her own chamber, and looked out of the window. The rain was still falling at intervals in driving showers. All the better! There was the less chance of any one whom she knew in that neighbourhood being abroad to recognize her.

She had told Smithson immediately after breakfast that she was going to her own room, and did not wish to be disturbed until luncheon-time. She now put on her hat and gloves, wrapped herself in the warm cloak, and carrying a tiny umbrella, which looked very unequal to offering much resistance to the wind and rain that were now sweeping along the street, she crept downstairs and let herself out at the hall door.

She had to walk some distance before reaching a cabstand, and by the time she did so her feet were wet. She had no boots fitted to keep out mud and damp. Aunt Pauline considered thick boots superfluous in London. In the country, of course, it was quite "the right thing" to tramp about in all weathers, and proper *chaussures* must be provided for the

purpose. Although, had it been a dogma laid down by "the best people" that one ought to march barefoot through the mire, Aunt Pauline would have desired May to conform to that as well as to all other sacred ordinances of the social creed.

May was driven to the railway station in due course by a cabman who, on being asked what she had to pay, contented himself with only twice his fare. She found she was much too early for the express train. But there was a slow train going within half an hour. It would not reach Oldchester until after the express, although starting before it; but May decided to travel by it. She was frightened at the idea of remaining in the big terminus, where she might be seen and recognized by some passing acquaintance at any moment. And the idea of being actually on the road to granny, safely shut up in a railway carriage out of reach, was tempting. She took her ticket, the purchase of which reduced her funds to the last shilling, and was put into a carriage by herself—first-class passengers by that train not being numerous.

The girl's head was throbbing, and the damp

chill to her feet made her shiver. She leaned back in a corner of the carriage, and closed her eyes. The train trundled along, its progress arrested by frequent stoppages. The dim daylight faded. At wayside stations the reflections from the lamps shone with a melancholy gleam in inky pools of rain-water. May began to suffer from want of food. She was not hungry; but she felt the need, although not the desire, for some sustenance. At one place where they stopped a quarter of an hour, she thought of getting some tea; but there was a crowd of men in front of a counter where beer and spirits were being sold, but where she saw no tea; and the steam from damp great coats, mingled with tobacco-smoke and close air, made her feel sick. She tottered back to the carriage, carrying with her a huge fossilized bun, which she tried, not very successfully, to nibble at intervals; and at length she fell into an uneasy doze.

She was awakened by the opening of the carriage-door, and a voice saying, "You'll be all right here, sir." A dark lantern flashed in her eyes. A hat-box and dressing-bag were put into the carriage by an obsequious porter.

A gentleman entered and took his seat in the corner farthest away from her. The door was slammed to, and they moved on again.

May put up her hand to her forehead in a dazed manner. She felt confused, and could not, for the moment, understand where she was. Her head ached and throbbed painfully. Then she recollected it all, and wondered what o'clock it was, and whether they were drawing near Oldchester.

“Can you tell me what station that was?” she asked in a faint voice, of her fellow-traveller.

The gentleman turned his head sharply, and peered at her where she sat in the darkness of her corner-seat. He could not distinguish her face; for, before his entrance, she had drawn the movable shade half across the lamp in the roof of the carriage. Thinking he had not heard, or had not understood her, she repeated the question—

“What is the name of that last station, if you please?”

Upon which the gentleman, instead of making any such reply as might have been expected, exclaimed, “Lord bless my soul!” and leaving his place at the other extremity of the carriage,

he came and seated himself opposite to her. "It *is* Miss Cheffington!" he said, in a tone of the utmost wonder. And then May recognized Mr. Bragg.

"My dear young lady, how come you to be travelling alone—by this train? Is anything the matter?"

His tone was so sincere and earnest, his face and manner so gentle and fatherly, that May at once felt she could trust him fully and fearlessly.

"I am so glad it's you, Mr. Bragg, and not a stranger!" she said, putting her hand out to take his.

"Thank you," said Mr. Bragg simply. "I'm glad it *is* me, if I can be of any use to you." Then he asked again, "Is anything the matter?"

"N—no; nothing very serious. I have run away from Aunt Pauline——"

"Run away!"

"And I'm going to Granny. You won't feel it your duty to give me up as a fugitive from justice, will you?" she said, trying to smile, with very tremulous lips.

"Mrs. Dormer-Smith has never been treating you bad or cruel?" said Mr. Bragg wonderingly. "No, no; she *couldn't*."

“No, truly, she could not be consciously cruel to me, or to any one; but she has ideas which—she tried to persuade me—— We don’t understand one another, that’s the truth.”

Mr. Bragg all at once remembered a certain private note despatched to his hotel in town by Mrs. Dormer-Smith, wherein she had assured him that May was an inexperienced child, who didn’t know her own mind, and begged him not to take her too absolutely at her word. He had never replied to that note, having, indeed, nothing to say which it would be agreeable to his correspondent to hear. But he recalled other instances in which ladies of the highest gentility had hunted him (or, rather, not *him*—he had no illusions of vanity on that point—but his large fortune) with a ruthless unscrupulousness which had amazed him, and a gallant perseverance in the teeth of discouragement which almost extorted admiration. And the question stole into his mind, “Could Mrs. Dormer-Smith have been persecuting May on *his* account?” The idea was inexpressibly painful to him. But, anyway, he was relieved and thankful to find that the girl did not shrink from him, but was sweet and gracious as ever.

“Well, to be sure,” he said in his slow, pondering way, “’tis a strange chance that we should meet just now, isn’t it? For I’ve just come from your family place, you know.”

“From where?”

“From the home of your ancestors, as Mr. Theodore Bransby calls it. You asked me the name of that station I got in at. Well, it’s Combe St. Mildred’s, the station for Combe Park you know.”

“Is it? Then we cannot be far from Oldchester.”

“Not very far in miles; but this is an uncommon slow train—stops everywhere. Stops just now at Wendhurst Junction; the express runs through. I’m afraid you’re very tired, Miss Cheffington.” He could not see her at all distinctly, but her voice betrayed great weariness, he thought.

“Not very—yes, rather. It does not matter now; we shall soon be there.”

“Yes,” went on Mr. Bragg, “I’ve been attending the funeral.”

“Oh yes. Poor Lucius! I had forgotten that it was for to-day,” said May, with a self-reproachful feeling. “He was very kind to me,

although, at first, he seemed so dry and eccentric. I think he liked me. I know I liked him."

"Yes; no doubt but what he liked you. *That* can't be disputed. And it does him honour, in my opinion. I suppose I ought to congratulate you, Miss Cheffington—although congratulating may seem out of place with a crape band round your hat. And yet I don't know!"

"Congratulate me! Do you mean because my father is the heir? I think there is more sorrow in Lord Castlecombe's heart than there can be satisfaction in any one else's?" answered May. She was surprised at this manifestation of coarseness of feeling in Mr. Bragg. It was the first she had ever observed in him.

"Your father? Lord bless me, no! Nothing to do with your father. I was alluding to your cousin's last will and testament. I was present when it was read, by Lord Castlecombe's desire, although having no particular claim that I know of. Still, when we came back from the old churchyard, his lordship invited me into the library, and the will was read out then by Wagget, the lawyer, poor Martin Bransby's successor."

"But what has all that to do with me?"

asked May, sitting upright, and holding on by the elbows of the seat. As she did so, everything seemed to waver and swim before her eyes. The cushions on which she sat seemed to be sinking down through the earth. The long fast, her broken sleep on the previous night, the tears she had shed, and all the emotions of this journey, which to her was an adventure fraught with all kinds of anxieties, were telling upon her. But she made a desperate effort to listen—not to be ill, not to give trouble. The train was to stop shortly. She would hold up her courage until then. Had not the gloom caused by the lamp-shade baffled Mr. Bragg's observation, he would have been startled by her countenance.

As it was, he merely answered, "Well, because your cousin has left you all the little property he inherited from his mother. It isn't a great fortune—a matter of four hundred and fifty, or five hundred pound a year, as well as I can make out. But it's all in sound investments—mostly Government securities—and it's settled on you every penny of it."

But May, struggling against a sick sensation of faintness, was scarcely able to grasp the

meaning of what was said to her. Her eyes grew dim ; she half-rose up from her seat, made a vague movement with her hands, such as one makes in falling and clutching at whatever is nearest, and then sank down in a heap on the floor of the carriage, like a wounded bird. She was in a dead swoon, and her young face looked piteously white and wan under the crude glare of the gas, as the train moved slowly, with much resounding clangour, into the big station at Wendhurst Junction.

## CHAPTER XI.

WITH that indescribably dreadful rushing, whirling sensation in the brain, which can never be forgotten by whoever has once experienced it, May Cheffington recovered out of her swoon, and her senses returned to her.

She was lying on a cushioned seat in the ladies' waiting-room at Wendhurst Junction. Her dress had been loosened, her own warm cloak had been spread over her as a coverlet, a woollen shawl was thrown across her feet, and an elderly woman was sprinkling water on her forehead. She opened her eyes, and then shut them again lazily. The glare of the gas made her blink, and the sense of rest was, for the moment, all she wanted.

"She'll do now," said the elderly woman, wiping May's wet forehead with a handkerchief. Then she went to the door of the room, and

half opening it, said to some one outside, "Coming round beautiful, sir; she'll be all right now."

"Who's there?" asked May, in a little feeble, drowsy voice.

"Your pa, dear. He *has* been in a taking about you. But I'm telling him you're as right as right can be. So you are, ain't you? There's a pretty!"

Every second that passed was bringing more clearness to May's mind, more animation to her frame. By the time the elderly woman had finished speaking, May said—

"Oh, ask him to come in. Ask him, pray, to come here and speak to me!"

This message being transmitted, the door was opened, and in walked Mr. Bragg, with a most disturbed and anxious countenance.

May was lying with her head supported on a pillow formed of a great coat hastily rolled up, which the attendant had covered with her own white apron. The pretty soft brown hair, dabbled here and there with water, was hanging in disorder. Her eyes looked very large and bright in her pale face. Mr. Bragg came and stood beside her, and looked at her with a sort

of tender, pitying trepidation : as an amiable giant might contemplate Ariel with a broken wing : longing to help, but fearing to hurt, the delicate creature.

May put out her hand and took hold of Mr. Bragg's as innocently as little Enid might have done. "Oh, I am so sorry!" she said.

"Yes," returned Mr. Bragg, in a subdued voice. "And I'm so sorry, too. But you are feeling better now, ain't you?"

"Oh, but I mean I am sorry for *you*. Sorry to frighten you and to give you so much trouble."

"Trouble! Well, I don't know about that. This good lady here has been taking what trouble there was to take. Not such a vast deal, was it, ma'am?"

The "good lady" who had begun to doubt the correctness of her assumption that these two were father and daughter, smoothed the shawl over May's feet, and murmured that they were not to mention it.

Mr. Bragg pulled out his watch impatiently.

"What! haven't they found anybody yet?" he said. "I sent off a man in a fly ten minutes ago."

The attendant observed apologetically that the first doctor they'd gone to might not have been at home, and then they'd have to go on a goodish bit further.

May started up on her elbow.

"Doctor!" she cried, in dismay. "You haven't sent for a doctor?"

"Yes, I have," answered Mr. Bragg, dismayed in his turn by her evident distress. "I couldn't do less. You might have been dying for anything I knew. You don't know how bad you looked!"

"But I don't want a doctor. I'm quite well. I only want to go on. I want to go on to Granny."

And May's head fell back on the pillow, while a tear forced its way beneath the closed eyelids.

"You came by the slow down, didn't you? Ah, well, there's no passenger train going on that way before eleven-five to-night," observed the elderly female.

At this intelligence the tears poured down May's cheeks, and she turned away her head on the cushion.

"Don't cry! Don't fret!" exclaimed Mr. Bragg. "You shall be in Oldchester within an hour if

the medical man says you're able to travel. I'll speak to the station-master at once. Only we *must* hear what the doctor says, mustn't we? I dursn't run a risk, now durst I? You see that yourself. You're what you might call laid on my conscience to take care of. Good Lord, will this fool of a fellow never come back? I told him to drive as fast as he could pelt."

May was crying now, less from vexation than from exhaustion.

"I'm *not* ill, indeed," she murmured, trying to check her tears.

"But, my dear young lady, people don't faint dead away like that, and look so white and ghastly, without there's *something* the matter. It wasn't the news I told you upset you like that, surely?"

"No; of course not. I think it was because I—I had had no dinner."

"Lord bless me!" cried Mr. Bragg. "Why, you're starving! *That's* what it is, then!"

In his anxious solicitude for her Mr. Bragg would have ordered everything eatable to be brought which the refreshment-room afforded. But he yielded to May's entreaty that she might have a cup of tea and a piece of bread. The

attendant suggested a teaspoonful of brandy in the tea, but at this May shook her head. Mr. Bragg, however, thought the suggestion a good one, and producing a small flask from his travelling bag, insisted on pouring a few drops of its contents into the cup of tea.

“That’s fine old Cognac,” he said; “like a cordial. I wouldn’t ask you to swallow the stuff they sell here; but this’ll do you nothing but good. Dear me, if I’d only thought of giving you some of this before!”

He was quite self-reproachful, and May had some difficulty in persuading him that no blame could possibly attach to him for not having administered a dose of brandy to her as soon as they met in the railway carriage.

By this time the doctor sent for from Wendhurst had arrived. A brief interview with his patient convinced him that she was perfectly well able to travel on as far as Oldchester.

“Rather delicate nervous organization, you see,” said the doctor to Mr. Bragg, when he left May. “And there has been some mental distress; family troubles, she tells me; and then the long fast, and the journey, quite sufficient to account—oh, thanks, thanks. She’ll be all

right after a good night's rest, I haven't the least doubt." And the doctor withdrew with a bow ; for Mr. Bragg, apologizing for having disturbed him and brought him so far through the rain, had put a handsome fee into his hand.

Mr. Bragg had also mentioned in the hearing of the waiting-room attendant, who was hovering inquisitively in the background, that the young lady had been put under his charge, and that he had just left the house of her great-uncle, Lord Castlecombe. He was aware that he himself was far too well-known a man in those parts for the adventure not to be talked about. And his experience of life had taught him that, while it is as difficult to check gossip as to bring a runaway horse to a standstill, yet that both may generally be turned to the right or left, by a cool hand.

His sagacity was amply justified. For the waiting-room attendant, for weeks afterwards, would narrate to passing lady travellers how that sweet young lady, Lord Castlecombe's grandniece, was so cut up by the death of her cousin that she fainted right away coming back from the funeral at Combe Park, not having been able to touch food for more than twelve

hours in consequence of her grief; and how Mr. Bragg, the great Oldchester manufacturer, who was taking charge of the young lady on her journey home, was so kind and anxious, and quite like a father to her; and how they both repeatedly said, "Mrs. Tupp, if it hadn't been for your care and attention, we don't know whatever we *should* have done."

Soon after the doctor had departed, Mr. Bragg came back to May, and informed her that arrangements had been made for their starting for Oldchester in three-quarters of an hour, if that would be agreeable to her. And in reply to her wondering inquiry as to how that could have been managed, he said quietly, "Oh, I've got a special train. I'm a director of this line, and they know me here pretty well."

May had always understood that a special train was an immensely costly matter. But in her ignorance she was by no means sure that it might not be part of the privileges of a railway director to have special trains run for his service gratis, whensoever he should require them. Which, probably, was precisely what Mr. Bragg desired her to suppose.

He then called aside the attendant, and held

a short colloquy with her in the adjoining room, the result of which was to put the worthy Mrs. Tupp into a great fuss and flutter. She dashed at a cupboard in the wall and plunged her hand into it, drawing it out again with a battered old black bonnet dangling by one string, as though she had been fishing at a venture and brought up *that* rather unexpectedly. Further, Mrs. Tupp, with many apologies, took the checked shawl which had been laid over May's feet and put it on her own shoulders; and then, assuring Mr. Bragg, in a speech which it took some time to deliver, that she wouldn't be gone not ten minutes, for her house was close by—better than half a mile before you really come into Wendhurst High Street, going the shortest way from the station—she finally disappeared.

“Now, Miss Cheffington,” said Mr. Bragg, “I want you to do something to oblige me. Will you?”

“Most gladly, if I can; but I'm afraid it will turn out to be something to oblige *me*,” answered May, looking up at him timidly. “Don't you want some food? I dare say you do.”

“Why, no, Miss Cheffington, I can't say I

do; I ate a most uncommon hearty luncheon. I wonder why people always eat so much when there's a funeral going on! Besides, it isn't dinner-time yet, you know."

"Isn't it? I have no idea what o'clock it is. If you told me it was the middle of next week, I don't think I should feel surprised," and she smiled with one of her old, bright looks.

"That's right," said Mr. Bragg. "You're picking up. Well, now, I was going to say that I noticed in the refreshment-room a cold roast fowl, which didn't look at all nasty; no, really, not at all nasty," insisted Mr. Bragg, with the air of one who is aware that his statement may not unreasonably be received with incredulity. "And if you'll let them bring it in here on a tray, and try to eat a bit of it, and drink another cup of tea—no! I promise not to put any brandy in it,—I shall esteem it a favour."

Of course there was no refusing this. But May said wistfully, "I was going to ask you—would you mind—I have something to say to you; and if I don't say it soon that woman will be here. She is coming back immediately."

"Why, as to that, Miss Cheffington, I don't

think she is. From what I can make out, she's the kind of person that never can realize to themselves that fifteen minutes, one after the other, end to end, make up a quarter of an hour. She lost a lot of time here talking, and I saw her stop to tell the young woman at the bar over yonder what a hurry she was in. No; I make no doubt but what she'll be back before we start, but not just yet awhile."

The roast chicken and some freshly made tea were brought in due course, and Mr. Bragg had the satisfaction of seeing May partake of both. Then he professed his readiness to hear what she wished to say.

"Are you comfortable? Light not too much for you? There! Now—provided you don't overtire yourself, nor yet what you might call overtry yourself—I'm listening."

He sat down in a chair nearly opposite to the fire, so that his profile was turned to May, and looked thoughtfully into the hot coals, folding his arms in an attitude of massive quietude which was characteristic of him.

"First of all, you must let me thank you for all your kindness," said May.

"No, don't do that," he answered, without

removing his gaze from the fire. Then he repeated musingly, "No, no; don't do that! Don't ye do that!"

Then ensued a pause. It lasted so long that Mr. Bragg, glancing round at the girl, said—

"That wasn't all you had in your mind to say, was it?"

"No, Mr. Bragg."

"Perhaps you've changed your mind about speaking? Well, don't you worrit yourself. You do just what you feel most agreeable to yourself, you know."

"But I want to speak! I was so anxious to tell you—— This chance, which I could never have expected or dreamt of, gives me the opportunity, and now—now I don't know how to begin!"

He was silent for a moment, pondering. Then he said, "Could I help you? I wonder if it is about a certain conversation you and me had together a few days back?"

"Yes—partly."

"Well, now, you remember that on that occasion I said to you that I hoped we might be friends, you and me—real, true friends. You remember, don't you?"

“Gratefully.”

“Well, I meant what I said. If you have been——” He was about to say “persecuted,” but changed the word. “If you have been any way bothered in consequence of that conversation, I’m truly sorry for it. But don’t let it make any difference as between you and me. Your aunt, Mrs. Dormer-Smith, she’s a most well-meaning lady, and has beautiful manners. But she’s liable to make mistakes like the rest of us. And don’t you fret, you know. You’re going to your grandmother, Mrs. Dobbs, you tell me. And she’s a woman of wonderful good sense. She’ll understand some things better than what your aunt can. It’ll be all right. Don’t you worrit yourself.”

He spoke in a gentle, soothing tone, such as one might use to a child, and kept nodding his head slowly as he spoke, still with his eyes fixed on the fire.

“It isn’t that! I mean—I wanted to tell you something!”

He turned his head now quickly, and looked at her. Her eyes were cast down, and she was plucking nervously at the fur lining of the cloak which lay on the seat beside her.

“Is it something about that confidence that you made me, and that I look upon as an honour, and always shall? Well, now, if you’re going to speak about that, I shall take it as a sign that you really mean to be friends with me, and trust me. And there’s nothing in the world would make me so proud as that you should trust me, full and free.”

Then she told him all the story of her engagement to Owen. How it had been kept secret for three months by her grandmother’s express stipulation. How, when Owen returned to England, they had revealed it to Mrs. Dormer-Smith; how that lady had disapproved and forbidden Owen the house, and had written to Captain Cheffington requesting him to interpose his parental authority; how, finally, May had felt so miserable and lonely, that she had made up her mind to leave her aunt’s house and take refuge with her grandmother.

Mr. Bragg sat like a rock while she told her story, hesitatingly and shyly at first, but gathering courage as she went on. When she first mentioned Owen’s name, his brows contracted for a moment, in a way which might mean anger, or perplexity, or simply surprise. But

he remained otherwise quite unmoved to all appearance, and perfectly silent.

When May had finished her little story, she said timidly, as she had said to him on that memorable day in her aunt's house, "You are not angry, Mr. Bragg?"

He answered nearly as he had answered then, but without looking at her, and keeping his gaze on the fire, "Angry, my child! No; how could I be angry with you? You have never deceived me. You have been true and honest from first to last."

"But I mean, you are not—you are not angry with Owen?"

The answer did not come quite so promptly this time; but after a few seconds, he said, "I don't know that I've the least right to be angry with Mr. Rivers. Only I should have liked it better if he had told me how things were, plain and straightforward, when we were talking about—something else." He brought his speech to an abrupt conclusion.

Upon this May assured him that Owen had never desired secrecy. The engagement had been kept secret in deference to "Granny." And as soon as her aunt knew it, Owen had

urged her (May) to tell Mr. Bragg also, feeling himself in a false position until the truth was revealed.

“I ought to have written to you yesterday,” she said guiltily. “It’s my fault, indeed it is!”

Mr. Bragg got up from his chair, and muttering something about “getting a little air,” walked out on to the long platform.

There was certainly no lack of air outside there. A damp raw wind was driving through the station, making the lamps blink. Mr. Bragg had no great coat, that garment having been rolled up to serve as May’s pillow. But he marched up and down the long platform with his hands behind his back, at a steady and by no means rapid pace, apparently insensible to the cold.

Owen Rivers! So the man May was engaged to was his secretary, Mr. Rivers! That was very surprising. Mr. Rivers was not at all the sort of man he should have expected that exquisite young creature to care about. But Mr. Bragg would have been puzzled to describe the sort of man he would have expected her to care about. He had never seen any man he thought worthy of her, and it might safely be

predicted that he never would ; seeing that Mr. Bragg was in love with May, and would certainly never be in love with May's husband, let him be the finest fellow in the world.

One suspicion he at once dismissed from his mind—that Owen had ever been in the least danger from Mrs. Bransby's fascinations. No ; when a man was betrothed to a girl like May Cheffington he was safe enough from anything of that kind, argued Mr. Bragg. Indeed, his visit to the widow's house had given him a favourable impression of all its inmates. It was impossible, he thought, to be in Mrs. Bransby's presence without perceiving her to be worthy of respect. Searching his memory, he discovered that the first hint of her having any designs on young Rivers had come from Theodore Bransby, and now the motive of the hint began to dawn upon him. Theodore, as he had long ago perceived, hated Rivers. Mr. Bragg now understood why. He paced up and down the draughty platform, solitary and meditative, for full ten minutes. It was a dead time, and the whole station seemed nearly deserted.

Then he returned to the waiting-room, of

which May was still the sole occupant. He stirred the fire into a blaze, and then sat down opposite to it as before. May looked at him nervously and anxiously. She did not venture to speak first.

“I’ll tell you one thing, Miss Cheffington,” said Mr. Bragg, all at once. “What you told me has been a relief to my mind in one way.”

She looked up inquiringly.

“Yes, it has been a relief to my mind, and I’m bound to acknowledge it. I was afraid at one time—indeed, I’d almost made up my mind, though terribly against the grain—that you was engaged to some one else.”

“Some one else!” exclaimed May, opening great eyes of wonder, and speaking in a tone which conveyed her *naïf* persuasion that, in that sense, there did not exist any one else. “Why, whom can you mean?”

Mr. Bragg reflected an instant. Then he said, “I’ll tell you. Yes, I’ll tell you, for he’s tried to thrust it in people’s faces as far as he dared. Mr. Theodore Bransby.”

May fell back on her seat with a gesture of mute astonishment.

“Ah, yes; you’re wondering how I could be

such a blockhead as to think that possible. But if it had been true, you'd ha' wondered how I could be such a blockhead as to think anything else possible," said Mr. Bragg. It was the sole touch of bitterness which escaped him throughout the interview. After a brief pause he went on, "Not, you understand, that I mean to deny Mr. Rivers is far superior to young Bransby—out of all comparison, superior to him. I may, perhaps, consider Mr. Rivers fort'nate beyond his merits. That's a question we won't enter into, because you and me can't help but look at it from different points of view. But I must bear testimony that he's always behaved like a real gentleman in his duties with me; and, so far as I know, he's thoroughly upright and honourable."

May considered this to be but faint praise. But she graciously made allowances. Granny, however, knew better. When Mr. Bragg's words were repeated to Granny, she exclaimed, "Well, done, Joshua Bragg! That was spoken like a generous-minded man."

By this time the engine which was to draw them to Oldchester was in readiness. Mr. Bragg inquired impatiently for the "good lady"

of the waiting-room. And then May learned that that person was to accompany them on the journey, lest Miss Cheffington should need any attendance on the way.

“And, indeed,” said Mrs. Tupp, afterwards, “if the young lady had been a princess royal, there couldn’t have been more fuss made over her. S’loon carriage, and everything! Of course, it was an effort for me to go along with ’em at such short notice, and so entirely unexpected. But as they said to me, ‘Mrs. Tupp,’ they said, ‘had it not have been for your kindness and attention, we don’t know what we should have done.’ And the gentleman certainly made it worth my while.” As he certainly did!

At the present moment, however, Mrs. Tupp was by no means in a complacent frame of mind. She was seen hurriedly approaching from the extremity of the station, very breathless and exhausted, attired in her Sunday bonnet, and shawl to match, confronting Mr. Bragg, who stood, sternly, watch in hand, at the door of the carriage.

“I told you so, Miss Cheffington,” said he to May, who was already made luxuriously com-

fortable within the carriage. "Now, ma'am! No, don't trouble yourself to explain, please. Because in exactly two seconds and a half we're off. *Would* you be so kind?" This to a guard who stood looking on beside the station-master. In a moment they had taken Mrs. Tupp between them, and, assisted from behind by a youthful porter, managed to hoist her into the carriage by main force. Mr. Bragg took his place opposite to May. The whistle sounded, and they glided from beneath the roof of the station, and at an increasing speed across the dark country through the streaming rain.

## CHAPTER XII.

“AND you got jealous! You actually were jealous of Owen and that poor, dear, pretty Mrs. Bransby?”

“Yes, Granny.”

“And you were such a *goose*—I won't use a stronger word, though I could—as to pay any attention to what that idiot of an aunt of yours—Lord forgive me!—chose to say in her anger and disappointment?”

“Yes, Granny.”

“And you let the jabber of poor Amelia Simpson—as kind a soul as ever breathed, but as profitable to listen to as the chirping of sparrows on the house-top—prey upon your mind, and bias your common sense?”

“Yes, Granny.”

“Why, then, I'm ashamed of you, May! Downright ashamed—there now!”

“Oh, thank you, Granny!”

And May seized her grandmother's hands one after the other as the old woman drew them away impatiently, and kissed them in a kind of rapture.

This little scene, with but slight variations, had been enacted several times since May's arrival on the previous evening at Jessamine Cottage. May had ceased to make any excuses for herself, or to endeavour to describe and account for her state of mind. She was only too thankful to have her doubts treated with supreme disdain. To be scolded and chidden, and told that she did not deserve such a true lover as Owen, was such happiness as she could not be grateful enough for!

“Jealous of Owen because a parcel of mischievous magpies had nothing better to do than to dig their foolish bills into a poor widow's reputation? Why, I think you must have had softening of the brain!” Mrs. Dobbs would say. Whereupon May would kneel down, and bury her face in her grandmother's lap, and laugh and cry, and murmur in a smothered voice—

“Bless you, Granny darling!”

“Not but what,” Mrs. Dobbs admitted after-

wards in a private confabulation with Jo Weatherhead, "not but what I do think it's pretty well enough to soften any one's brain to undergo a long course of Mrs. Dormer-Smith. I thought I knew pretty well what she was, and I told you so long ago, Jo Weatherhead, as you must well remember. But, mercy! I hadn't an idea! Her goings on, from what the child tells me, and that *fool* of a letter she's written to me, display a wrongheadedness and an aggravating kind of imbecility that beats everything."

Mr. Weatherhead, for his part, was inclined to be seriously wrathful with everybody who had contributed to make May unhappy—not excluding Mr. Owen Rivers, who, said Jo, might have had more gumption than to rush to Mrs. Bransby's the moment he returned to England, and make such a fuss about her, just as though *she*, and not May, were the object of his solicitude and affection.

"And I think, Sarah," said honest Jo, "that you're too hard on Miranda. It's all very fine, but it seems to me that she *had* enough, and more than enough, to make her uneasy. What with disagreeable things being dinned into her ears from morning to night, and facts that

couldn't be denied, interpreted all wrong, and no friend near to interpret 'em right, and her own modesty and humble-mindedness making her suspect that the young man had offered to her before he was sure of his own mind, and had begun to repent—take it altogether, I consider it's unkind and unfair to bully her as you do, Sarah, and so I tell you."

"You do, do you?" answered Mrs. Dobbs, who had listened with much composure to this attack. "Well, I'm not likely to quarrel with you for *that*. But you needn't worry yourself about May. I think I understand the case pretty well. If you doubt it, just try sympathizing with her, and telling her you think Mr. Rivers behaved bad and thoughtless. You'll see how pleased she'll be with you, and what a lot of gratitude you'll get for taking her part. Try it, Jo."

Mr. Weatherhead, on reflection, did not try it.

The unexpected legacy from Lucius Cheffington to his cousin was hailed by Mrs. Dobbs with heartfelt thankfulness. May's account of it at first was a very vague one. She had only imperfectly heard Mr. Bragg's communication in the railway carriage. And, indeed, at that

moment, it had seemed to her an affair of very secondary importance. But now, when it occurred to her that this money would render them so independent as to put it out of the question for Owen to have to seek his fortune in South America, or any other distant part of the world, she was as elated by it as the best regulated mind could desire.

“And it isn’t so *very* much money, after all, is it, Granny?” she said, with an air of satisfaction, which Mrs. Dobbs did not quite understand.

“Well,” she answered, “it seems a pretty good deal of money to me. Between four and five hundred a year, as I understand.”

“Yes; but it isn’t a *fortune*. Mr. Bragg said it wasn’t a fortune. I mean—it is very little more than Owen has with what he earns, Granny.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Mrs. Dobbs, a light beginning to dawn upon her. “I see. Well, you can’t have the proud satisfaction of marrying him without a penny belonging to you. But perhaps he might take a situation for five years on the Guinea Coast, so as to bring his income up above yours.”

“ Oh, Granny ! ”

“ Why not ? It would be quite as natural and sensible as his wanting to marry poor Mrs. Bransby and her five children. Things are getting too comfortable to be let alone. The least he can do is to undergo a course of yellow fever, and—— ”

“ Granny, how can you ? ” And the young arms were round Granny, and the blushing face hidden in Granny’s breast.

“ Was I ever so foolish about Dobbs, I wonder ? ” murmured Mrs. Dobbs, as she stroked the girl’s hair. “ He was a good-looking young fellow, was Isaac, in our courting days, and a temper like a sunshiny morning, and we were over head and ears in love, I know that ; and— yes, I believe I was every bit as soft-hearted and silly, the Lord be praised ! ”

Mr. Bragg called at Jessamine Cottage about noon the day after May’s return. He asked to see Mrs. Dobbs, and remained talking with her alone for some time. He had made up his mind, he told her, to give Mr. Rivers a permanent post in his employment, if he chose to accept it. He thought of offering him the management of the Oldchester office, if, after a three months’

trial, he found it suited him, and he suited it. There was no technical knowledge of the manufacture needed for this post : merely a clear head, honesty, the power of keeping accounts, and of conducting a large business correspondence.

“ I think he can do it,” said Mr. Bragg ; “ and, if he can, he may.” Then he informed Mrs. Dobbs that he had telegraphed to Mr. Rivers to come down to Oldchester. He would there find, at the office in Friar’s Row, a letter with all details. “ As for me,” said Mr. Bragg, “ I shall cross him on the road. I am going to town by the three-thirty express. You needn’t mention what I’ve told you to Miss C. I thought, perhaps, she’d like better to hear it—as an agreeable bit of news, I hope—from him.”

What more may have passed between them Granny never reported. He went away without seeing May, merely leaving a message, “ His kind regards, and he hoped she was feeling well and rested.”

“ Oh, I wish I had seen him !” exclaimed May, when this message was faithfully delivered by Granny. “ I wanted so much to thank him again. It’s too bad ! I wonder why he went away without seeing me.”

“Do you?” said Granny shortly. “Well, perhaps he thought he’d had bother enough with you for one while. He’s got other things to do besides dancing attendance on young ladies who wander about the world, fainting from want of food, and requiring special trains, and all manner of dainties.” Privately she observed to Mr. Weatherhead that innocence was mighty cruel sometimes, as could be exemplified any day by trusting a young child with a kitten.

“H’m! Mr. Bragg isn’t exactly a kitten, Sarah,” returned Jo.

“True, a kitten will scratch! He’s a man, and a good ’un; and I’ll tell you what, Jo, if Joshua Bragg wanted his shoes blacked, I’d go down on my old knees to do it for him.”

May’s legacy was a great piece of news for Mr. Weatherhead. He was not only delighted at it for her sake, but he enjoyed the importance of disseminating it. Jo went about the city from the house of one acquaintance to another. He also looked in at the Black Bull, where he ordered a glass of brandy-and-water in honour of May’s good fortune. The item of news he brought was a welcome contribution to the general fund of gossip. The subjects of Mr.

Lucius Cheffington's funeral, and how the old lord had taken the death, and whether Captain Cheffington would come back to England now that he was the heir, and make it up with his uncle, were by this time beginning to be worn a little threadbare; or, at all events, had lost their first gloss.

In this way it speedily became known to those interested in the matter that May Cheffington had arrived at her grandmother's house. Among others, the intelligence reached Theodore Bransby. Theodore had been frequently in Oldchester of late, on business of various kinds, chiefly connected with the approaching election. He had never relinquished the hope of winning May; and he believed that the death of Lucius was a circumstance favourable to his hopes. He did not doubt that the new turn of affairs would bring Captain Cheffington to England forthwith; and he as little doubted that many doors—including Mr. Dormer-Smith's—would be opened widely to Captain Cheffington now, which had been closed to him for years. Moreover, Theodore was convinced that one immediate result of her father's presence would be to separate May altogether from Mrs. Dobbs,

and the unfitting associates who haunted her house, and claimed acquaintanceship with Miss Cheffington. May, he knew, had a weak affection for the vulgar old woman. But her father's authority would be strong enough to sever her from Mrs. Dobbs; and, for the rest, Captain Cheffington was his friend; whereas he was instinctively aware that Mrs. Dobbs was not. Latterly, too, ever since his father's death, May's manner to him had been very gentle.

He was meditating these things as he walked up the garden path to Jessamine Cottage. May caught sight of him from the window, and sprang up in consternation, crying to Granny to tell Martha he was not to be admitted. Mrs. Dobbs, however, told May to run upstairs out of the way, and determined to receive the visitor herself.

"I'm so afraid he will persist in asking for me! He is wonderfully obstinate, Granny!" said May, ready to fly upstairs at the first sound of the expected knock at the door.

"Ah!" rejoined Mrs. Dobbs, setting her mouth rather grimly, "so am I. Show the gentleman into the parlour, Martha."

Theodore was ushered into the little room,

and found Mrs. Dobbs seated in state in her big chair. The place was far smaller and poorer than the house in Friar's Row, but in Theodore's eyes it was preferable. There was the possibility of some pretensions to gentility on the part of a dweller in Jessamine Cottage, whereas Friar's Row, though it might, perhaps, be comfortable, was hopelessly ungenteel.

Theodore, when he entered the room, made a low bow, which, unlike his salutation on a former occasion, was distinctly a bow, and not a nondescript gesture halfway between a bow and a nod. He had learned by experience that it did not answer to treat Mrs. Dobbs *de haut en bas*. He also made a movement as if to shake hands; but this Mrs. Dobbs ignored, and asked him to sit down, in a coldly civil voice.

She had been knitting when he came in, but laid the needles and worsted aside on his entrance, and sat looking at him with her hands folded in her lap.

Theodore could scarcely tell why, but this action seemed to prelude nothing pleasant. There was an air of being armed at all points about the old woman, as she sat there looking at him with a steady attention unshared by her

knitting. But possibly the work had been laid aside out of politeness. In any case, Theodore told himself that *he* was not likely to be disconcerted by such a trifle.

“How do you do, Mrs. Dobbs?” he asked, when he was seated.

“Very well, I’m much obliged to you.”

Here ensued a pause.

“It is some time since we met, Mrs. Dobbs.”

“It’s over a twelvemonth since you called at my house in Friar’s Row, Mr. Theodore Bransby.”

Another pause.

“There has been trouble in the Cheffington family since then,” said Theodore, at length. “Ah, how strange and unexpected was the death of the eldest son! Lucius, of course, was always delicate. Still, he might have lived. His death has been a sad blow to Lord Castlecombe.”

Theodore considered himself to be condescending and conciliatory, in thus assuming that Mrs. Dobbs took some part in the affliction of the noble family. In his heart he resented her having the most distant connection with them. But he intended to be polite.

“There has been trouble in other families besides the Cheffingtons,” returned Mrs. Dobbs gravely, with her eyes on the young man’s mourning garments.

“Oh! Yes. Of course. But no trouble with which you can be expected to concern yourself,” he answered. He was annoyed, and preserved his smooth manner only by an effort.

“And, anyway,” continued Mrs. Dobbs, “Lord Castlecombe’s sons have left no fatherless children, nor widows, nor any one to be desolate and oppressed—like your poor father did.”

Theodore raised his eyebrows in his favourite supercilious fashion. “Your figurative language is a little stronger than the case requires,” he said.

“Widowhood is a desolate thing, and poverty oppressive. There’s no figure in that, I’m sorry to say.”

“Oh, really? I was not aware,” said Theodore, nettled, in spite of himself, into showing some *hauteur*, “that Mrs. Bransby and her family had excited so much interest in you!”

“No; I dare say not. I believe you were not. I think it very likely you’d be surprised

if you knew how many folks in Oldchester and out of it are interested in them."

The young man sat silent, casting about for something to say which should put down this old woman, without absolutely quarrelling with her. He was glad to remember that he had always disliked her. But he had come there with a purpose, and he did not intend to be turned aside from it. Seeing that he did not speak, Mrs. Dobbs said, "Might I ask if you did me the favour to call merely to condole upon the death of my late daughter's husband's cousin?"

This was an opening for what he wanted to say, and he availed himself of it. He replied, stiffly, that the principal object of his visit had been to see Miss Cheffington, who, he was told, had returned to Oldchester; and that, in one sense, his visit might be held to be congratulatory, inasmuch as Miss Cheffington inherited something worth having under her cousin's will. He did not fear being suspected of any interested motive here. Besides that he was rich enough to make the money a matter of secondary importance; his conscience was absolutely clear on this score. He had desired,

and offered, to marry May when she was penniless; he still desired it, but truly none the more for her inheritance.

“Oh! So you’ve heard of the legacy, have you?” said Mrs. Dobbs.

“Heard of it! My good lady, I was present at the reading of the will. There were very few persons at the funeral; it was poor Lucius’s wish that it should be private, but I thought it my duty to attend. There are peculiar relations between the family and myself, which made me desirous of paying that compliment to his memory. I think there was no other stranger present except Mr. Bragg. You have heard of him? Of course! All Oldchester persons are acquainted with the name of Bragg. After the ceremony Lord Castlecombe invited us into the library, and the will was read. I understood that the deceased had wished its contents to be made known as soon as possible.”

This narration of his distinguished treatment at Combe Park was soothing to the young man’s self-esteem. He ended his speech with patronizing suavity. But Mrs. Dobbs remained silent and irresponsive.

“I wish,” said Theodore, after vainly awaiting

a word from her, "to see Miss Cheffington, if you please."

Mrs. Dobbs slowly shook her head. He repeated the request, in a louder and more peremptory tone.

"Oh, I heard you quite well before," she said composedly; "but I'm sorry to say your wish can't be complied with."

"Miss Cheffington is in this house, is she not?"

"Yes, she is at home; but you can't see her."

Theodore grew a shade paler than usual, and answered sharply, "But I insist upon seeing her." He threw aside the mask of civility. It evidently was wasted here.

"'Insist' is an unmannerly word to use; and a ridiculous one under the circumstances—which, perhaps, you'll mind more. You can't see my granddaughter."

He glared at her in a white rage. Theodore's anger was never of the blazing, explosive sort. If fire typifies that passion in most persons, in him it resembled frost. His metal turned cold in wrath; but it would skin the fingers which incautiously touched it. A fit of serious anger was apt, also, to make him feel ill and tremulous.

“May I ask why I cannot see her?” he said, almost setting his teeth as he spoke.

“Because she wishes to avoid you. She fled away when she saw you coming,” answered Mrs. Dobbs, with pitiless frankness.

He drew two or three long breaths, like a person who has been running hard, before saying, “That is very strange! It is only a few days ago that Miss Cheffington was sitting beside me at dinner; talking to me in the sweetest and most gracious manner.”

“As to sitting beside you, I suppose she had to sit where she was put! And as to sweetness—no doubt she was civil. But, at any rate, she declines to see you now. She has said so as plain as plain English can express it.”

“Your statement is incredible. Suppose I say I don’t believe it! What guarantee have I that you are telling me the truth?”

“None at all,” she answered quietly.

He stared blankly for a moment. Then he said, “Mrs. Dobbs, for some reason, or no reason, you hate me. That is a matter of perfect indifference to me.” (His white lips, twitching nostrils, and icily gleaming eyes, told a different tale.) “But I am not accustomed to

be treated with impertinence by persons of your class."

"Only by your betters?" interpolated Mrs. Dobbs.

"And, moreover, I shall take immediate steps to inform Captain Cheffington of your behaviour. He will scarcely approve his daughter's remaining with a person who— who——"

"Says, she'd rather not see Mr. Theodore Bransby."

"Who insults his friends. With regard to Miss Cheffington, I have no doubt you will endeavour to poison her mind against me. But you may possibly find yourself baffled. I have made proposals to Miss Cheffington—no doubt you are acquainted with the fact—which, although not immediately accepted, were not definitively rejected: at least, not by the young lady herself. And I shall take an answer from no one else. Miss Cheffington's demeanour to me, of late, has been distinctly encouraging. If it be now changed, I shall know quite well to whose low cunning and insolent interference to attribute it. But you may find yourself mistaken in your reckoning, Mrs. Dobbs. Captain

Cheffington is my friend : and Captain Cheffington will hardly be disposed to leave his daughter in such hands when I tell him all."

He was speaking in a laboured way, and his lips and hands were tremulous.

Mrs. Dobbs looked at him gravely, but with no trace of anger. "Look here," she said when he paused, apparently from want of breath—"you may as well know it first as last—May is engaged to be married; has been engaged more than three months."

Theodore gave a kind of gasp, and turned of so ghastly a pallor that Mrs. Dobbs, without another word, went to a closet in the room, unlocked it, took out a decanter with some sherry in it, poured out a brimming glassful of the wine, and, placing one hand behind the young man's head, put the glass to his lips with the other. He made a feeble movement to reject it.

"Off with it!" she said in the voice of a nurse talking to a refractory child.

He swallowed the sherry without further resistance, and a tinge of colour began to return to his face.

"You haven't got too much strength," observed Mrs. Dobbs, as she stood and watched

him. "Your mother was delicate, and I suppose you take after her."

She had no intention, no consciousness, of doing so, but, in speaking thus, she touched a sensitive chord. Any allusion to his mother's feeble constitution made him nervous. He closed his eyes, and murmured that he feared he had caught a chill at the funeral; that the sensation of shivering pointed to that.

Mrs. Dobbs stood looking down on him as he sat with his head thrown back in the chair.

"And so, my lad, you think I hate you?" she said. "Why, I should be sorry to be obliged to hate your father's son; or, for that matter, your mother's son either. She was a good, quiet, peaceable sort of young woman. I remember her well, and your grandfather, old Rabbitt, that kept the Castlecombe Arms when I was young. No; I don't hate you. Not a bit! But I'll tell you what I do hate; I hate to see young creatures, that ought by rights to be generous, and trusting, and affectionate, and maybe a little bit foolish—there's a kind of foolishness that's better than over-wisdom in the young—I hate to see 'em setting themselves up, valuing themselves on their 'cuteness;

ashamed of them that have gone before 'em. I hate to see 'em hard-hearted to the helpless. Young things may be cruel from thoughtlessness; but, to be cruel out of meanness—well, I'll own I do hate that. But as for you, it comes into my head that perhaps I've been a bit too hard on you."

Mrs. Dobbs here laid her broad hand on his shoulder. He would fain have shaken it off. But, although the wine had greatly restored him, he thought it prudent to remain quiet, and recover himself completely before going away.

"You are but a lad to me," continued Mrs. Dobbs. "And perhaps I've been hard on you. There's a deal of excuse to be made. You love my granddaughter, after your fashion—and nobody can love better than his best—and it's bitter not to be loved again. You'll get over it. Folks with redder blood in their veins than you, have got over it before to-day. But I know you can't think so now; and it's bitter. But if you'll take an old woman's advice—an old woman that knew your mother and grandmother, and is old enough to be your grandmother herself—you'll just make up your mind to bear a certain amount of pain without flinch-

ing:—like as if you'd got a bullet in battle, or broke your collar-bone out hunting—and turn your thoughts to helping other folks in their trouble. There's no cure for the heartache like that, take my word for it. Come now, you just face it like a man, and try my recipe! You've got good means and good abilities. Do some good with 'em! Some young fellows when they're out of spirits, take to climbing up mountains, slaughtering wild beasts, or getting into scrimmages with savages—by the way, I did hear that you were going into Parliament—but there's your stepmother now, with her five children, your young brothers and sisters, on her hands. Just you go in for making her life easier. There's a good work ready and waiting for you.”

Theodore moved his shoulder brusquely, and Mrs. Dobbs immediately withdrew her hand. He stood up and said stiffly, “I must offer you my acknowledgments for the wine you administered.”

Mrs. Dobbs merely waved her hand, as though putting that aside, and continued to look at him, with a grave expression, which was not without a certain broad, motherly compassion.

“I presume the name of the man to whom Miss Cheffington has engaged herself is not a secret?”

“It is Mrs. Hadlow’s nephew; Mr. Owen Rivers,” answered Mrs. Dobbs simply.

He had felt as sure of what she was going to say as though he had seen the words printed before him; nevertheless, the sound of the name seemed to pierce him like a sword-blade. He drew himself up with a strong effort to be cutting and contemptuous. But as he went on speaking, he lost his self-command and prudence.

“Miss Cheffington is to be congratulated, indeed! Captain Cheffington will, no doubt, be delighted at the alliance you have contrived for his daughter! Mr. Owen Rivers! A clerk in Mr. Bragg’s counting-house—which, however, is probably the most respectable occupation he has ever followed! Mr. Owen Rivers, whose name is scandalously connected throughout Oldchester with that of the person you were so kind as to recommend to my good offices just now! A person whose conduct disgraces my family, and dishonours my father’s memory! Mr. Owen Rivers, who——”

“Hush! Hold your tongue!” cried Mrs.

Dobbs, fairly clapping one hand over his mouth, and pointing with the other to the window.

There at the bottom of the garden was Owen, hurriedly alighting from a cab; and May, who had witnessed his arrival from an upper window, presently came flying down the pathway into his arms.

Theodore had but a lightning-swift glimpse of this little scene, for Mrs. Dobbs saying, "Come along here!" resolutely pulled him by the arm into a back room, and so to a door opening on to a lane behind the house. He was astonished at this summary proceeding, but he affected somewhat more bewilderment than he really felt, so as to cover his retreat. And he muttered something about having to deal with a mad woman.

"Now go!" said Mrs. Dobbs, opening the door. "I can forgive a deal to love and jealousy and disappointment, but that cowardly lie is not to be forgiven. To think that you—*you*—should be Martin Bransby's son! Why, it's enough to make your father turn in his grave!"

And with that she thrust him out, and shut the door upon him.

## CHAPTER XIII.

MRS. DORMER-SMITH'S affectionate letter to her brother produced a result which she had not at all anticipated when she wrote it. He arrived in England by the next steamboat from Ostend, and took up his quarters in her house. He had come ostensibly for the purpose of visiting Combe Park, and patching up a reconciliation with his uncle. This, indeed, was a pet scheme with Pauline. She had hinted at it in writing to her brother. Now that George and "poor dear Lucius" were gone, Lord Castlecombe might not dislike to be on good terms with his heir. He was old and lonely, and, as Pauline's correspondents had assured her, greatly broken down by the death of his sons.

Frederick scarcely knew which to regret the most—his niece's departure or his brother-in-law's arrival. He missed May very much, but

very shortly he began to be reconciled to her engagement. Rivers was a gentleman and an honest fellow, and might be trusted to take care of May's money, which Mr. Dormer-Smith thought would be otherwise in imminent jeopardy from the arrival on the scene of May's papa.

That gentleman, indeed, who had at first taken the news of his daughter's engagement with supreme indifference, showed some lively symptoms of disapprobation on learning the fact of Lucius's bequest. A daughter dependent on the bounty of Mrs. Dobbs for food, shelter, and raiment, was an uninteresting person enough; but a daughter who possessed between four and five hundred a-year of her own, ought not to be allowed to marry without her father's consent. Frederick dryly remarked that May's capital was stringently tied up in the hands of trustees, whether she were married or single. Whereupon Augustus indulged in very strong language respecting his dead cousin; and declared that the terms of the will were a pointed and intentional insult to *him*, who was his child's natural guardian.

Still, although the capital was secure, Frederick

knew that the income was not. And the more he observed his brother-in-law, the more he felt how desirable it was that May should have a husband to take care of her.

Captain Cheffington had not improved during his years of exile. He smoked all day long; and even at night in his bed, incensing May's chamber, which he occupied, with clouds of tobacco-smoke. He had contracted other unpleasant habits, and his temper was diabolical. He had not brought his wife to England with him. He would sit for hours with his slippered feet on the fender in his sister's dressing-room, railing at the absent Mrs. Augustus Cheffington in a way which was most grievous to Pauline; for he showed not the least reticence in the presence of Smithson. Talk of "floating"—how would it be possible to "float" a woman of whom her own husband spoke in that way?

He had no very grave charges to bring against La Bianca after all. She had been faithful to him, and stuck to him, and worked for him. But he bewailed his fate in having tied himself to "a third-rate Italian opera-singer, without an idea in her head beyond painting her face and squalling!" It was just

his cursed luck. Why couldn't Lucius die, since he meant to die, six months earlier?

At another time, he would openly rejoice in the death of his cousins, and express a fervent hope that the old boy wasn't going to last much longer. Pauline would remonstrate, and put her handkerchief to her eyes, and beg her brother not to speak so heartlessly of his own family: especially of "poor dear Lucius." But Augustus pooh-pooh'd this as confounded humbug. He was uncommonly glad to be the heir of Combe Park, and thought it about time that his family, and his country, and the human race generally, made him some amends for the years he had passed under a cloud! *He* would show them how to enjoy life when he came into possession of "his property," as he had taken to call Lord Castlecombe's estate. He planned out several changes in the disposal of the land, and decided what rent he would take for the house and home-park. For he did not intend to live in this d——d foggy little island, where one had bronchitis if one hadn't got rheumatism, and rheumatism if one hadn't got bronchitis. In one respect his visions coincided with his sister's, since he talked of having a villa on the

Mediterranean coast, not far from Monte Carlo ; but they differed from hers in several important points : notably in providing no place for her in the villa.

Frederick would sometimes throw a shade over these rosy dreams by observing doggedly that, for his part, he doubted the likelihood of Lord Castlecombe's speedy decease, and that, looking at them both, he was inclined to consider Uncle George's life the better of the two ; so that, on the whole, domestic life in Mr. Dormer-Smith's smart house at Kensington was by no means harmonious. Meanwhile Pauline, with considerable pains and earnest meditation, composed a letter to her uncle on behalf of Augustus ; she did not venture to entrust the task to Augustus himself. It would be impossible to persuade him to be as smooth and conciliatory as the case demanded. But she wrote a letter which, she thought, combined diplomacy with pathos, and from which she hoped for some satisfactory result. But the reply she received by return of post was of such a nature that she hastily thrust it into the fire lest Augustus should see it, and told him and her husband that " poor dear Uncle George

was not yet equal to the effort of seeing Augustus, after the great shock he had suffered." Uncle George had, in fact, stated in the plainest terms that if Captain Cheffington ventured to show himself in Combe Park, the servants had orders to turn him out forcibly!

The object for which Captain Cheffington had come to England at that time being thus balked, it would have appeared natural that he should return to his wife in Brussels. But day followed day, until nearly three weeks had elapsed since Lucius Cheffington's death, and still Augustus remained at Kensington. Every morning, with a dreadful regularity, Mr. Dormer-Smith inquired of his wife if she knew whether her brother were going away in the course of that day; and every morning the shower of tears with which Mrs. Dormer-Smith received the inquiry, and which generally formed her only answer to it, became more copious. Augustus, on the whole, was the least uncomfortable of the trio. He had contrived to raise a little ready money on his expectations; he was well lodged and well fed; the change to London (now that he had a few pounds in his pocket) was not unwelcome after

Brussels; and as to his brother-in-law's undisguised dislike to his presence, he had grown far too callous to heed it, so long as it suited him to ignore it. Not but that he took note of it in his mind keenly enough, and promised himself the pleasure of paying off Frederick with interest, as soon as he should come into "his property."

All this time a humble household in Oldchester was a great deal happier than the wintry days were long. The news of Captain Cheffington's arrival in England had at first disturbed May. Perhaps he might insist on seeing her; and she shrank from seeing him. But she thought it her duty to write to him and inform him herself of her engagement; and neither Owen nor her grandmother opposed her doing so.

If May had any lingering illusion about her father, or any hope that he would manifest some gleam of parental tenderness towards her, the illusion and the hope were short-lived. The reply to her communications was a hurried scrawl, haughtily regretting that Mr. Owen Rivers had not thought proper to wait upon him and ask his consent to the marriage,

which he totally disapproved of! And adding that although Rivers of Riversmead was undoubtedly good blood, it appeared that the traditions of gentlemanlike behaviour had been lost by the present bearer of the name, since he entered the service of a tradesman. The letter ended with a peremptory demand for fifty pounds.

May and Owen had planned that granny was to return to Friar's Row on their marriage. Mr. Bragg was willing to break the lease which he held, and to remove his office to another house hard by. And Mrs. Dobbs, with all her goods and chattels, was to be reinstated in her old home. As this scheme was to be kept secret from Granny for the present, it involved a vast deal of delightful mystery and plotting. Jo Weatherhead was admitted to the conspiracy, and enjoyed it with the keenest relish.

A word or two had been said as to Mrs. Dobbs taking up her abode with the young couple when they should be married. But this Granny instantly and inflexibly refused.

“No, no, children; I'm not quite so foolish as that! It's very well for Owen to take May for better for worse. But it would be a little

too much to take May and her grandmother for better for worse !”

Of course it was not long before Owen took his betrothed to see Canon and Mrs. Hadlow. They walked together to the old house in College Quad, where, however, their news had preceded them. The Hadlows were very cordial. Both of them were very fond of May ; and Aunt Jane loudly hoped that Owen appreciated his good fortune, and declared it was far above his deserts, though in her heart she thought no girl in England too good for her favourite nephew. The lovers were affectionately bidden to come again as often as they could, and brighten up the old place with the sight of their happy young faces.

They agreed, as they walked home together, that the home in College Quad seemed a little gloomy and lonely without Conny. Conny was still away. She had only been at home on a flying visit of a few days during several months past. She was now staying with a Lady Belcraft, who had a handsome house at Combe St. Mildred's. Mrs. Hadlow had told them so ; and a word or two, uttered in the same breath, about Theodore Bransby being often in that

neighbourhood, suggested a suspicion that Theodore might be thinking of returning to his old love. This idea annoyed Owen extremely. The hint which suggested it had been dropped almost in the moment of saying "good-bye" to Mrs. Hadlow, or he would have attempted at once to sound her on the subject.

He had interrogated his aunt privately—while May was being petted and made much of by the kind old canon—as to a rumour which was rife in Oldchester—namely, that Constance had been betrothed to Lucius Cheffington. But Aunt Jane positively denied this. She admitted that the gossip had reached her own ears, and that she had spoken to her daughter about it.

"But Conny entirely disabused me of any such notion. She said that, in the first place, nothing was farther from Lucius's thoughts than love-making; and that, in the second place, it would have been a most imprudent marriage for her, since she could only expect to be speedily left a widow with a very slender jointure. Conny was never romantic, you know," said Aunt Jane, with a quick, half-humorous glance at her nephew.

Owen began to consider with himself whether

it might not be his duty to acquaint Canon Hadlow with many parts of Theodore's conduct which were certainly unknown to him. All inquiries conducted either by himself or by Jo Weatherhead—who ferreted out information with untiring zeal and delight in the task—showed more and more plainly that the calumnies concerning Mrs. Bransby could be traced, for the most part, to her step-son, and in no single instance beyond him. May had long ago acquitted Constance Hadlow of speaking or writing evil things of the widow. Constance had not, in fact, expended any attention whatever on the Bransby family since their departure from Oldchester.

She was spending her time very agreeably. Her hostess, Lady Belcraft, was a widow. She was a great crony of Mrs. Griffin's, and delighted with Mrs. Griffin's *protégée*. Having, so to speak, retired from business on her own account (her two daughters being married and settled long ago), Lady Belcraft was still most willing to renew the toils of the chase on behalf of a friend. She and Mrs. Griffin had carefully examined the county list of possible matches for Constance Hadlow; and had agreed that there

was good hope of a speedy find, a capital run, and a successful finish.

It so happened that on the same afternoon when May and Owen were paying their visit to College Quad, Theodore Bransby was making a call at the residence of Lady Belcraft in Combe St. Mildred's.

Ever since his interview with Mrs. Dobbs—now several days ago—Theodore had been considering his own case with minute and concentrated attention. We are all of us, it must be owned, supremely interesting to ourselves; but Theodore's interest in himself was of a jealously exclusive kind. His health was undoubtedly delicate. He had felt the loss of a home to which he could repair when he was ailing or out of sorts ever since his father's death. He found, too, that he was apt to become hipped and nervous when alone. He came to the conclusion that he needed a wife to take care of him, and, after grave consideration, he resolved to marry Constance Hadlow.

If he could by a word have destroyed Rivers and obtained possession of May Cheffington, he would have said that word without hesitation or remorse; but since that could not be, he did

not intend to wear the willow. He would marry Constance. That she would have accepted him long ago he was well assured; and his circumstances were far more prosperous now than in those days. Canon and Mrs. Hadlow could not but be impressed by his disinterestedness in coming forward now that he was in the enjoyment of a handsome independence. And, on his side, he believed he was choosing prudently. If he were ill, the attentions of a wife—a refined and cultured woman, dependent, moreover, on him for the comfort of her daily life—would be far preferable to those of a hireling nurse, who would have the power of going away whenever she found her position disagreeable. But this was only one side of the question. When he grew stronger (he always looked forward to growing stronger) Constance would be an admirable helpmate from a social point of view. She had acquired influential friends, was received in the best houses, and would do his taste infinite credit, and whether as a politician or a barrister she might have it in her power to forward his ambitions.

It was as the result of these meditations that he called at Lady Belcraft's.

He had met her occasionally in society, and she knew perfectly who he was. But there was a distinct film of ice over the politeness with which she received him when he was ushered into her drawing-room. She thought this little attorney's son was taking something like a liberty in appearing there uninvited. She forgave him, however, immediately when, in his most correct manner, he asked for Miss Hadlow.

Really it might do, thought Lady Belcraft. The young man was very well off, and presentable, and all that, and dear Conny, though simply charming, had not a penny in the world (neither was dear Conny her ladyship's own daughter). Yes; she positively thought it might do! She was so sorry that Miss Hadlow was not within, but she expected her every moment. She was walking, she believed, in the park. "The Park" at Combe St. Mildred's meant Combe Park. Oh, yes; she was aware that Mr. Bransby was an old acquaintance. Playfellows from childhood? Really! That sort of thing always had such a hold on one—was so extremely—— Oh, there was dear Conny coming up the drive.

Lady Belcraft sent a message by a servant, begging Miss Hadlow to come into the drawing-room, where she presently appeared.

She was dressed in a winter toilet of carefully-studied simplicity, and looked radiantly handsome. Theodore gazed at her as if he had never seen her before. Self-possessed she had always been, but she had now acquired something more than that—an air of conscious distinction—of “being somebody,” as Theodore phrased it in his own mind, which he admired and wondered at.

“Here’s an old friend of yours, Conny,” said Lady Belcraft.

Constance had been pulling off her gloves as she entered the room, and she now extended a white, well cared-for hand to Theodore, with a cool little, “Oh, how d’ye do?” and the faintest of smiles.

Her hostess thought within herself that if there really was anything between her and young Bransby, Conny’s behaviour was marvellous, and that all the training bestowed on her own daughters had left them far below the point of finish attained by this provincial clergyman’s daughter.

“Did you walk far? Are you tired?” she asked.

“No, thanks, dear Lady Belcraft; I am not at all tired. I went to my favourite group of beeches. It’s a capital day for walking. And what is the news in Oldchester, Theodore?”

Her calling him “Theodore” in the old familiar way seemed to have the mysterious effect of putting him under her feet; it implied such superiority and security. Theodore was conscious of this, but it did not displease him; she had doubtless resented his not making the expected offer earlier. He had thought when he met her in London that hurt *amoure propre* had much to do with her cavalier treatment of him. But he had a charm to smoothe her ruffled plumes.

After a little commonplace conversation, Lady Belcraft recollected some orders which she wanted to give personally to her gardener, and, with a brief excuse, left the room. Constance perfectly understood why she had done so, Theodore did not; but he seized the occasion which, he imagined, hazard had thrown in his way.

“I am very glad of this opportunity of speak-

ing with you alone, Constance," he began very solemnly.

There was no trepidation such as he had felt in speaking to May. He neither trembled, nor stammered, nor grew hot and cold by turns. That chapter was closed. He was turning over a new and quite different leaf.

"Yes?" said Constance. "Really!" She removed her hat, smoothed the thick dark braids of her hair before a mirror, and sat down with graceful composure.

"I don't think we have met, Constance, since——" He glanced at his black clothes.

"No; I think not. I was very sorry. I begged mamma to give you a message from me when she wrote to condole with Mrs. Bransby."

"I merely allude to that sad subject in order to assure you that I am not unmindful of what is proper and becoming under the circumstances; and lest you should think me guilty of heartless precipitation."

He was beginning to enjoy the rounding off of his sentences—a pleasure he had never tasted in May's company; strong emotion being unfavourable to polished periods.

"Oh, I don't think you were ever guilty of

precipitation," answered Constance quietly. But the mirror opposite reflected a flash of her handsome eyes.

"Nothing," continued Theodore, "could be in worse taste than to neglect the accustomed forms of respect. A period of twelve months would not be too long to mourn for a parent so excellent as my father; but six months could not be considered to outrage decorum. And I should not urge——"

He paused. He had been on the point of saying that he would not press for the marriage taking place before the summer, when he happily remembered that he had not yet gone through the form of asking Constance whether she would marry him or not. To him it seemed so like merely taking up the thread of a story temporarily interrupted, that he had lost sight of the probability that Constance's mind had not been keeping pace with his own on the subject. But it recurred to him in time.

Constance was sitting on a low couch near the fireside, at some distance from him. He now took his place beside her. There was a certain awkwardness in making a proposal of marriage across a spacious room.

“There can be no need of many words between us, Constance,” he began, with as much tenderness of manner as he could call up. Then he stopped. Constance had drawn away the skirt of her gown on the side next to him, and was examining it attentively. “What is the matter?” he asked.

“I thought you had accidentally set your boot on the hem of my frock,” she said. “And the roads are so muddy, although it is fine overhead! But it’s all right. I beg your pardon: you were saying——?”

This interruption was disconcerting. He had had in his head an elaborate sentence which was now dispersed and irrecoverable. He must begin all over again. However, when fairly started once more, his eloquence did not fail him. He offered his hand and fortune to Miss Hadlow, “in good set terms.”

She was silent when he had finished, and he ventured to take her hand.

“Am I not to have an answer, dearest Constance?” he asked.

She drew her hand away very gently and with perfect composure before saying, as she looked full at him with her fine dark eyes—

“You are not joking, then?”

“*Joking!*”

“Well, I know you are not given to joking, and this would certainly be an inconceivably bad joke; but it is almost more inconceivable that you should be in earnest.”

He was fairly bewildered, and doubtful of her meaning.

“However,” she continued, “if you really expect a serious answer, you must have it. No, thank you.”

He stood up erect and stiff, as if moved by a spring. She remained leaning back in an easy attitude on the couch, and looking at him.

“I—— Constance!—— I don’t understand you!” he exclaimed.

“I refuse you,” she replied in a gentle voice, and with her best society drawl. “Distinctly, decidedly, and unhesitatingly. I think you *must* understand that. Won’t you stay and see Lady Belcraft?” (Theodore had taken up his hat, and was moving towards the door.) “Oh, very well. I will make your excuses.”

She rang the bell, which was within reach of her hand, and Theodore walked out of the room without proffering another word.

## CHAPTER XIV.

CANON HADLOW had resolved that his daughter, when she returned to Oldchester for May's wedding, to which she was, of course, invited, should remain in her own home at least for some months. He had grown very discontented with her prolonged and frequent absences. Mrs. Hadlow, at the earnest request of Constance, backed by a polite invitation from Lady Belcraft, went to Combe St. Mildred's to remain there one day, and bring her daughter back with her.

But, instead of doing so, she sent a telegram home, desiring that a box of clothes might be packed and sent to her; and, most surprising of all, the box was to be addressed to Dover. This item of news was disseminated by the Hadlows' servant, whose duty it was to see the trunk conveyed to the railway station. And

the woman declared she believed, from what she could make out, that her mistress was going to France.

Of course, the canon knew the truth. But the canon was not visible to callers. He had a cold, and kept his room. All the circle of the Hadlows' acquaintance—and the circle seemed to be immediately widened by the dropping into its midst of this puzzling bit of news, as a stone dropped into water is surrounded by a ring of ever-increasing circumference—were, however, spared further conjecture by the publication, in due course, of the supplement to the *Times* newspaper of Tuesday, the twenty-seventh of February. It contained the announcement of the marriage at the British Embassy in Paris, on the preceding Saturday, of Viscount Castlecombe to Constance Jane, only daughter of the Reverend Edward Hadlow, Canon of Oldchester.

The general public, or as much of it as had ever heard of the parties concerned—for that vast entity the general public is really as divisible as a jelly-fish; each portion being perfect for all purposes of its existence, when cut off from the rest—was ranged, as is usual in such cases, in two main camps; those who

couldn't have believed it beforehand, though an angel from Heaven had announced it, and those who had all along had their suspicions, and were not so *very* much surprised as you expected. But only the nearest friends and relatives of the family enjoyed the not inconsiderable advantage for judging the matter, of really knowing anything about it.

Owen was the first person whom his uncle admitted to see him. The old man was greatly overcome. His daughter's marriage was a blow to him. It gave a rude shock to the ideal Constance, whom he had loved and admired with a sort of delicate paternal chivalry. There could be no question of love in such a marriage as this—no question, even, of gratitude, or reverence, or any of the finer feelings. To the pure-hearted, simple-minded old man, it seemed to be a sad degradation for his daughter. Not a soul except his wife ever fully understood his state of mind on the subject; for he spoke of it to no one. Mrs. Dobbs, perhaps, came nearest to doing so. She had a great reverence and admiration for the canon, and considerable sympathetic insight into his feelings. And when, afterwards, people said in her presence

how proud and elated Canon Hadlow must be at his daughter's making so great a match, she would tighten her lips, and observe *sotto voce* that you might as well expect a Christian saint to be gratified by being decorated with the peacock's feather of a Chinese mandarin.

When Mrs. Hadlow came home, of course more particulars were divulged. Many came out by degrees in confidential talks with her nephew. Mrs. Hadlow spoke to him quite openly.

Constance had earnestly begged her mother to go to her at Combe St. Mildred's, and almost immediately on her arrival there had announced that she was about to marry Lord Castlecombe, and that everything was arranged for the ceremony to take place in Paris; since, under the circumstances, they both felt that it could not be managed too quietly. She much wished her mother and father to accompany her to Paris, in order that everything might be *en règle*.

When the first astonishment was over, Mrs. Hadlow impulsively tried to dissuade her daughter from taking this step. It was dreadful, it was really monstrous to think of her

Conny marrying that old man, who was several years the senior of her own father! A man, too, of a hard, unamiable character—one who was much feared, little respected, and loved not at all! She was revolted by the idea. And as to the canon, she could not bear to think of what he would feel. He would never allow it! It was hopeless to think of gaining his consent.

When her mother's tearful excitement had somewhat subsided, Constance pointed out that she had a very sincere regard for Lord Castlecombe, who had behaved in every way excellently towards her; that as to "falling in love," as depicted by poets and novelists, she had her private opinion, which was, briefly, that all that was about as historically true as the adventures of Oberon and Titania; and that, at all events, she was sufficiently acquainted with her own character to be persuaded that *she* was incapable of that species of temporary insanity. Further, with regard to her father's consent, she deeply regretted to hear that he was likely to withhold it; since she would, in that case, be compelled to marry without it, which would be very painful to her. (And when she said that it would be painful to her,

her mother knew that she spoke quite sincerely.) She was of full age to judge for herself in the matter, and could not think of breaking her word to Lord Castlecombe. She further pointed out that although, of course, Oldchester people would chatter about her—she spoke already, as though she were looking down on those common mortals from the serene and luminous elevation of some fixed star—yet there could be nothing scandalous said if she were known to be accompanied to Paris by her mother. As to papa, his health, and his duties, and many other excuses might be alleged for his not undertaking a journey at that inclement season.

Constance spoke with perfect calmness, and without the slightest disrespect of manner. But Mrs. Hadlow was made aware within five minutes that nothing on earth which she had power to say or do would, for an instant, shake her daughter's resolve to be a viscountess. There was nothing to be done but to put the best face possible on the matter, and go to Paris. She could not allow her child to travel thither alone. The bridegroom had already preceded them, to make all needful preparations.

Poor Mrs. Hadlow was in such a whirl of

confusion and emotion as scarcely to know what she was doing or saying. "Had Lady Belcraft known of this?" she asked. Constance smiled rather scornfully, as she replied that nobody would be more surprised than poor dear Lady Belcraft when she should learn the news. No; Conny was not going to share the glory of her capture with any one. And, in truth, such glory as belonged to it was all her own.

Mrs. Griffin, on hearing the news, was at first half inclined to be sharp and spiteful at being kept in the dark. (Although, of course, she did not allow herself to continue in that vulgar frame of mind.) But Lady Belcraft was subdued, and almost prostrate in spirit before this gifted young creature. "She's a wonderful young woman, my dear—a wonderful young woman!" declared Lady Belcraft.

Just before they landed from the steamboat at Calais, Constance said to her mother, "Mamma, I do think you and papa are the most unworldly people I ever heard of! You have never thought of saying a single word about settlements."

Mrs. Hadlow started, and looked blankly at her daughter. She stood rebuked. "I have

felt, ever since you told me, as if I had received a stunning blow on the head which deprived me of half my faculties," she answered. "But I ought to have thought of that. It is not too late now, perhaps, to secure some provision for you; is it, Conny?"

"I should not have thought of marrying Lord Castlecombe without a proper settlement, mamma. We might have been married a fortnight ago if it had not been for the delays of the lawyers; although matters were simplified for them by my having nothing at all! I am quite satisfied with the arrangements, and I hope you and papa will be so too. I think you will admit that Lord Castlecombe has been very generous."

Mrs. Hadlow was a woman of bright intelligence, and she had been apt to consider Conny a little below the Rivers' standard of brains; but now, as she looked and listened, she felt tempted to exclaim, like Lady Belcraft, that this was a wonderful young woman.

But what words can paint the effect of that fateful announcement in the *Times* on the family party assembled in Mr. Dormer-Smith's house at Kensington!

Augustus behaved so outrageously, used such vituperative language, and comported himself altogether with such violence, that his brother-in-law privately fortified himself by securing the presence of a policeman well in view of the windows, on the opposite side of the way, before requesting Captain Cheffington to withdraw at once from his house. Much to his surprise, and immensely to his relief, the request was complied with promptly. Captain Cheffington disappeared in a hansom cab, with a smart travelling-bag, and followed by a second vehicle containing two well-filled portmanteaus. Whereas, as James cynically remarked to the cook, a cigar-case and a tooth-pick was about the amount of his luggage when he arrived! James had not been fee'd. Augustus asserted his claim to be considered one of the family by swearing at the servants, and never giving any of them a sixpence. The explanation of this speedy departure was shortly forthcoming in the shape of a variety of bills, which poured in with astonishing rapidity. Augustus also, as has been stated, had been clever enough to raise a little money on the strength of his heirship. And Mr. Dormer-Smith had to endure some

contumely from creditors who had looked to getting something like twenty-five per cent. above market-prices out of the captain, and were roused to a frenzy of moral indignation when they discovered that he was safe out of England, and beyond their reach.

To Pauline the blow was the more severe because she persuaded herself that she had been the victim of black ingratitude on the part of Constance.

“*That* girl!” she would murmur, weeping. “That girl, whom I held up as a model—and who really did behave perfectly when she was here—quite *perfectly*—to think of that girl being the one to turn round on the family in this treacherous way! I do not know how I shall endure to see her face again.”

“Then don’t see it,” suggested Frederick. “If you think she has behaved so badly, cut her, and have done with it.”

“Cut her!” exclaimed Pauline, sitting up from among the pillows in her *chaise longue*, with a vinagrette in one hand and a pocket-handkerchief in the other. “How can I cut my uncle’s wife? She is now Lady Castlecombe, Frederick! You seem to have no idea

that private feelings must give way to the duty one owes to society. I wonder who will present her. I dare say Mrs. Griffin will persuade the duchess to do it. It would not surprise me at all. Probably they will open the town house now, and come up every season. Cut her! Frederick, you talk like that Nihilist who is going to marry poor darling May!"

Frederick more than ever thought that "poor darling May" was to be congratulated on having secured the love and protection of the honest young Englishman to whom his wife persisted in attributing anarchical principles. He wrote a kind letter, in which he proposed to come down to Oldchester and give his niece away at the marriage, if that would be agreeable to her and Mr. Rivers. May's affectionate heart was overjoyed by this proposal. A joint letter, signed by May and Owen, was sent by return of post, in which both Aunt Pauline and Uncle Frederick were warmly invited to the wedding. And May put in a special petition that Harold and Wilfred should be allowed to be present. Granny would find a nook for them in Jessamine Cottage.

May also sent an invitation to Mrs. Bransby

to be present, but she replied that she would not bring her black gown to be a blot on their brightness, but that no more loving prayers would be breathed for their happiness than those of their affectionate friend Louisa Bransby.

Neither did Aunt Pauline accept the invitation. She did not write unkindly. Her reply seemed to be, indeed, a sort of homily on the text—

“How all unconscious of their doom  
The little victims play.”

It was a sad business, but she was mildly compassionate and forbearing. But the best of all was that Harold and Wilfred were to be permitted to come. In fact, their father insisted on bringing them, to their inexpressible rapture. They took to Granny at once, and she had to keep a watch upon her tongue lest she should let slip before Mr. Dormer-Smith the words she had said on first seeing the children—

“Poor dear motherless little fellows!”

On the wedding morning a letter arrived for Mrs. Dobbs from Mr. Bragg. Mr. Bragg was about to sail for Buenos Ayres on a twelve-months' visit to his son. Before going away, he thought it would be agreeable to May and

her husband, he wrote, to be the means of communicating something to Mrs. Bransby, which he hoped would be to her advantage. The new premises which he had taken for his office, now removed from Friars' Row, were to be furnished throughout, and a couple of rooms reserved for Mr. Bragg's use whenever he wished to come into Oldchester from his country house. Under these circumstances, a resident housekeeper would be required to look after the place and govern the servants. Mr. Bragg hoped that Mrs. Bransby would do him the favour to accept this post, and that she would find herself more comfortable among her old friends in Oldchester, than in the wilderness of London. Moreover, he enclosed a cheque for a handsome sum of money, as to the disposal of which he thus wrote :—

“The cheque I would ask Mr. Rivers to apply to paying young Martin Bransby's school fees for the ensuing year. And any little matter that may be over can be used for the boy's books, and so on. He is a fine boy, I think, and worth helping. Learning is a great thing. I never had it myself, but I don't undervalue it for that. I have thought that this would

perhaps be the best way I could find of what you might call testifying my appreciation of Mr. Rivers's services to me. I hope he will accept it as a wedding present."

To May he sent no gift.

"I could offer her nothing but dross," he wrote, "and I don't want her thoughts of me to be mixed up with gold and diamonds, and such poor things as are oftentimes the best a rich man has to give. Some young ladies would be disappointed at this. I don't believe she will. When she's dressed and ready to go to church, just you please kiss her forehead with a blessing in your mind, and—you needn't say anything to her, but just say to yourself, 'this is from Joshua Bragg.'"

Of the wedding, it may be said that, although it was no doubt in many respects like other weddings, yet in several it was peculiar. And its peculiarities were in such flagrant violation of the regulations of society, that it was almost providential Mrs. Dormer-Smith escaped witnessing it.

In the first place, although Uncle Frederick was present, a welcome and an honoured guest, May insisted that Mr. Weatherhead should give

her away. And, perhaps, nothing she had ever done in her life had caused Granny more heart-felt satisfaction. As to "Uncle Jo," the honour nearly overpowered him. His appearance in wedding garments, with an enormous white waistcoat, and a bright rose-coloured tie, was an abiding joy to all the little boys of the neighbourhood who were lucky enough to behold him.

Then the Miss Pipers fluttered into the church in such extremely bridal attire, with long white veils attached to their bonnets, as utterly to eclipse May, in her quiet travelling dress. May, however, wore two ornaments of considerable value: a pearl bracelet and brooch, which had arrived the previous evening. Inside each morocco case had been found a slip of paper bearing respectively the inscriptions:—"To Miranda Cheffington, with the good wishes of her great-uncle;" and "To dear May, with the love of her affectionate friend, Constance Castlecombe."

Lastly, Amelia Simpson was so florid in her raiment, and so exuberant in her delight, as to be the observed of all observers. In her excitement, she backed heavily upon people behind

her, and trod upon the gowns of people before her; knelt down at the wrong moment, and then, discovering her mistake, jumped up again at the very instant when the rest of the congregation were sinking on to their knees; dropped her metal-clasped prayer-book with a crash in a solemn pause of silence; lost her pocket-handkerchief, and, in her near-sightedness and confusion, seized on Miss Polly Piper's long white veil to wipe her tear-dimmed spectacles; and was, altogether, a severe trial to the nerves of the officiating clergyman.

Many other friends were there. Major Mitton, with his amiable face, and erect, soldierly figure; Dr. Hatch, who said he doubted whether he could snatch a moment to witness the ceremony, but who remained to the very last, to wish the young couple God speed! when they drove away from the door of the church on their honeymoon trip. Even Sebastian Bach Simpson was in a softened mood. The entire absence of pretension about the whole affair conciliated his good will; and he played Mendelssohns' "Wedding March" as a voluntary, when the bride and bridegroom walked down the church arm-in-arm, with unusual spirit and heartiness.

And so May and Owen began their voyage of life together, followed by many good wishes, and by less of envy, hatred, malice, and uncharitableness, than perhaps fall to the lot of most mortals.

Marriage, which is the end of most story-books, is but the beginning of many stories; but this chronicle cannot follow the personages who have figured in it much beyond that fateful chapter of the wedding-day.

One or two facts may, however, be told, and a few outlines sketched in, to indicate the course of future events on a more or less distant horizon.

For a long time Pauline clung, with the soft pertinacity which was part of her character, to the hope that "poor dear Augustus" might yet inherit the Castlecombe acres, and resume his place in society. Uncle George could not live for ever! But one fine day the bells of Combe St. Mildred's rang a merry peal, and the news spread like wildfire through the village that an heir was born in a foreign city called Naples; and that my lord and my lady—who was doing extremely well—and the all-important baby

were coming home to Combe Park as soon as ever my lady was strong enough to travel.

Then, indeed, Pauline felt that Providence had decided against her brother, and that her own duty to society lay plain and clear before her.

During the following year or two she suffered considerable persecution in the shape of appeals for money from Augustus. The first were in a haughty strain, but before long they sank into the whine of the regular begging-letter writer. She gave him what she could, for to the last she had a soft place in her heart for her brother. But her husband, finding the case hopeless, forbade her to give any more, and, as far as he could, prevented Augustus's letters from reaching her.

Captain Cheffington then brought his wife to London. He had little fear of his creditors, having by this time sunk so low as not to be worth powder and shot. He got his wife engaged, under her real name, at a music-hall of the third class, and caused paragraphs to be inserted in sundry sporting and theatrical prints to the effect that "the Mrs. Augustus Cheffington, whose Italian bravura-singing was so successful a feature in the nightly entertain-

ment," etc., etc., was the niece by marriage of a peer of the realm—Viscount Castlecombe of Combe Park; and he furnished his relations liberally with copies of these papers. Probably he had some hope that they would buy him off to save the honour of the family, but in this he was totally at fault. The old lord who, in the joy of his little son's birth seemed to have taken a new lease of life, merely chuckled at "Gus's making such a confounded ass of himself," and cared not a snap of the fingers for anything he could say or do.

Owen Rivers privately supplied his father-in-law with all the necessaries, and some of the comforts, of life, on condition that he was never to annoy May by making any kind of appeal to her; on the first infringement of this condition the supplies would be withdrawn. And in order to secure its not being all lost at the gaming-table, Owen paid the money into the hands of La Bianca, who, according to her lights, was by no means a bad wife, and was certainly a much better one than her selfish and graceless husband deserved.

Mrs. Bransby gratefully accepted the position offered to her, and fulfilled its duties entirely to

Mr. Bragg's satisfaction. Indeed, when the latter returned from Buenos Ayres, he took the habit of spending a good deal of time in the apartment reserved for him over the office. The house—one of the roomy, old-fashioned mansions in Friar's Row—contained ample accommodation for Mrs. Bransby's family. Miss Enid completed, and maintained, her conquest of Mr. Bragg; and some persons thought that it was this young lady's personal attractions which caused him to spend so much of his time in Friar's Row; but other observers thought differently. And, indeed, quite latterly, Mrs. Dormer-Smith has had her ill-opinion of Mrs. Bransby strengthened by certain rumours touching the likelihood of that lady's promotion to a higher position in Mr. Bragg's household than that of paid housekeeper.

“If *that* should ever come off,” says Mrs. Dormer-Smith, “I suppose poor dear foolish May's eyes will be opened at last; and she may repent when it is too late having thrown away her magnificent opportunity, to be picked up by that *designing* woman.”

When these mysterious forecasts are imparted to Lady Castlecombe, she only smiles faintly,

and says in her quiet, well-bred way, "Well, but why not?" My lady has her own views on the subject—views in which the discomfiture and mortification of Theodore Bransby form a conspicuous and pleasing feature. But hitherto nothing has happened to justify the previsions of either lady on this score.

Theodore is not often seen in Oldchester now. The place is full of disagreeable associations for him. His political candidature was a failure: the Castlecombe influence on his behalf having been suddenly withdrawn after his lordship's marriage—greatly to the perplexity of his lordship's agent!

Nevertheless, Mr. Theodore Bransby by no means despairs of being able to write M.P. after his name at some future time. But if he ever does enter Parliament, it will probably be on what our Continental neighbours term "the extreme Left of the Chamber." For Theodore's political opinions have undergone a great revulsion, and he is now loftily contemptuous of the territorial aristocracy. In fact, he has been heard to support advanced theories of an almost Communistic complexion—stopping short, however, at the confiscation of other people's pro-

perty, and maintaining the inviolability of Government Stock, of which he is a large holder. This sort of theory he finds to be quite compatible with the pursuit of fashionable society.

Although surrounded by every luxury which can minister to his personal comfort, he is not at all extravagant, and, indeed, saves more than half his annual income. This he does, not from positive avarice, but because he feels ever more and more strongly that money is power. Moreover, it will be well to have a handsome sum in hand whenever he marries: for he is still firmly minded to find a wife who will devote herself to taking care of him. Quite recently a paragraph has appeared in the Oldchester newspaper announcing the probability of a marriage between "our distinguished townsman, Mr. Theodore Bransby, whose career at the Bar is being watched with pride and pleasure in his native city, and the Lady Euphemia Haggistown, daughter of the Earl of Cauldkail, etc., etc., etc."

Lady Euphemia is a faded, timid, gentlewoman of some five or six-and-thirty years of age, with neither money nor beauty. She is sometimes haunted by the ghost of a romantic attachment to a penniless young navy officer

lost at sea hard upon twenty years ago. But she has a soft, submissive desire to win the kindly regard of the remarkably stiff and cold young gentleman whom her father has decided she is to marry whenever he shall see fit to ask her. But poor Lady Effie does not succeed in softening the implacable correctness of her suitor's demeanour into anything very humanly sympathetic. Theodore is quite certain to make the most of his wife's title and social standing in dealing with the world in general, but it is to be feared that he may think fit to balance matters by tyrannizing over her in private with some rigour.

Mrs. Dormer-Smith often moralizes her family history, entangling herself in many metaphysical knots in the course of her cogitations as to what would have happened if something else had happened which never did happen!

Of course, if poor dear Augustus had not thrown himself away on Susan Dobbs things would have been very different. But even in spite of that, much might have been retrieved had he not made a second and still more shocking *mésalliance* with a strolling Italian singer; because, probaby, if Augustus had come home

after the death of his cousin Lucius in a proper spirit, and under not discreditable circumstances, and had conducted himself so as to conciliate his uncle, the old man would never have thought of marrying again. Constance Hadlow would never have become Viscountess Castlecombe, and no heir would have appeared to thrust Augustus from his inheritance.

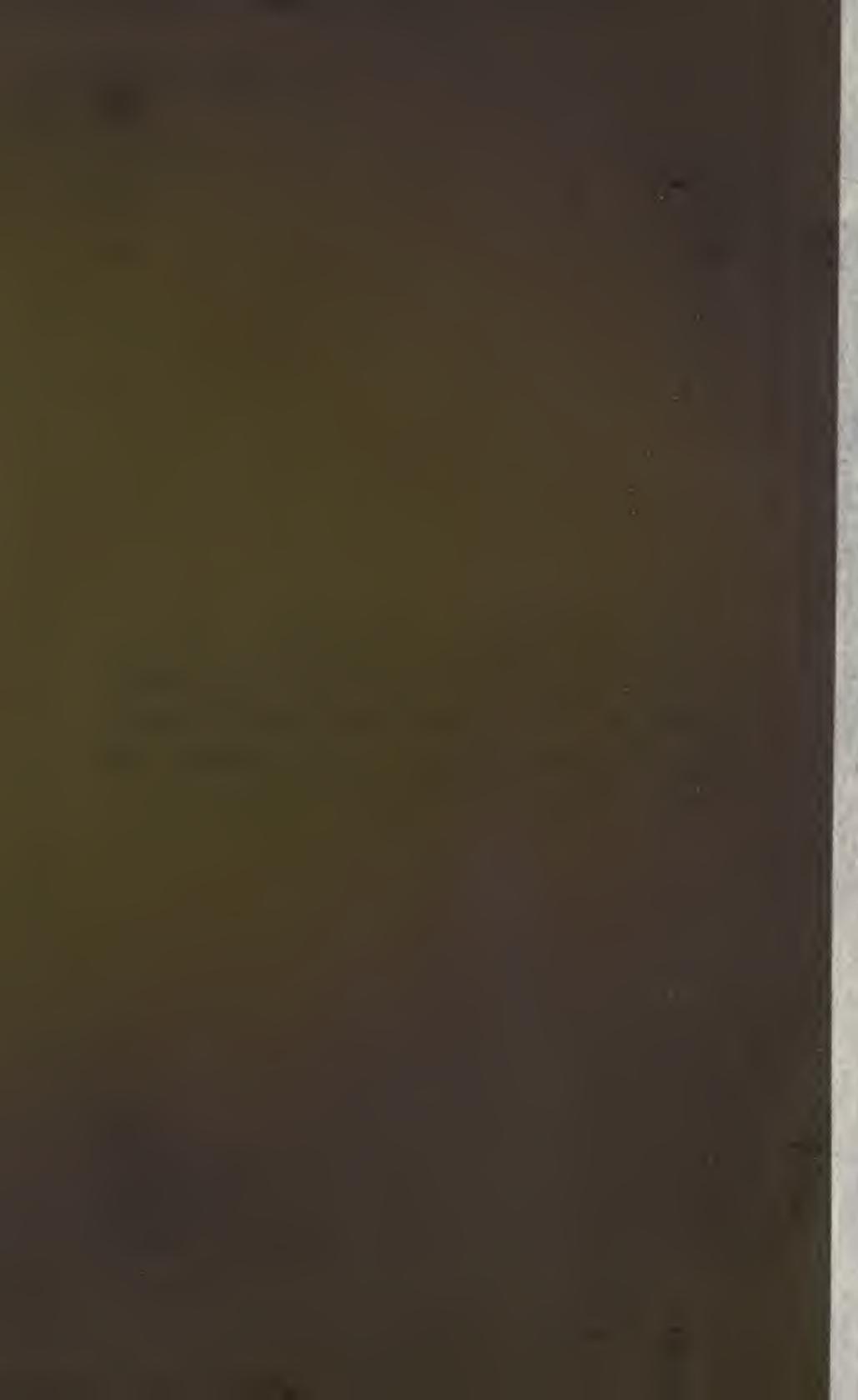
There was an ever-recurring difficulty in fixing the exact point at which "poor dear Augustus's misfortunes" had become irretrievable. So that, although Pauline was on perfectly civil terms with the Castlecombes, and although Frederick was asked down to Combe Park for the shooting every season, and although my lady was happy to receive the Dormer-Smiths (with the least little indefinable touch of condescension) whenever she was at her house in town; yet, in her confidential moments, Pauline's intimate friends were never quite sure to which of the three momentous alliances she was alluding, when she talked plaintively of "That Unfortunate Marriage."

THE END.

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