THE

THREE CHANCES.

BY

THE AUTHORESS OF "THE FAIR CAREW."

You must speak louder, my Master is deaf.

SHAKSPEARE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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THE THREE CHANCES.

CHAPTER I.

"I DO NOT LIKE YOU, DOCTOR FELL."

One day longer was Colonel Hussey left to exult in that Fool's Paradise of his, the fancied constancy of his Maria: but then she promised herself to be *so* prompt —*so* energetic on the morrow! Part of that pledge she did indeed redeem when the morning came, for she was up early and busily employed, writing, re-writing, copying, and tearing—unable to the very end to satisfy herself with the fulfilment of her task.

The admittance of one pure bright flame into the deep caverns of Maria's heart, did for her all that a higher influence had failed to accomplish; demonstrating, without a shadow of doubt, that the reasons she had formerly advanced with such selfish complacency, for bartering her passive hand for the warm and generous heart which Colonel Hussey had placed at her disposal, were, in truth, based on grounds of the lowest expediency. She had been eloquent in her defence to Lucy Ainsworth; and indeed it seemed to her that she was eminently success-

ful in distinguishing her own individual case from the matches of interest or convenience against which she was in the habit of declaiming; never perceiving, till it was too late, that the temptations which prevailed with her, were not one whit more excusable than the common allurements to which common minds succumbed, but which it cost her no struggle to resist.

Maria had not scrupled to confess that the nearest approach to earthly happiness her imagination could picture, was the living, to the cultivation of her intellect, in a state of apathetic ease, free from all outward inconvenience and disquiet; and she had fancied from the qualities of the man, and his position in life, that an union with Colonel Hussey would afford her as fair a chance of this medium state of felicity, as there was reason or right to expect.

Never had it occurred to her, presumptuous as she was, to question her powers of endurance, or her efficiency for the duties she was undertaking; until her acquaintance with Manley Frere aroused her to a better knowledge of herself, and the capacities of her nature; and caused her to pant for a higher and happier destiny, than to become the companion of one with whom she held no common bond of sympathy: whose principles and prejudices were foreign to any of her own—whose society wearied her—and whom, till the last moment they spent together, she could never regard with any livelier sentiment than that of a respectful indifference.

In what alone concerned Maria Palliser, there was meet retribution and most impartial judgment in the turn of fortune which had caused her to feel and acknowledge her error; but it was hard upon Colonel Hussey to be made the victim of her selfish mistake: nor could her sternest accuser be more painfully conscious of the wrong she had done him, than his false but repentant mistress.

Excuses for breaking her engagement with him—reasons persuasive and satisfactory enough—had thronged upon her when she communed only with herself; but in finally setting her thoughts in array for the enlightenment of another, Maria could not but perceive how very few of these arguments were calculated to convince even the world at large—least of all the man she was preparing to forsake.

If she grounded her objections to marrying him on scruples of recent date, and professed to have only just become sensible of the nature of her rash promise, and to have had some sudden revelation of the holiness and high mystery of this same marriage contract, which some can enter upon so thoughtlessly—but which she now perceived to require a heart more tender and affections far more lively than it was in her gift to bestow—then he would have reason to complain that she had suffered her convictions to lie dormant so many months, and, with a strange refinement of caprice, had kept the chain of their compact inviolate, till the wedding-day was fixed.

Yet should she go farther back in the history of her feelings, and confess to him how wearisome from the very first—how all but intolerable—had been to her the prospect of passing her days in his society, he would surely charge her then with the basest and most mercenary motives for accepting his regard.

How plain it now appeared that Lucy Ainsworth knew her better than she knew herself! Long ago her cousin, with wonderful accuracy, had foretold the very dilemma in which she found herself involved.

There were moments while she wrote, when, oppressed by the difficulties of her subject, and quite incapable of throwing an air of decent consistency over any part of it, Maria meditated revealing the actual truth; frankly and without reserve confessing, that while Colonel Hussey occupied the same place as formerly in her calm and sisterly regard, another had possessed himself of her affections: the disclosure could scarcely increase the measure of his mortification, and would certainly save her the pain of being further solicited. But she was by nature reserved and distrustful of her human kindred; and she had suffered so much, and, as she feared, to so little purpose, in volunteering the same humiliating confession to Mr. Cranston—no! there was indelicacy in proclaiming an unreciprocated attachment, which only the extremest case could warrant or excuse.

Cut off from publishing the real grounds of her refusal, therefore, all that was left to allege might be

easily comprehended in the brief answer which, on an occasion very similar, was addressed and forwarded to a certain Dr. Fell: though, like many instances assuming to be parallel, there may be found a flaw in this also; for whereas the lady of anonymous memory could *not* tell the reason why she refused the Doctor, Miss Palliser would have had not the least difficulty in adding up all the little items which made the Colonel objectionable to *her*.

What defence Maria *did* set up we are not bound to record: it is enough to say that the production in nowise satisfied her; and it was only the salutary conviction that something *must* be done, which prevailed upon her at last to finish one of the many lame beginnings that lay strewn before her.

Her tears were well-nigh blinding her as she closed this momentous epistle, and wrote, for perhaps the last time, an address so familiar to her eyes; and which, until then, had never been written but with the steadiest hand and the calmest equability.

"Poor fellow! how glad he would be to see her handwriting after so long—and to him so unaccountable—a silence! How eagerly he would break the seal she was impressing, and then—and then!——Ah! why was she born to bring such heavy disappointment upon one so much better than herself?"

Finally she desired her letter to be taken immediately to the post; and then, though experiencing a certain sense

of relief from present embarrassment, Maria could not help feeling that with her own hands she had signed a deed which must sever her eternally from the only true friend she possessed on earth. She was returning to her own room after despatching this letter, when they told her that a lady and gentleman were in the drawing-room inquiring expressly for her, but the servant who brought the message had forgotten their names.

Supposing them to be merely some old acquaintances of the Pelhams or Pallisers, whom, because they were mixed up with family recollections, Mrs. Otway was distinguishing with the title of friend, and would be expecting her young visiter to recognize with a cordiality she had little inclination to manifest, Maria was tempted to send an apology, and remain in her room till these people had departed. But, on the other hand, bearing in mind that the intruders might be an improvement on the irksome *tête-à-tête* she must otherwise endure with her hostess, she relinquished her solitude, and proceeded, though very leisurely, to the apartment where the visiters had been shown.

She entered, but paused before taking another step, transfixed with wonder not unmixed with apprehension; for sitting with Mrs. Otway, their heads inclined together in low and earnest discourse, were David Divet and his eldest daughter. The sight of persons so intimately connected with all which was engrossing and agitating her, startled her so completely, that in her first

confusion she could only imagine that all was come to light, and that the Divets had hastened to forestall their injured cousin with their own bitter, and, alas! too just upbraiding. Maria forgot that the contents of her letter to the Colonel were still a profound secret, not to be guessed by the sprightliest fancy, or seen by human eye, till the delivery of the second post at Woolwich.

Even when they rose up to accost her, the sad and troubled looks of both father and daughter bore such a contrast to the expression with which they had parted from her the day before, that her accusing conscience still favoured this misconception of their errand; and it was with the utmost difficulty she could entertain the fact of her being really an object of pity to them, rather than reproach. At length, recovering a little from her confusion, she found that they were exhorting and entreating her in the kindest terms they could devise, to summon all her fortitude to bear the heavy tidings they were there to tell.

During certain experiments in gunnery, in the prosecution and superintendence of which Colonel Hussey had long distinguished himself, and shown the liveliest interest, something had gone wrong; there had been carelessness or misunderstanding of orders—the Divets were as yet ignorant of the whole particulars—the consequences of which had been a frightful explosion, nearly killing one man, wounding several more or less severely, and amongst the number—and Mrs. George cried heartily as

she wrung Miss Palliser's hand—amongst them their dear Colonel Hussey.

"But take comfort, Maria," for they watched her growing faint and pale. "Comfort yourself, my love; we have reason, Captain Horner says, to be most thankful that he is spared to us at all. We are positively assured that his life is in no danger, nor has he even sustained any actual fracture; but his sufferings"—— here Kezia's voice was again broken by sobs. "It would be useless as well as wrong to attempt concealing any thing from you, my dear girl—his sufferings, mental and bodily, are intense. Poor Ben! He is covered, Captain Horner says, with wounds and contusions. You recollect the name of Horner, Maria? A great crony of my cousin's, you know. He was kind enough to undertake the sad task of breaking the news to you and us; and came down to Etheridge late last night. Ben could think and talk, the Captain said, of nothing but you—and would not hear of the accident being telegraphed, for fear the shock would be too much for you."

Maria gasped for breath; while Kezia could melt into tears, not one would fall to relieve the tightness round the heart of the Colonel's wretched mistress.

Mrs. George continued, "What he most complains of —poor dear soul! is his incapability of writing you a single line—his eyes are in such a state"——

"Blind!" Maria exclaimed; "Oh, Mrs. Barclay! Hide nothing from me—has he lost his sight?"

"No, no—thank Heaven, that is not the case! We questioned Captain Horner most particularly on that point; and he satisfied us that there was not the least apprehension of that greatest of all misfortunes. No, not blind: but of course his eyes have suffered with the rest of his face; and the lids are so stiff and inflamed, that, even if the doctors would consent to his trying them, he would not be able to write. And this is such a grief to him, the Captain says."

At the word "write" Maria flushed crimson. "Oh, that letter! it must not go: for all the world he must not have it now!" and she rushed from the room, calling, in a voice hoarse with agitation, to know if it was still in the house.

The servant she first interrogated thought John had already taken the letter to the post, but was not sure; and Maria had to pursue her inquiries, suffering the intensest anxiety till its fate could be ascertained.

She believed she should never rest in peace if that cruel sentence reached Colonel Hussey under circumstances so calculated to poison the wound it would inflict. He was described—and she doubted it not—as grieving more for her sake than his own, and deriving—next to his trust in Heaven—his chiefest solace in the simple faith he had ever placed in her true love and sympathy! And never—oh, never—could she forgive herself if that hard-hearted—that false and cruel letter, were now delivered to him!

She followed the maid down-stairs, trembling as if her life depended on the issue of her questioning, when to her inexpressible relief the answer came in the shape of the letter itself. The footman was opening the street door with the woeful message in his hand, so that in another moment it might have been irreclaimable. Maria snatched it from him, and, hurrying back, paused for a single instant before she re-entered the parlour, to tear the scroll across and across; as if, till that act of mercy had been executed, she durst not look even a Divet in the face.

For the next step in her recantation (or whatever it may be called) Miss Palliser was hardly prepared.

The Divets were proceeding immediatly to visit the Colonel; and the assured manner in which they reckoned on her accompanying them to Woolwich, as the thing of all others she must naturally desire to do, left her no decent ground for refusal.

"You will go with us, Maria? We may not be admitted to see him; but at all events it will be satisfactory to have a verbal report from the medical men: and he will be pleased, poor fellow! to know that we are there."

What a rebuke to the reluctance of the betrothed lady were these simple words of Kezia's! "I will lose no time in getting ready," was the reply, though faintly uttered, and she left the room accordingly.

Thus were Maria's sternest resolutions at once over-

thrown. She, who had been so fearful of meeting the eyes of her ill-fated lover—who, scarcely ten minutes ago, had been trusting, as her chief consolation, that no accident unforeseen might bring her in contact with the man against whom she was meditating such a cruel injury (the greatest that woman can inflict)—the possibility of declining to go with the Divets, never, after the first moment of the proposal, crossed her mind.

Still there was time in the course of their short journey to reflect on the sudden rupture of all her previous plans, and shudder at the possible result of what she was doing —or rather submitting to; for, indeed, she felt herself so much the sport of circumstances, that it seemed to her a vain task to form any independent resolution for her future conduct.

Thus doubtful and crestfallen had grown the once self-confident Maria Palliser, whose favourite boast of old had been the clearness of the human vision—the indomitable power of the human will. The utmost exertion of this vaunted faculty could do no more than impress her with a seeming submission, which was but the sullen acquiescence of a murmuring heart and a spirit ripe for rebellion. It was helpless in the day of need, when the strife between principle and inclination waxed fiercest; then it either slumbered on its arms or turned traitor to the cause it should have defended, continually reviving the memory of past joys—of hopes and expectations which, rash and wild and unreal as they were, tortured

the unhappy Maria with a heightened sense of present misery.

If one ray of heavenly light was to pierce the gloom that enveloped her, it could only proceed from the capacity of soothing the anguish and sustaining the sinking spirits of another; and in this instance of Colonel Hussey's disaster she was presented with a fitting motive for exerting her energies. Whether she would have fortitude to meet the trial awaiting her was yet to be proved.

CHAPTER II.

HUMBUG PROFESSIONAL AND NON-PROFESSIONAL.

A GROUP of officers loitered about the Colonel's door as the anxious trio drove up to it; and at a season of less absorbing interest Maria could not have failed to perceive that she was an object of attention to the assembled party. For there could be hardly a shadow of doubt in the mind of any of Colonel Hussey's friends, that the beautiful woman who visited him at such a time as that, looking withal so wan and perturbed, must be no other than the Maria Palliser who was so soon to have been his bride. And critical, though respectful in the utmost, was the notice she attracted, and the whispers which ensued thereupon.

To the honour of the lady, and even though time be pressing and the occasion too solemn to sanction much frivolous interruption, I cannot omit saying that these remarks were one and all of a character highly complimentary to the Colonel's taste; a comfortable conviction being from that period diffused throughout the corps, that the choice of their friend and superior officer had

brought no discredit on himself, themselves, or the service generally.

Yes, at another time Maria would have turned away from their eager examination, though not perhaps without wondering what they thought of her; these strangers, who were so soon to be her intimates, her associates probably in a foreign country. A host of new ideas must have resulted from such an encounter. But it was decreed that none of the light and natural feelings of her sex were to be the portion of Maria Palliser: now, at least, there was no room for them in her oppressed and anxious bosom.

Captain Horner, the friend who had communicated the news of Colonel Hussey's accident, was amongst the group, and came forward as soon as he recognized the Divets.

They were waiting, he told them, to hear the opinion of Mr. T—— (naming a surgeon of great eminence), who had been summoned from town, in addition to those already in attendance, but had only just arrived.

"It is fortunate that you should be here before he leaves," Captain Horner said; "for there is nothing so satisfactory as a *viva voce* report. And I hope it will be as favourable as that of our own doctor, who is quite satisfied that every thing is going on well. I assure you he is." He looked at Miss Palliser as he said this; for the Captain's hopeful remarks were specially intended for her.

"And my cousin has not passed the night so *very* badly?" Mrs. George inquired.

"Oh, God bless me, no! charmingly! delightfully!—that is to say, better than might have been expected: in fact, there would be nothing to apprehend, positively nothing—a mere trifle not worth mentioning, if we could only succeed in keeping up his spirits." Here was a shrug and a glance, directed this time to Divet and his daughter, who chimed out a doleful rejoinder of, "Ah! poor Ben—poor fellow!"

But, recovering himself again, Captain Horner asserted that the arrival of such friends must, under any possible circumstances, prove the most salutary of medicines: a perfect panacea to his suffering friend. He then invited them to enter the Colonel's quarters, doing the honours of the place with infinite gallantry, and still labouring to preserve a cheerful exterior; though Maria detected some ominous telegraphing between him and her companions, when they fancied her eyes were directed elsewhere, and could not but remark how very nervous David appeared till he could get the Captain aside and communicate with him apart from her; all which convinced her, that their confident tone was merely put on in deference to her feelings, and she grew suspicious of every thing that passed. There was something, also, in the anxious stillness, the watching and whispering, and the air of suspense which hung over every thing while Mr. T——'s sentence

was yet undivulged, that sent along her veins a creeping, deadly chill.

They had been waiting nearly half an hour when there came a sound of feet descending from the room overhead; and the abrupt closing of the door where Miss Palliser and Mrs. Barclay were sitting, by this time all alone, proclaimed that these heralds and harbingers of Fate—the surgeons—were coming down-stairs.

They were conducted to an apartment opposite to that occupied by the ladies; and when the shuffling of feet and the sound of men's voices had subsided, an awful stillness took the place of the low eager whispering which had been kept up by the group outside.

It was impossible for woman's nature to remain unshaken by all this. Maria believed she was brought thither only to receive her lover's last sigh; and, while sickening at the thought of the interview, she rejoiced once more that his dying moments would not be clouded by the knowledge of her defection.

There ensued a tedious interval while the consultation proceeded; but at length it broke up, and Divet and Captain Horner made their appearance, ushering in the surgeons, in order that the ladies might hear from their own professional lips the favourable opinion these gentlemen were able to pronounce.

And here a lecturer on humbug might have picked up some useful hints, in the difference so strikingly apparent between a professor regularly bred to the science,

and the mere amateur who has not enjoyed the same advantage of thorough and habitual training.

In a profession like medicine, a science which embraces a regard to mind as well as matter (the two being so inseparably linked that it is impossible to injure the one without risking offence to the other), it follows that occasional deception must be practised, not only on the patient himself, but on those, his well-wishers, who are fearfully hanging on every word that proceeds from the mouth of the physician, and whose doubts and discouragement would inevitably be communicated to the sick person himself—in many cases to his mortal injury.

What wonder is it, then, that doctors of all ranks and denominations should be such accomplished though excusable hypocrites—such adepts in the art of merciful flummery? an art felt to be so indispensable to the perfection of this character, that when it has been neglected in early education, and surgeon or physician fails to discover himself master of this part of his business, and aims rather at a reputation for speaking plain truths in homely downright terms—he may be indeed employed for his talents or for the sake of variety, but is invariably stigmatized as a "Brute."

Now the concluding words with which Mr. T—— broke up his conference with the men—for Divet and Captain Horner had been called in at the latter part of it—were couched in some such terms as these:—

"An awkward affair, undeniably—a very ugly and disagreeable affair! But all you have to do now is to make the best you can of it to the ladies." Which remark, being immediately assented to by the others, they proceeded to play their parts accordingly; and, as far as concerned both the town and army surgeon, nothing could be objected against the performance. As they crossed to the opposite apartment every symptom of vexation passed away from their faces, leaving such a smooth tranquillity of feature as was calculated to inspire a perfect confidence in their professional ultimatum.

In the blandest yet most decided manner, the ladies were assured that the patient was progressing as favourably as his best friends could desire: in "the fairest way of permanent recovery." "Much shaken, of course, and requiring care—considerable care—to bring him quite round." "But," Mr. T—— said, "considering the great advantages he enjoyed in the skill and attention of his good friend, Dr. Simpson," and at this point the London surgeon made a most polite and patronizing bow to the military doctor, "he had no doubt, with the blessing of Heaven, of seeing the Colonel entirely restored before many weeks were over, with merely such evidence of having been in the wars, as must make him an object of higher interest than ever in the estimation of all his friends."

A faint colour came to Miss Palliser's cheek, and Mrs. Barclay was profuse in her acknowledgments to Provi-

dence and the doctors. She supposed that, "of course," they must not ask to see the patient; though, if such a favour could be granted, they would be as still as mice, and not stay in the sick-room for more than two seconds.

The bare mention of such a thing raised a palpable sensation amongst the non-professionals, causing the Captain to shrink together as it were, and Divet to shake his head ferociously. But from the others it merely sustained an opposition so mild and calm as might demonstrate that the Colonel's fair friends were asking something *rather* too unreasonable to be granted.

"Why, we are not at liberty, you know, to consider present gratification at the risk of ultimate inconvenience —and even danger—to the patient. No one can doubt how very welcome your presence would be up-stairs; but I think, in the present crisis," Mr. T—— said, in his most persuasive accent—"I think you must yourselves perceive the propriety of avoiding the slightest approach to unnecessary excitement. I am sure that, if every thing goes on as it is now doing, many days will not elapse before Dr. Simpson will feel himself quite justified in taking off the injunction; and by that time," with a cheerful smile, "the Colonel will be in better trim to receive the visits of fair ladies."

"To be sure! to be sure! to be sure!" said Divet, out of breath in his eagerness to second what was said. "No doubt of it, my dear sir—no doubt of it!" Mr. T—— turned an eye of admonition on the interlocutor,

and finished his speech with—"You know we civilians are inclined to think our military friends a *little* punctilious regarding their personal appearance."

"A great deal too much so! A vast deal too particular!" David exclaimed—"In fact, God bless me! what does it signify? Of what possible importance can it—eh? Oh—it's absurd—ridiculous! Yes, yes, I see—exactly so, exactly so!"

Captain Horner talked about the omnipotence of the medical staff, and the necessity of submitting to their decrees, even when interfering with our tenderest inclinations; but he spoke with an affectation of gaiety not at all appropriate to the occasion. In short, both gentlemen, the one by his blundering eagerness, the other by his conscious simper, afforded so little support to the professional humbugs, that a less acute person than Maria Palliser would, on that account, have refused credence to any one of the party.

Here let us pause for a very few seconds to demand why it is that Truth, being such an indispensable ingredient in the moral character—the very groundwork and foundation of all the virtues which purify and exalt our fallen nature—should so often, in fact, be slighted by those who profess to hold her precepts in the highest honour? Why do we so often detect ourselves in tendering our sympathies to the opposite principle, and experiencing a hearty contempt for the simple-minded few who are hindered by the scruples of a tender con-

science from tricking their fellow-creatures scientifically and successfully? Touching the proprietor of the Etheridge mansion, we know him a little too intimately to have much reverence for the thing that causes him to blunder in his officiousness: we have good reason to believe that it is a defective temperament, rather than any exalted regard to the pure and sublime, which interferes to make our old friend David Divet boggle at a falsehood.

But, on the other hand, look at the respectable Captain Horner, whose native frankness and habitual love of truth are all that stand in the way of his acting artistically on the present occasion. And yet, forsooth, because the good man cannot tell his white lies with the same smooth countenance and oily tongue as those clever arch-hypocrites, the doctors, how—it is useless to deny the fact, or try to gloss it over—how we *do* despise him! Once upon a time, when Captain Horner was a little boy, his mamma had whipped him and put him to bed for telling a story. Now we therefore praise that mother of his; and, though History says nothing about the mode in which the juvenile Gracchi were disciplined on similar occasions, we hold it for a case of the highest probability that the late Mrs. Horner trod exactly in the footsteps of the celebrated Cornelia. Why, then, in the name of all that is consistent, should we extol the mother for her exercise of parental care and authority, and yet sneer and cavil at the son who, having attained maturity, and an intimate acquaintance with the world, shews by his con-

duct that his integrity remains uncorrupted, and that the moral lessons and accompanying castigation of his deceased parent are still exerting a salutary influence over his walk and conversation ?

Maria not only saw that the whole party were leaguing together to deceive her, but had an instinctive perception of the individual amongst them whom she would find the least difficulty in managing ; but whether she had on that account a greater respect for Captain Horner I will not take upon me to say.

The London surgeon departed, and Divet went with Dr. Simpson to visit the patient. It was not, however, many minutes before the latter returned, and summoned Mrs. Barclay also; for the Colonel, understanding that Kezia was in the house, would not be pacified without seeing her. "It seems harsh, Miss Palliser," the doctor said, "to deny you the same privilege ; but you know our reasons for excluding you. The indulgence we think ourselves justified in permitting in one case, might be dangerous in another."

The betrothed lady appeared to acquiesce in this arrangement ; but no sooner was she alone with Captain Horner, than turning upon him an eye of fixed resolution—an expression which no one could assume with better effect—she said, "I am quite aware that there is something you are all anxious to hide from me. The signals passing between Mr. Divet and his daughter have not been lost upon me, and I am not to be deceived

by the smooth language of the medical men. To you, sir, I appeal to treat me as a rational creature, ready to encounter the truth, whatever that may be. I demand, therefore—in fact, I *insist*—upon knowing from you the real extent of Colonel Hussey's accident."

The Captain, taken by surprise, blushed like a peony. "I give you my honour," he said, "that your fears are unfounded; he is not in the slightest danger. Dr. Simpson has repeatedly assured me of that; but the affection of the nerves is so great—his head, in short"—

"The brain?" she whispered, shuddering.

"No, no, nothing of the sort! I do assure you, your apprehensions carry you much beyond the truth"——

"But what *is* the truth, Captain Horner? In the name of Heaven do not treat us both like children!"

"You mistake the case altogether, Miss Palliser. It is not his friends who have any thing to do with it—the thing rests entirely with himself. Poor fellow! he can't stand the seeing you—upon my soul he can't."

"Not stand the sight of *me!*" Maria repeated, growing red in her turn; for her conscience told her that the Colonel had but too much reason to decline her company.

"No, it is just as I say. You are the last person in the world he can bear to come near him, though I can answer for it his thoughts are seldom a moment absent from you. He talks—he raves about you night and day; but as for seeing you, or rather your seeing him, he swears he shall never recover it. And really, Miss

Palliser," Captain Horner added, "I can hardly blame him. In Hussey's situation I should feel very much as he does. I am sure, when I was courting Mrs. Horner, I would no more have let her see me looking like such a scarecrow—that is, when I say scare—ahem" (correcting himself), "of course I exaggerate foolishly—that is a *very* strong term—I merely intend to say that the explosion of an affair of that sort, when you are within reach of it, can hardly be supposed to happen without leaving some traces behind: not that they would be left ultimately," the Captain said, getting every instant more nervous as he stood there exposed singly to the full effulgence of Miss Palliser's superb eyes—"What I mean by the word 'ultimately' is in fact a day or two: in the course of that time, or a week at farthest, we all hope—indeed, we may say we are confident, that he will be quite himself again—quite himself, I will answer for it. A scar or two left perhaps, but only the sort of thing that a fellow of any spirit would be rather proud than ashamed of. And the ladies—ha, ha!"—said the Captain hysterically—"the ladies, we know, will like us the better the more we are knocked about: I believe that is an established fact, Miss Palliser; indeed on that score I can speak from experience. You see this gash on my temple?" and he laid his finger upon an almost imperceptible cicatrice. "The truth is, I got it in the most peaceable way in the world—merely running my head against the handle of a pump as I was coming home from the mess one dark

night; and my wife, Mrs. Horner, said that it served me right—I mean to say, that she was pleased at my acquiring what would pass as a mark of distinction; she says it makes me look heroic, and quite forbids my ever mentioning how I came by the wound—she does indeed—ha, ha!"

After this fashion Colonel Hussey's well-meaning friend ran on; but he greatly mistook in supposing he carried his audience with him. Maria heard little of the discursive prattle with which he strove to overlay and embellish the awkward nature of his communications. She was deeply considering the new circumstances under which she was required to act, and feeling all the difficulty of the decision.

Love, we know, Maria had none for Colonel Hussey; nothing at least of that ardent, unshrinking devotion which makes the alleviation of another's woe the highest luxury we can enjoy on earth; and, therefore, she had to combat a strong disposition to obey the declared wishes of her unlucky lover, and leave him to his fate. But a kindlier feeling soon got the mastery over this selfish inclination. After the deliberation of a very few seconds, she electrified Captain Horner by requesting him to shew her the way to the Colonel's room.

In vain did the Captain remonstrate, declaring his friend would never forgive him for forwarding a meeting he dreaded so much; and again he pressed her to wait "if it were but for a couple of days. At least," he

said, as she moved towards the door—"at least you will allow me to go first and tell him you are coming?"

"On no account whatever," she replied; "a formal preparation will only increase his reluctance. But if he sees me unexpectedly, the shock will soon be over."

"See you!" was the mournful answer. "Ah, Miss Palliser, I wish he *could* see you, or any body else. But he is far beyond that, poor fellow! And to be plain with you—for I perceive that you are, in the best sense of the term, a woman of strong mind—if you persist in going to our poor friend, you must be prepared for an awful—a heart-rending sight. He is literally so mangled—his face so cut and scorched by this confounded shell—that you can hardly distinguish one feature from another. Of course, the doctors will soon set all that to rights: in a very short time, he will be quite his own man again; for there is nothing in these days that may not be accomplished by surgical skill—and this it is which makes me recommend your waiting till"——

"Indeed, sir, it is better that there should be no delay. I entreat you to take me to him at once!"

Captain Horner raised his shoulders with a lamentable shrug.

"I don't know what Hussey will say to me for giving way to you," he said; but he offered no farther opposition, and they went together to the Colonel's room.

CHAPTER III.

SANCTA MARIA ! ORA PRO NOBIS !

To humour the patient's weakened sight, his chamber was so darkened that for the first few moments Maria could discern little beyond the entrance ; but Mrs. Barclay (who was standing with her father near the Colonel's bed, her handkerchief continually at her eyes), though a little flurried at the approach of Miss Palliser, met her at the door, and whispered that she believed she was right in coming. " I know it is only what I should be doing in your place, Maria ; for a word from you will do more to comfort him, poor soul ! than any thing we can say, if we were to talk till Doomsday. But oh ! my dear girl, it is a lamentable scene for you—a sad, sad trial ! " and Kezia sobbed aloud.

Maria, heart-struck, confused, and dizzy, was so subdued as to find a sort of support in the good-natured sympathy of one whom, on most occasions, she held in the profoundest scorn ; and for the only time in her life found herself returning with something like reciprocal cordiality the pressure of a Divet's hand. She hesitated not, however, to proceed; and Mrs. George, drawing

her father away from the vicinity of the betrothed couple, left them to confer together; those in attendance on the Colonel, of course, following her example.

Maria Palliser had answered for her firmness of mind (she was only too apt to do so); but she could not look upon the sight before her without shuddering. Whatever portions of the Colonel's face and hands remained unhidden by the surgical applications, were so swollen and discoloured, as to give a horrible impression of the deformity which must be lurking beneath; and it might be safely averred that the corpse of her lover would have borne a far nearer resemblance to him she had lately parted from—so full of life and cheerful anticipation—than the shapeless mass of mortality, more like a half-swathed mummy than a breathing man, which lay there writhing on its couch of agony.

Until she leaned over the bed and softly whispered his name, Colonel Hussey had no suspicion of the presence of his beloved Maria. Then, as had been foreseen, the shock was dreadful to him indeed! A bitter cry escaped from his mangled lips, and he shrank from her with all the strength that was left him.

"Why do you turn away?" she asked him, weeping. "What have I done that you should think me capable of keeping from you at such a time as this? It is cruel to distrust me!" and again Maria thought of her morning's work—that letter so nearly sent—and her tongue faltered as it spoke the words.

"Distrust you!" he repeated, passionately. "No—no! So help me, Heaven! I am helpless and miserable enough; but not so weak or wicked as to harbour an unkind thought of you! But oh, Maria! I am worse than any thing you can imagine. They say they can cure me, but I know to the contrary. I am crippled for life, my love—I am certain of it—I shall have to leave the service, and wear out my life a poor, maimed, useless wretch."

Then, his voice utterly failing him, Maria whispered in the kindest tones—"I will nurse you night and day. If the devotion of the truest friend can bring you comfort, it shall never, never fail you—I swear in the presence of Heaven"——

"No, no!" he cried, interrupting her before the sentence was finished. "No, that must never be!"

Then, shrinking still further from his beloved, he murmured—"You have no conception, Maria, what an object you are offering to attend upon. You don't know what I shall be when these dressings are taken off me, and I am what they call *cured*—a loathsome spectacle, my love, that even you, with all your angelic goodness, will turn away from with horror and disgust. My very voice seems no longer my own. Don't you hear how it has altered?" and, in fact, the thick lisp in which he was obliged to speak, made it seem to Maria as if she was listening to the words of an utter stranger.

But while the dilating on every circumstance of his

deplorable condition reduced the patient's spirits to their lowest ebb, the persuasion of his unutterable misery did but impel the sympathies of his high-minded mistress along the new channel in which they were beginning to flow.

Maria's heart had failed her when contemplating a lifetime to be spent by the Colonel's side in smooth prosperity: the prospect was intolerable to her, and we have seen her on the point of breaking from it in desperation; but to wait upon and cherish him when others might be tempted to shun his very sight as a thing hardly to be supported—to know that she was forming the sole light and joy of an existence deprived of every other solace—there was a glitter of heroism in this self-sacrifice that raised her in her own esteem, and inspired such buoyancy into her desponding soul, as persuaded her there was no task so tedious, no labour so revolting to her secret inclinations, but she could perform it with high and unflinching resolution.

From such emotions as were seething in the fair breast of Maria Palliser have saints and martyrs sprung before now; for who can make it the question of a second that it would have cost her a far less effort to have embraced with fleshly arms the visible instruments of torture, the stake or the rack, than to have thrown them in spirit round the person of poor Colonel Hussey. Now she can but figure as the heroine of an obscure story; but had she flourished centuries ago, the self-same individual,

acting under other circumstances, it is impossible to tell what visions and ecstasies might not have resulted from the enthusiasm which was beginning to animate her chilled and disconsolate heart, or how exalted a seat she might not eventually have claimed amongst the canonized virgins of old—the Dominicas and Veronicas—the Ursulas and Bridgets; her fine form being typified even to this present day by some dirty doll, beflounced and befurbelowed, the dingier still the dearer to its votaries. Then, convents might have hymned her praise and squabbled for her relics; the hairs of her head, precious now only in the sight of one half-crippled lover, should have been held in reverence by whole congregations of the faithful; the parings of her nails have been estimated at a Jew's ransom; and a tooth of the glorified Maria have been pledged in the contracts of popes and emperors as an article too holy to sanction even a political fraud.

Nor let it be objected that, in framing this comparison, I am unduly exalting the character of Colonel Hussey's betrothed love; for I believe that martyrs ere now have marched triumphantly to their fiery fate with less singleness of purpose than actuated Maria Palliser, when, standing by the bed-side of her dilapidated lover, she consecrated her life and energies to his service. The enthusiasm which prompts her to undertake so much may possibly not endure to the end, but droop and fade away under circumstances less propitious to its nourish-

ment. But who can tell how many of those whose effigies have come down to us crowned with the brightest of haloes, would have merited such saintly distinction, had the fulfilment of their martyrdom required a term of years instead of hours—the infliction of a life-time, and not the few sharp pangs which pass away when the flesh can endure no more, and leave the spirit to soar away, rejoicing in its freedom from earthly shackles? Or who shall count the numbers that have been goaded along the path of glory by the shame rather than the crime of recanting? or penetrate into the secret chambers of the heart, and see what share the praises of friends—ay, and still more the curses of enemies—may not have had in sustaining many a fainting soul whose holy zeal has been held unblemished by a single worldly motive? In forming her generous resolution, the Colonel's mistress was single-minded in this respect; that she valued her fellow-creatures at too poor a rate to care for their good word, or to covet the high reputation she might acquire by means of their erring judgment.

Ignorant as Colonel Hussey happily was of the feelings which were impelling his Maria, it was natural that he should shrink from seeing her till all that surgery could do for him had been fairly tried. He knew not that the very excess of his misery formed the attraction that drew her to his side, and rendered it comparatively easy for her to play the character she had assigned herself.

Even as the soothing medicaments upon his wounds

and bruises, fell the soft accents of Maria on his breaking heart. Periods during their courtship there had undoubtedly been when he had been jealous of her constant equanimity, suspecting it of approaching somewhat too nearly the quality of indifference; but "Oh, how grievously—how wickedly—had he misconceived the heart of his beloved!"

As his delighted ears drank in the sweet assurances of her fidelity and attachment, the eyes of the suffering Colonel grew dimmer than ever; for they were overflowing with tears of honest joy at discovering (as he flattered himself) the unconquerable power of an affection whose depths had till now been hidden from him; and, together with admiration of his mistress, there was mingled the most fervent gratitude to the Giver of all good things, for having sent him such a noble creature to cheer and sustain his drooping energies.

Under ordinary circumstances Maria Palliser would have turned away from a weeping lover as a thing too paltry to be contemplated; but she knew that it was on her account more than his own that he was thus subdued, and she summoned every argument in her power to raise the tone of his mind to that point of elevation which accorded with her conceptions of the Man and the Hero.

Since the occurrence of Colonel Hussey's accident, he had had his comforters, the very antipodes to those of Job, and far exceeding them in number. But of these all had uttered the same well-intended, but insincere

language, whose flattering falsehood had been apparent to him from the very first.

How different were the exhortations of the high-spirited Maria! She promised him no miracle by way of cure; she held out no expectation that he was to arise from that bed of his like a phœnix from her funeral pile—as good, or even (as some of his friends would have persuaded him) a better bird than when he took to it; with stronger wings to flutter in mid air, and eyes to stand sunlight with the eagle, and lungs to accompany the lark, or crow with the cocks of Cochin China. He knew in his heart that his kind consolers were telling a very different story so soon as the door of the sick-chamber had closed upon them, and arts so easily penetrated induced only an unwonted impatience in the desponding sufferer.

Maria, on the contrary, following unconsciously the bent of her secret inclinations, was disposed to magnify rather than depreciate the extent of his troubles and the unlikelihood of their termination. Yet such were the spirit and energy in which she clothed her exhortations, and she seemed so equal in her own person—bright and glorious to his apprehension as she stood before him—to the noble lessons of endurance and fortitude which flowed from her lips, that the gayest fictions of Colonel Hussey's male friends had never worn a form half as credible and engaging as the plain truths of his beloved mistress.

There might, indeed, as we can sadly perceive, have been found a higher motive for this patience under calamity, or, to define it more accurately, this stern, unshrinking defiance of suffering, than any which the fair philosopher advocated—one that would have raised a more unbounded assurance in her lover, and have endued her heroism with a steadier light; but, happily for the present repose of the good Colonel, his own heart supplied what was wanting, and in his perfect reliance on the religious principles of his dear Maria, he never suspected her of being actuated less than himself by that simple trust in Heaven, which, amidst all the fulsome flatteries poured into his incredulous ears, had been his only real and efficient support. In this, as in all material respects, he fancied a perfect unanimity of sentiment to subsist between himself and his affianced bride.

A due regard to his weakened state cut short this too exciting interview; but from that period Colonel Hussey was observed to be, in his quality of invalid, an altered man: no more of the peevish and irritable complaining —the repining and mistrust—so foreign to his general disposition. Assured from her own lips of his Maria's fidelity under every earthly trial, the pangs and vexations he had found it so hard to bear were divested of half their sting; and in the end he could lend a patient and not ungratified attention to the rest of his sympathizers, and really begin to think that things might not be going quite so hardly with him as he had at first apprehended—

that he should not be obliged to leave the service, or be utterly unproduceable in society.

It was a very natural thought to which the Colonel gave utterance as he parted from Miss Palliser; but whether it shook her nerves to their centre, or incited her to a higher pitch of heroism and a still firmer step along the merciful career she was choosing, one is scarcely prepared to say.

Laying his bandaged hand upon her slender fingers, much as a bear might have presented her his paw, the poor Colonel mumbled out, "Then I say, Maria, you wont serve me as that Miss Girdlestone did poor Frere?"

Luckily the sick man's sight was too weak to distinguish the look his mistress cast upon him—for it was one that might have borne strange interpretation.

CHAPTER IV.

REACTION.

It was not in human nature to sustain in all their intensity the high-wrought feelings which had brought Maria Palliser to the side of her wounded lover, and incited her to renew the vow she had mentally broken. Yet it is not in the present phase of Colonel Hussey's illness, that any failure of his mistress's resolution need be apprehended. As long as his state demands her unqualified pity, it will be freely and even tenderly bestowed. With heart and soul she dedicates herself to his service, will be his comforter, his helper, his nurse—looking for no solace to herself, expecting and hoping none, until the weary life they have to spend together is worn out. "Then—then!" indeed—"Let angels take him to their care!"—Maria has never, at her highest point of enthusiasm, promised to cherish him *beyond* the grave. Not even at the altar will that be required of her—that more than mortal sacrifice!

"Yes," was the proud reflection that rose amid her

anguish,—she *would* behave better than the false one Colonel Hussey had instanced. She would shew herself to be made of far other stuff than the fine but brittle clay in which Barbara Girdlestone was modelled. Without half her professions of attachment, and with a hundred thousand times more temptation to inconstancy than could ever have assailed the woman beloved by Manley Frere, Maria vowed to herself to maintain her integrity intact; and, by her noble and consistent conduct, constrain even Lucy Ainsworth to confess how falsely she had estimated her cousin's lofty virtue. This confidante, thrown off for ever, but still to Maria an object of interest, as the one sole being who, thoroughly knowing the state of her heart, could best appreciate the meditated sacrifice,—even she should see that, though not nursed on creeds and homilies, Maria was equal to the highest act of disinterestedness that woman can set herself to perform. Lucy Ainsworth should behold her passing along triumphant in that self-sustaining power of the human conscience, that simple but all-sufficient sense of duty, which the orthodox Lucy had so grievously mistrusted. Stubborn and illiberal as were the prejudices of her old correspondent, she should be forced to own at last that the strictest pietest that ever crouched under the burden of forms and ceremonies, could achieve no more than was freely undertaken, and steadily carried out, by the freethinking Maria Palliser.

There was one besides whose slightest praise would have

been coveted by Maria—far, far beyond the approbation of her rigid cousin. To have secured one kind thought, a single word of approval, from Manley Frere, would have cheered her greatly in her woeful pilgrimage. If she had not been cheated into a higher pitch of presumption, she would, in the humility of her love, have prized incalculably even the trifling interest he had been accustomed to display towards her in the time of their early acquaintance. But, by her own rash conduct, she had burst in twain even this frail bond of mutual sympathy. With her meaning misconstrued—her words perverted—her character blackened and traduced by that hateful Richard Cranston—what could she expect but that Frere would regard her as the most bold and deceitful of women! A touch of playful irony or grave reproof was almost the nearest mark of severity Maria had ever seen him assume; and now, for *her* who honoured and adored him as woman had seldom worshipped man—for *her* were reserved the disdain and aversion which his fine features were no less formed to express in all their intensity, whenever any thing vile or loathsome happened to cross his path.

Maria had hoped to have escaped the sight of Mr. Frere for the remainder of her miserable existence; but the return to Etheridge, which her restored allegiance to the Colonel necessitated, made it but too likely that they might meet again. And this dreaded possibility lay at the root of all the mental strife which, day by day and

hour by hour, had to be renewed, ere the unhappy Maria could succeed in maintaining that perfect self-command she had inwardly sworn to display. This trial, however, though most feared of all, is at least not imminent: it may even be spared her altogether; for she knows that the period of the deaf guest's return to the Divets is as yet unfixed; and, in the meanwhile, Miss Palliser preserves well the noble attitude she has worn in the eyes of all beholders, ever since her woman's heart was touched with the sense of her lover's misfortunes.

Nor is it at this period of her history that we need fear any material failure of Maria's resolution. As long as Colonel Hussey's condition is deplorable enough to demand her unlimited sympathy, it will be fully and freely tendered.

The struggle—the real struggle—between duty and inclination, will take place when the worst symptoms of the wounded man are over, and, becoming less physically pitiable, the feelings of his fair friend shall no longer be moved to the same degree. But this being hidden from the Colonel and his friends, their solicitude was, of course, directed to the best means of correcting and ameliorating the effects of his accident, and striving, by every mechanical contrivance, superadded to the ordinary operations of the surgeon, to restore him to some portion of the good looks with which he had been originally blest. As soon as he could submit to these manipulations, therefore, the first dentist of the day was called in to

supply with fresh teeth the fine set which had been so woefully maltreated; and the most scientific of all wigmakers, skilled to overlay with the judgment of the artist, and hair of the nicest match, all those unsightly gaps on skull and chin where the gallant sufferer had been partially scalped. It was natural to feel that a lady of taste and discernment, herself in the pride of health and beauty, could not but deplore the loss of these advantages in the man who had wooed her under such a different exterior. And the shattered Colonel must experience more than ordinary misgivings when he calls to mind his mistress's declared partiality for good looks.

He, poor man, has time to muse painfully enough upon the subject, as he lies on his water-bed; and, though his mind usually turns to practical rather than poetical images, he cannot help wishing, in the interval of sober reflection, that some one or other of those beneficent fairies familiar to his childhood, would come and offer him the gifts—the *three* gifts (for well he remembers the golden number, and never speculates, such is the force of habit, on either more or less)—the three wishes, then, which good little boys and enchanted princes were encouraged to specify; and which, on the very first hint that such and such things would be acceptable, were wont to be supplied with a punctuality far transcending that of any London tradesman.

The Colonel had better have confined his fancy to

the possibilities which skill and money may procure him; for, after indulging in visions of the supernatural, the features or portions of them which art is able to supply, however well done on the part of the mechanic, will still want the miraculous touch of the skilled workmen employed at the Court of Fäery—dwarfs, ogres, sylphs, and elves, and the rest of the fantastic throng who execute the orders of Queen Mab, and have, no doubt, her royal arms emblazoned over their workshops.

In his zeal to approximate more nearly to the old aspect under which he formerly won Miss Palliser's cold approval, Colonel Hussey little dreams that he is really laying the axe to the root of all his hopes; lopping off, as it were, with every fresh improvement, that enthusiasm which can only be kept alive by the idea of his utter misery and humiliation. And thus a very different scene is presented to Maria on her next visit to her wounded artilleryman. Conscious of some abatement in the fervour of her zeal, she anticipates this second interview as a means of reviving the generous glow which animated her on the former occasion. But the touching and solemn effects that then worked upon her feelings, and excited her to an unwonted pitch of resolution—these are all absent now.

No more sadness, and silence, and glances of ominous import—mysterious whisperings and stealthy footsteps—causing the flesh to creep and the blood to run cold! Every trace of anxiety has long been laid at rest.

Now there is light and laughter in the house. Old officers come to cheer the ladies with their lively congratulations ; and young ones are fencing and giggling in the very vicinity of the sick man. In short, the Colonel is better—wonderfully better ! charmingly, "delightfully" better !—progressing rapidly to a perfect recovery; and although a good constitution and temperate habits may have had something to do with this improvement, popular opinion inclines strongly to the belief, that the symptoms of renovation date from the precise moment of Miss Palliser's first visit to the sick-chamber. The Colonel himself, good man ! will live and die in this creed.

As more than a week has elapsed since his accident took place, the Colonel is now sitting up ; having forced himself out of bed, in direct opposition to the advice of his doctor, that he may gratify his beloved Maria by seeming better than he really is : though it is torture to him to move, therefore, and he is bent almost double as he sits in what is flatteringly termed his "easy" chair, he endures it manfully, in order to send her back to Etheridge with a quiet mind rejoicing in his convalescence.

His eyes are getting stronger, consequently more light is admitted into the room. Not *much* more, however; for those poor eyes with their stiff swollen lids have been busy consulting his shaving-glass, and the image it reflected back to him caused such a return of his despondency, and such a near relapse into all his original

misgivings, that he had preferred remaining shrouded in a friendly mist; for, as he observed with a sigh, "If a sensible fellow like myself cannot bear the sight without wincing, how should my poor dear girl be able to stand it?"

Then, on the other hand, reflecting that any mistrust on his part—Maria having played her own so nobly—would seem nothing less than cowardly, he did his very utmost to receive her with cheerfulness. So much as she was doing for him, she ought to be rewarded in the manner most grateful to her, by finding him better, in fact, than she had expected, whatever appearance he might outwardly present. No! perish all further misgiving! His perfect and unbounded confidence in this best of women, should be evinced by his no longer seeking to hide from her the deformity she was condescending to tolerate and make light of. Nevertheless, "that blind need not be drawn up quite so high—a little lower, Jenkins—lower still, please—Yes, yes!" (with a tremulous sigh.) "Yes, that will do—I must not have it *quite* down, I suppose."

Maria has been described as entertaining a rather apathetic indifference to the metamorphosis in her true knight, farther than as it called forth her pity and zeal to comfort him. But it must be admitted that when the Colonel was now presented to her, doubled up rather than sitting amongst his cushions, with a ray of foggy sunshine playing on the discoloured and battered features —where not a single trace of his former expression, much

less of his former comeliness, could be recognized—her heart had almost failed her. But then came his faltering accents—his diffidence—his timid, humble gratitude—his thanks and praises, and the evil spirit departed for a while. Yea, for a season at least, that demon of selfishness flapped his ugly wings and fled. So, taking her place beside the wounded man, his lady constrained herself to look upon him without betraying her inward repugnance, and met his expressions of love with as much resolution, if not as much serenity, as ever.

But it is an unspeakable trial—a ghastly prospect that is even now before her; and worse remains to be unfolded! With all the enthusiasm of her charity abated, and the horrors of the life she has pledged herself to lead, opening upon her more and more—its difficult requirements, its sickening round of duties, its nauseous comforts—with all this to torture and frighten her, she must go back to Etheridge—dear, detested Etheridge!—the birthplace of her dearest, proudest hopes, and the grave in which all of them are buried!

Maria is loath to believe her fancied firmness already forsaking her, and thinks if by any means she could avoid this fatal journey, and all that may recall the past, her task would be comparatively easy, and that she should go on her way following the course of events, and bowing to a fate too despotic to be resisted, with the same docile plodding pace in which beasts of burden move on at the will of whomsoever has the whip and

reins in his possession: she learned the step very early in life, and has had to practise it ever since. But never yet has the external show of obedience covered such inward loathing! And we, who know all that besets this unhappy lady, all that she relies on, and all she rejects in her weary life-journey—surely we, too, may echo that awful question she is constantly putting to herself, and wonder whether she will indeed come safely to the end of it, or sink by the dull wayside, unresisting and broken-hearted; or, worse even than this sad fate, rush wildly through some unlawful outlet, seeking a shorter, quicker path to the goal she is longing to reach.

Miss Palliser paid no more visits to the Colonel, whose gradual though sure amendment was announced to her in daily bulletins of the most cheerful tendency; at first from his friend Captain Horner, but subsequently from his own pen; his first despatches being so illegible as to manifest the trouble and pain he was putting himself to, to cheer the heart, and lighten the fond anxiety of his betrothed: and then after a time the writing grew less crabbed, while the style exhibited signs of self-satisfaction.

He might never, he told her, quite get over the effects of his unlucky accident—they would probably make him appear a fright in all eyes but hers; but he found himself daily acquiring strength, and could now place entire credit in the predictions of his doctors, who had from the first assured him that the injury in his knee, from the

consequences of which he had feared the very worst, would be ultimately of slight importance, in no respect likely to interfere with his professional career.

And so the Colonel trusted that his dear and heroic Maria, in still consenting to link her fortunes to his, would not be making such a sacrifice as had seemed to be the case when she promised him to be his nurse as well as companion for life: a promise, he further added, "that had so cheered him, and lightened all his sufferings, that he now thought they had been inflicted upon him by the kind Providence in whom they both trusted, rather as a favour than a trial." For, in the overflowing of his heart, he now confessed to Miss Palliser, that "there had been occasions when the beautiful composure and equability of her ordinary manner had created some apprehension in his mind as to the strength of her attachment; but now, he needed hardly to assure his beloved Maria, that such ungrateful misgivings were for ever laid at rest. From the blessed moment when she stood like a pitying angel by his pillow, pouring such balm into his poor mangled ears, no doubt of her warm and unchangeable affection could evermore rise to harass him."

It is no very soothing sight, that of a good and confiding man utterly deceived in the best affections of his nature; so for the present we will take leave of Colonel Hussey, nor on the other hand trouble ourselves to inquire how these praises and thanksgivings were relished by the mistress to whom they were addressed.

Maria lingered in town as long as she decently could, availing herself of every imaginable excuse for avoiding Etheridge and the society of the Divets. Such strange things had happened to her of late, that every morning when she arose a vague hope would present itself that something might intervene to defer—perhaps to prevent altogether—the necessity for this dreaded journey. But in vain she lingered and procrastinated: accounts from Woolwich grew daily more encouraging, and David himself came to take her back to his hospitable house.

If we would seek a fit parallel to the feelings of Maria Palliser at this period of her life, we must turn back to the days of high conventual discipline, and fancy the case of some wretched nun forced back to her prison-house after she had broken her vows and fled away from it. Appalling as the re-entrance within its walls may be, she knows there is a still more fearful habitation preparing for her—a narrower cell than any she has yet occupied, where no slightest ray of light or hope can penetrate: an entombment of the panting body and the living soul has to be endured, before the grave itself, that narrowest cell of all, encloses and saves her from further earthly suffering. Even so to Maria must marriage come before death!

From this time forth a change came over the Colonel's mistress: a revolution in manner and countenance so marked, that the Divets—albeit their busy brains were for the most part of the day intent on many things

besides the fortunes of Maria Palliser—even they could not help observing it. David indeed—always the most obtuse of his family, and the easiest to be taken in by the outward and superficial—*he* thought Miss Palliser unusually gay—"quite volatile" in fact; and when a shadow crossed, as it would occasionally, the surface of her fine face, he merely judged her pining for the reappearance of Colonel Hussey, and the refixing of the wedding-day; but his daughters were less satisfied with the fitful vivacity which had taken the place of their guest's characteristic composure: they saw in it only a state of excitement, easily to be accounted for under the circumstances, but far more natural than pleasing. Even they, however, though nearer the mark than their father, were so far from reconciling causes and effects, as to conclude that the best cure for Maria's flightiness was to be looked for in the return of her betrothed lover. In talking the matter over amongst themselves, Mrs. George would declare that "really she had never till then given Miss Palliser credit for being so much in love with the poor dear Colonel; but there was nothing like adversity for proving the strength of the affections."

CHAPTER V.

ONCE MORE AT HOME.

Of the personal adventures of Mr. Frere, there is little to be said from the period of his quitting Etheridge up to the time when, incited by the pressing instances of his friend, and his own partial opinion of the lady, he had thoroughly compromised himself by despatching that offer of marriage, which had created such a joyous sensation amongst the inmates of the stately old manor-house.

Amidst the almost frantic pœans that were chanted forth by her family, we have seen the shepherdess grumbling at the slow and sluggish pace in which her wooing had been conducted; and murmuring, with that pout which was so destructive to her moderate share of beauty, that "some of these days she would pay him off for keeping her waiting, and looking like a fool." But how much greater would have been Miss Divet's discontent had she known the extreme and measured caution which had marked the conduct of Manley Frere throughout the whole proceeding; how he had pondered upon it, morning, noon, and night—walking and riding—in

action or in rest—in perpendicular musing and horizontal cogitation—and at last, that a measure so infinitely important to him might be subjected to a consideration cooler and more impartial than it could obtain in the presence of Mr. Cranston, how he had forsaken the company of that its most zealous advocate, in order that no undue influence should warp the freedom of his judgment.

In seeking to test the strength of his liking for Phebe Divet, Frere could not have adopted a wiser course than fixing upon Old Court as the spot in which to conduct the analyzing process; for there, of all places in the world, he was most certain to be reminded of Barbara Girdlestone, and to encounter in firmest array the feelings and impressions of the sweet time when she had reigned sole empress of his affections.

It was at his own country-house that he had first beheld her, brought there by some mutual friends with whom she happened to be staying. Well could he remember the room—the very spot in it—where, entering all unconscious of the future, the vision of her beauty had first shone upon him; and ever after, the image of the loved and lost one had presided over all those touching associations which twine themselves round the home of a happy childhood.

There was not a walk or ride for miles around the old place but must abound with such recollections.

In those aisles of Nature's glorious cathedral, his own

ancestral woods, Mr. Frere had pursued such fancies as had tinged the overarching branches and those whispering leaves with a brighter glow than any mortal sunlight might bestow upon them; there again, within its deeper recesses, he was wont to bury himself when either his own too sensitive passion, or on his mistress's side a slight disposition to coquetry, had somewhat clouded the mental horizon; by the green margin of that stream he had listlessly wandered, when some temporary obstacle was retarding the prosperous course of his first love; and, looking down into the water's cool, dark depths, imagination had given him back, as in a magic mirror, the only face he then desired to gaze upon.

And, dear as were all these haunts, there was one still dearer, more sensibly and vividly imprinted on his memory; for there, climbing the brow of that highest eminence, he had stood intoxicated with the joy of success, when, of all the many blessings which crowned his lot upon earth, the one he prized most highly was assured to him (as he thought) beyond recall; and as his soul went forth to greet the wide magnificence of the landscape, stretching beneath him in the full radiance of an unclouded sky, Frere had said to himself, in the blindness of man's presumption, that "death alone could interpose between him and his happiness."

With reminiscences such as these ready to throng upon him wherever his steps were turned, there seemed to be some prudence in the advice which Cranston

liberally bestowed upon him, to avoid, by all means, a scene so likely to shake his better resolution. And yet Mr. Frere evinced a better spirit when, confiding in the Power which had hitherto sustained him, he rejected the timid suggestion of his friend.

That steadfast faith and reverent submission to the Divine will which had directed all his efforts at self-government, and proved a tower invulnerable, and a rock of defence against the waves of human passion and impatience, even when they were surging highest—the sacred principle which he was conscious had raised and consoled him at the period of his bitterest affliction—would not, as he wisely trusted, lose its holy efficacy when any inferior trial of fortitude was at hand. The journey about to be undertaken could not be otherwise than melancholy; but Frere had come by this time to look upon his former life as a separate state of existence, to be remembered as one would look back upon a dream of the night—bright, beautiful, and fleeting. And now, with somewhat the same feelings with which we may imagine a disembodied spirit revisiting the scenes of a prior state of being, and hovering over the spot where its sweetest pleasures and severest sufferings have been experienced—where it had imperiously striven with the will of Heaven, or bent in submissive reverence before its irreversible decree; with just such a chastened sadness did Manley Frere return to gaze upon this picture of the past: to him, changed as he was since

last he had beheld his home, it could be nothing more —at least, not until new ties and connections should be formed there, attaching him to the dear old place once more with all the strength of home impressions.

The true knight-errant—that type of all that is noble in man—whensoever he girded himself for battle, went, as we are told, to implore first the protection of Heaven, and then to breathe in softer accents a prayer to his mistress; and even so did thoughts of his little shepherdess begin ere long to chequer the high and grave reflections which were passing through the brain of Mr. Frere.

Melancholy, but not desponding, it might now be seen how successfully he had cultivated such a state of mind as should dispose him to receive with due thankfulness the inferior gifts which were offered him, in place of those costlier things he had craved and coveted so earnestly in the season of his prosperity. In other words, the pine-apple being withheld, our deaf friend had the good sense to hold out his hand for the ribstone pippin. No raptures might henceforth swell the measure of his domestic felicity; his note of triumph was not sounded in the fate-defying strain of mortal presumption; yet few can fail to perceive what a pleasant thing it must have been to this high-minded and unfortunate man, as he rode pensively along, recognizing each well-known object and each familiar face that came in sight —surely most soothing to think that he was not return-

ing home as the solitary, forsaken being he would inevitably have felt himself, had not one soft and tender heart been freely offered to his acceptance—one gentle nature striven to link itself for ever unto his. In the full consciousness of this, he could look firmly from side to side, and gather comfort and amusement from the very circumstances which would only have saddened and oppressed him before his sojourn at the Etheridge manor-house.

And as good thoughts seldom come alone, but one will still be opening the way to many more, Frere soon found himself accusing the impulse, born of false pride and selfishness, which had prompted him to desert his home and hurry away to some foreign country—there to live the life of a useless, discontented wanderer, nursing his morbid melancholy, and that sinking of the soul, which, beginning in distrust of its great Creator, goes on to question, and lastly to despise, the human sympathies of its daily companions. Never had he been more sensibly impressed with the high responsibilities to which he was born, as the lord of so goodly a heritage and the master of so many servants, or even felt more disposed to sacrifice every private inclination and caprice to the requirements of his station, than at the moment he recrossed the threshold of the home he had been so eager to abandon.

If it was solely his new attachment which had produced this striking change of sentiment, the proprietor

of Old Court was well justified in magnifying the blessing of Miss Divet's true affection; but although no one denies that a virtuous love may be the foundation of much that is admirable in character and conduct, I am inclined to think that time and reflection had also had their share in bringing back the absentee, a wiser and (consequently) a better man, than when he fled from his once-loved home, a prey to despondency and unmanly diffidence.

The restoring and beautifying of his country-seat had been carried on by Frere with a zeal proportioned to the occasion on which it was undertaken; viz., his marriage with Miss Girdlestone. For her pleasure, more than his own, had he planned and improved, devised and amended, chosen this thing and rejected the other; and not having visited the house since the completion of his labours, it is easy to imagine the sort of feeling with which he regarded the many ornaments and objects of still life which had been accumulated under circumstances latterly of such painful interest.

It is true that Frere was now looking upon every thing with reference to another attachment; for he had by this time very nearly made up his mind to marry Phebe Divet, and was bringing himself, by gentle degrees, to anticipate the period when that vivacious young person should reign paramount-mistress at Old Court, instead of her whose presence there was once so dear to his fancy.

Nevertheless, the difference which marked his sentiments towards the two ladies was manifested unintentionally in a hundred ways; and in none more strongly than in this very question of refurnishing his house. Seldom had he moved a step in the affair, or issued an order, without wondering whether Barbara would approve of what he was proposing to do; yet, on the present occasion, it never once entered Mr. Frere's head to trouble himself anent the tasteful predilections of Miss Divet—her likings or her dislikings.

So peremptorily, indeed, is this contrast forced upon our notice, that I am sadly afraid there must have been something of the old aristocratic leaven mixed up and working unfavourably in the otherwise enlightened mind of my deaf friend; enough of the sort of feeling, at least, to make him hold it as a settled thing, and too apparent to call for any consideration, that "Divet's daughter" *ought* to be satisfied with Old Court under any aspect whatsoever, and with any description of embellishment which he and his London workmen had judged appropriate to the place.

We have seen that Manley Frere was modesty itself in weighing his personal pretensions to the favour of little Phebe; but the case stood very differently touching the mansion and demesne, where her respectable grandsire had transacted the affairs of the Frere family as steward and man of business. Nor, in the history of Frere's second attachment, must we omit to mention one

trait, serving to show how great an influence the beautiful Barbara still exercised over his imagination—if not his heart.

There was a certain suite of apartments in his fine old house, that Frere had appropriated to the sole use and delectation of Miss Girdlestone; and with special care and consideration he had superintended whatever was done there, fondly anticipating the moment when he should introduce her, himself, to what he loved to call her "bower"—that sweet word of the olden time, which would almost encourage us to hope that our forefathers, deficient no doubt in many modern improvements and many idle luxuries which their descendants would do well to discard, might not have been universally and without exception the gross, sensual, dirty, and uncomfortable race which some historians of the present day delight in describing them.

How her eyes were to sparkle, and her smile to grow softer than ever, as each new proof of his restless solicitude came under inspection! In every ornament selected by her lover she would find a fond attention to her peculiar tastes; and many a light wish dismissed from her own mind as soon as uttered, Barbara would find to have been treasured closely in his.

In the last chamber—the innermost sanctuary as it were—there were some wood carvings, finely executed from designs of Mr. Frere's; and as living flowers—evanescent as the passion they represent—are made in

some countries to convey a hidden meaning, and speak a language the tongue may not utter; so, amongst these more durable forms of beauty, lurked a hundred playful or tender allusions, to be noticed and understood only by her for whom they were so cunningly devised—fancies as graceful and delicate as the entwinements of flower and leaf, within which they might be said to be couching from all eyes but hers.

Now these rooms—that one with the carved work especially—it was Frere's first business to have entirely dismantled of their present furniture and decorations; scarcely entering himself till he knew that the work of the destroyer was thoroughly done, and every vestige of the past swept ruthlessly away. But although this quarter of the building was admirably adapted for female occupation, bordering on the flower-garden, and within an easy distance of his own study, it was observable that neither before nor after their metamorphosis did Frere ever propose to instal Miss Divet in these apartments. Whatever rights and privileges were to be hers, as wife and mistress of the mansion, to the bower (as such, and as a peculiar possession) she was never to succeed.

And yet this feeling did not prevent his contemplating Phebe as his future companion, and picturing her light and juvenile figure playing about his well-beloved home, casting an air of cheerfulness over its grey antiquity; indeed we know that Frere's proceedings tended shortly to this very result, and that it cost but a little more con-

sideration and solitary musing to persuade him to offer himself to Divet's daughter. He objected, in fact, to no part of the arrangement except the trouble of writing his letter, and asking the favour in set terms. For the first time in his life he envied crowned heads the lazy prerogative of courting by proxy, and longed for an ambassador to bring him his "dainty dear," ready wooed and won.

Could Frere, indeed, have entertained the smallest uncertainty as to the success of his application for Miss Divet's hand, his behaviour might have been very different: any latent suspicion, however slight, that there existed a possibility after all of his being refused, would have done wonders in fanning the zeal of the deliberate suitor; but, under the circumstances, this could not be. He felt himself on such sure ground, and was so certain of a ready acceptance, that when the answer arrived, though he greeted the well-known hand with the same indulgent smile with which he used to look at the writer herself, there was no inconvenient ardour in his movements—no irrepressible eagerness to tear it open and read his fate; and, I believe, that no less than three separate times did he patiently suffer himself to be interrupted in the perusal of the despatch, before he had got beyond the "Dearest Mr. Manley" at the beginning of it: much too secure of his divination, Frere could afford to wait till time and opportunity should serve to demonstrate its perfect accuracy.

The subject of the epistle rightly guessed, nothing was left but to ascertain the taste and propriety of its style, and the mode in which that subject was treated; and this was in all points satisfactory. An undisguised yet modest delight pervaded every line, at the same time modified by a sort of bashful wonder that a creature so undeserving as the writer—so young and insignificant—should have the unspeakable good fortune to excite an interest in the heart of the gentleman she was addressing: —one so above her, so much her superior in every quality and good gift!

But could the trusting and noble-minded suitor have looked on while Phebe, with the help of her grandsire, was composing that answer, and seen how her hand shook with laughter as she wrote it—ever the more delicate the sentiment, the deeper the mirth—and with what sly enjoyment of the whole transaction old Jesse's corrections were appended! No trace of such bad feeling, however, was to be discovered in the letter itself, which breathed only of humility and innocent joy; and Frère, having leisurely perused it, laid it by with a quiet complacency, which seemed to say, "And so that matter is settled!"

CHAPTER VI.

A WANDERING SPARK.

Let it not be supposed that, in losing sight of Etheridge and its manor-house, Mrs. Sarah Barclay forgot the events which had latterly enlivened her stay there, or that she was unmindful of her doughty determination, confided only to the ear of one tried friend, that she would meddle (an' it pleased the pigs) to much more purpose than had heretofore fallen out, in the fortunes of Barbara Girdlestone and Manley Frere.

"I shall not be comfortable in my mind," said the old lady, "till I've done what I promised, and made a clean breast of it. So I'll tell you what I mean to do, George. I shall call on Mr. Manley as soon as I get to London, and without more ado I shall let him know what a Tom Noddy they have been making of him. For, even if he should make a quarrel of it with our people, why, there'll be no great harm done; for it's plain, from his running off like a dog with a tin kettle after its heels, that he never cared a pin's-head about Phebe. I always told her she was counting her chickens a vast deal too

soon. But, for all that, I am not one for making more mischief than I can help; so I shall butter him over, poor dear fellow! and tell him we did it all for his good, and stroke him down the right way of the hair, in case he seems inclined to be uppish and dance the grand paw. And then I shall speak a word for his old sweetheart, and give him her scrap of a letter; for I've kept it safe and sound in case it should ever be wanted. And then you see, George my boy, I shall have done what I promised the poor girl, and my conscience will be easy whatever comes of it."

To this harangue, Barclay only replied he had no doubt of her conducting the affair with her usual discretion, and of her efforts being crowned with all the success which had hitherto attended them. But the sneer of her associate, instead of discouraging, only incited the old lady to carry out her purpose with double vigour and despatch.

The very first leisure day, therefore, upon her arrival in town, and taking care to make her call at the hour Frere was most likely to be at home, cousin Sally presented herself at his door; but, greatly to her vexation, was informed that her deaf friend had left Park Lane for his place in Yorkshire two days ago. Her discomfiture was indeed so palpable, that the servant who answered her interrogatories, though wondering much where his master could have picked up such an extraordinary acquaintance, proposed her seeing Mr. Cranston, who

would be sure to deliver any message she might wish to leave. But the alternative, though civilly proposed, was received with positive contempt. Mrs. Sally gruffly inquired, "What good that was to do her?" and, mumbling something in which the word "skipjack" was all that could be distinguished, bade her "jarvey," as she called him, drive on; and, pulling up the glass of her fly with a jerk, rode off in a grim soliloquy.

Before that day was over, cousin Sally had finished a letter to Frere, enclosing what she persisted (even to him) in calling "his sweetheart's billy-do," and explaining how she had become possessed of it, by a tolerably full account of what had transpired at the manor-house almost under the very eyes of its deaf inmate; though she did her best to colour the affair decently, and attribute a plausible motive to the conduct of the Divets.

As this epistle was never destined to meet any eyes but her own, it would be superfluous to offer it to the public; and yet it was so thoroughly characteristic of the writer, that, as a literary curiosity, it scarcely deserved the fate that awaited it.

It was sealed over-night, and directed ready for the morrow's post, when, lo! on that very morrow, Mrs. Sarah received news from the Divets which unsettled all her plans, and threw her into a condition which she of course denominated a "nonplush." "Mr. Frere, after keeping them so long in suspense, had made his offer to their dear pet in the very handsomest terms;" and Mrs.

George, who penned the epistle, announced the joyful news with all the greater zest, that cousin Sally had been convicted of treason to the grand conspiracy; although, in their worldly prudence, her relations had forborne to reproach her openly with defection.

This engagement cousin Sally would fain have prevented; but, finding it had actually taken place, she came to the conclusion that it would be scarcely justifiable to interfere, even supposing her interference to be of sufficient weight to avert the catastrophe.

"I don't pretend to care a twopenny-piece for the artful little minx," she said; "but as Mr. Manley's been gaby enough to let her catch him, why, I suppose they must e'en make a match of it, for any thing I can do to prevent it. If he's so mightily taken with her baby-face, there wouldn't have been much chance for t'other poor thing, even if I hadn't dawdled away my time, like an old fool as I am. And so I might have saved my old eyes the writing by candle-light, and my pocket the penny stamp, and be hanged to the whole lot of them! For even poor George Barclay, though he was glad enough to clap me on the back, will have a sneer at my bad management, whenever we come across each other."

Thus grumbling, the old lady flung her letter into the grate; but reclaimed it before it had actually caught fire, in order that the little note enclosed within it might not come to quite such a silent and speedy end.

"I don't suppose Miss What's-her-name's love-letter

will ever come to much as matters stand now," she said to herself; "but as long as her spark remains a bachelor, it'll do nobody any harm to keep it."

Was it pure choice, I wonder, that dictated that old-fashioned term of "spark" for a brisk young lover, or one of those involuntary suggestions so subtilely conveyed from the eye to the brain, that we ourselves remain wholly unconscious of their influence? For, while murmuring the words, cousin Sally's pensive gaze was resting on the ashes of what a moment or two before had been her letter to Frere; and the incremation had subsided into as fine a congregation of brilliant little atoms as ever charmed the eyes of imaginative childhood. Away go the busy crowd, each member of it taking his own independent course through the churchyard, till only one seems left. And yet, not so; for when the supposed last man has departed over the stile in the corner, a glimmering, indistinctly visible from a quarter quite opposite, shows how easy it is for your observation to be at fault even in so simple a matter.

The light grows stronger shortly, and out of the convolved mass of thick darkness, which once contained the thoughts and language of cousin Sally, appears a cluster of little stars, so thickly conjoined that they might be mistaken for a single one of more than common brilliancy. Anon they separate, and seem for a moment to confer together, when one, whom the experienced at once sets down for the parson, bids "good-morning," to the in-

ferior functionaries, and vanishes, evidently in the direction of the vicarage. He is speedily followed, "scarce less illustrious," by the clerk; and now but a single spark remains, brighter to the eye than all its generation merely because it shines alone. It makes its way with a stealthy pace; one could almost believe it a spark of more *nous* and observation than all its kindred, such an evident inclination it has to peer and poke into the nature of things. It vanishes down what we conjecture to be one of the side aisles of the church, or a snug little chapel dear to the antiquary and the artist, and there stays so long that we think its little existence has gone out in utter obscurity and that we are to trace its solitary walk no further; but, presently, it appears again rounding a nook and diving into some mysterious depth. Its mission cannot be mistaken; it is sexton as well as gravedigger, and goes prying duteously into vault and vestry, careful that no sacrilegious thief should be secreting himself below stairs, with an eye to the church-plate and vestments.

Lower and lower still moves that small bright point: will it linger there, "down amongst the dead men," till its strength is spent? No, another spot is conscious of the feeble gleam that precedes its approach; once more it comes in sight—pauses, as we interpret, to lock the door of the church, and then disappears for ever.

Mrs. Sarah diverts her half-unconscious gaze from the black embers, and, again turning to business, dives into

that pocket, broad and long, which formed so important an addition to her personal proportions, and lugs forth a pocket-book, whose case of dingy leather seems bursting with the mass of heterogeneous memoranda with which it is stuffed; and here, between a butcher's bill and a receipt for curing bunions, she inserts the billet of poor Barbara.

Whether that forlorn little scrap of paper shall ever come forth again in the broad sunshine, and, like the solitary spark we have been describing, assert its claim to notice when least expected; or whether it shall have the fate of myriads of other sparks less celebrated in story, and expire in silent blank oblivion, are questions not yet to be decided; but, judging by the present position of affairs, the chances seem to be chiefly on the adverse side.

CHAPTER VII.

WELCOME TIDINGS.

NEVER had the duties appertaining to the living of Sheen been performed with such absence of mind, and a spirit so reluctant to its work, as just about this time. That christenings and burials, marryings and churchings, did come off according to custom, are facts established on the sure evidence of the parish register; but that the reverend incumbent of that living had always a distinct idea of what he was about while engaged in the ceremonies of his calling, is greatly to be doubted. Thus the old were visited and comforted as heretofore—the young helped and admonished. As usual, the seemingly assiduous rector looked in at the schools, examined the boys on their arithmetic, and cast a grave if not a sagacious eye on the hemming and stitching of the girls; reproved Peter Barnes for sucking lollipops at church, and extolled the psalmody of the demoiselles, his sisters; was earnest—to all appearance—in furthering the soldiering mania of the junior Higgins, (that pest of the parish!) and insinuated a word of warning into the ear

of Peggy Thomson, on her addiction to dress and coquetry. It is marvellous, when once a man has thoroughly entered upon the routine of a profession, with what mechanical facility he may proceed in it, while his brain is labouring amongst matters a hundred miles off.

It was not until he had read Frere's own announcement of his offer to Divet's daughter, that Cranston became thoroughly awake to the impression which the representations of Miss Palliser had actually made upon him. A very little while ago, and he would joyfully have arrogated to himself the entire merit of every part of the transaction; but now, that paragraph in his friend's letter which imputed such weight to Richard's interference and persuasion, fell heavily upon his conscience.

"In strictest obedience to your injunctions, my dear Cranston—(for I really believe you are now a better judge of what is best for me than I am myself)—I wrote off to my good little shepherdess shortly after my arrival at home; and, knowing all we *do* know, I need hardly waste the ink in telling you that my wooing has met with a prosperous issue, and that I am an accepted suitor—engaged once more!"

As Richard Cranston read these lines, the dark eyes of Colonel Hussey's stately mistress seemed to penetrate his very soul; and wheresoever he might be, in church or school-house, locked into his solitary study or suffering with filial peevishness the querulous complainings

of his mother, Maria's warning voice was still sounding in his ears.

Mr. Frere having engaged himself to Divet's daughter, it would seem as if he considered his fate so fully settled, that even Cranston's interest in his concerns must have suffered some diminution; for, about this time, there occurred an unwonted gap in their correspondence. A few hasty lines, indeed, informed his friend, when pressing for a more certain knowledge of his movements, that he had returned to London; but no time was as yet fixed for proceeding to Etheridge.

"He can care but little for her," thought Cranston, now as anxious to convince himself of his friend's indifference to the shepherdess, as he had previously been eager to prove the warmth of his regard. "At least, there can be nothing of that domineering, unreasoning sentiment in his feelings toward this little girl, which renders a man heedless not only of trifling errors in the behaviour of his mistress, but even of her very principles." The conviction of this encouraged Richard to hope that his friendly influence might yet predominate with Frere; and solemnly, and with a most contrite recollection of the past, did he propose to conduct himself, in all his future dealings with the Divets, with a judgment totally unprejudiced—calm, wakeful, and deliberate.

In order to be in a capacity to start for the manor-house on the earliest notice of Frere's return thither,

Richard engaged the professional services of an old college acquaintance who happened fortunately to be disengaged, and staying in the neighbourhood of Sheen; and, having thus far settled his arrangements, he was waiting the disposal of events with a mind somewhat more composed, when one morning there came a letter, in weight and dimensions so much more resembling the confidential journalizing of old times than any thing lately received from Frere, that Cranston felt certain of its containing something of peculiar interest to the writer: and, perhaps, nothing could mark more strongly the alteration of his sentiments towards David's daughter, than the fact that, amongst all the circumstances which a lively fancy might have conjured up as likely to have given occasion to this monster despatch, the first which suggested itself to Richard Cranston was, a rupture with the charming Miss Divet.

"Could Frere have heard any thing, or made any discoveries, which might authorize or even oblige him to recede from his engagement to her, without injuring his own character as a man of honour?" Unsolicited was the thought, involuntary the joy attending it—sending the blood to flow so cheerily through the veins of the young rector. "What a load of doubt and disappointment might they all be spared by such a catastrophe! And from himself personally, what bootless repentance and self-upbraiding might it not be the means of averting!"

With eager curiosity the seal was broken; but finding

within the folds of a much larger manuscript a short note, finished, and even addressed to himself, but marked No. 1, as if demanding to be first attended to, Richard tore it open in breathless expectation. It referred neither to the shepherdess nor her family, nor indeed to any one of the topics whereon he had been so busily speculating; and yet the contents of that enclosure far exceeded the most improbable and far-fetched of all Mr. Cranston's wild conjectures. Thus ran the note, the nervous characters of which shewed plainly the disturbance of the writer:—

"I cannot suffer the day to pass without making you a sharer in my joy and thankfulness. Cranston—my dear Dick—I verily believe I have regained my hearing; but the confusion of my brain, and the unaccustomed noises that resound in all quarters, magnified to a pitch that nearly maddens me, and then the anxiety, the incessant dread lest I should be flattering myself with false hopes—for, as you may well believe, the greatness of the blessing makes me tremble for its continuance—in short, my state is such that it is impossible for me to enter into particulars. But that I *do* hear distinctly, perfectly, at the moment I write these words, is a fact most certain. God bless you, my dear fellow! I will not add, rejoice with me, for that would be to insult our sworn friendship. In what vicissitude of this strange life has the sympathy of Dick Cranston ever been withheld from Manley Frere?"

A few hurried lines, in addition to the above, promised a fuller communication when the writer's brain would bear the effort; and requested that a strict silence might be kept on the subject, till Frere himself knew whether the restoration of his faculties was more than temporary.

"Besides," he concluded, "I have another reason for delaying any mention of my recovery—just such a frivolous, romantic reason as will, or I am much mistaken, suit exactly the taste of my reverend friend at Sheen Rectory."

Touching this request, it was fortunate that Mr. Cranston chanced to be alone when he received Frere's letter, or the exclamations which burst from him, in his joy and surprise, would infallibly have betrayed the nature of its contents.

And yet, till he had read further, something of the writer's mistrust must be felt; the news seeming indeed, as the phrase is, too good to be true; and Cranston's satisfaction was incomplete till he had run his eye over the longer letter, and ascertained enough to be assured that there existed no drawback, no disappointing paragraph in the last page, revoking and annulling all the good news that had gone before.

The other enclosure was dated before sunrise the following morning, and was written in Frere's usual even hand:—

"Upon second thoughts, I resolve on keeping back the

hurried scrawl which was written under the intoxicating influence of an event as unexpected as it was joyful. In the extremes of either pleasure or pain, we are apt to be wholly egotistical; and, when I wrote that short account of my recovery, it seemed to me as if it would be an unpardonable breach of confidence to keep such wonderful, world-astounding news entirely to myself. Whereas, coming back to my sober senses in an hour or two, I am able to fancy even my dear Dick Cranston existing very comfortably a day or two longer under the firm persuasion that his old companion is just as deaf as ever. You will, however, be glad enough to know that the first was no vain announcement. I am passing a happy, though, as you may well believe, a sleepless night; the slightest sound still audible, yet growing less painfully obtrusive—an evidence that the nerves of the ear are resuming their old and healthy tone. Nevertheless you may surmise how jealously I keep testing the power so wonderfully restored to me; and, when the night seems too silent to be natural, how my gratified ear catches each casual noise, delighted to follow the light scratching of my pen upon the paper: for in my anxious condition the most minute test is of course the most valuable.

"The more I consider the nature of the malady, and its stealthy and gradual progress, the more I am encouraged to believe that it will not return without some warning sufficient to prepare me for another, and it may be then a final, attack. But when so much is at stake, I

may be excused a little faint-heartedness. Except for my own childish amusement, however, I am seldom called on to try the reality of my recovery by any voluntary movement. Even through these hours of repose, which I should once have thought so silent, there is usually enough stirring—a gust of wind, the humming of a gnat, a rat behind the arras—something distinct enough to thrill the nerves and comfort the inmost soul of him who has, day after day, been vainly striving to distinguish some definite sound.

"Had the sense been restored to me under such circumstances of moderate excitement as surround me while I write, my satisfaction at the moment of receiving it would have been more complete; for, considering the sort of Babel where I happened to be when my ears were opened, I could almost imagine that the gift of healing was in my case deputed to some sprite of the Robin Goodfellow tribe, who could not exercise his kindness towards a child of clay without shewing his freakish disposition, his innate love of mischief and confusion.

"It is now nearly a week since I came to town, and yesterday, having business in the city, I went with old Millington, my stockbroker, to the bank. I had just taken leave of him, and was returning through that part of the building they call the Rotunda, without the remotest suspicion of what was going to happen to me, when a noise resembling a violent crash or explosion sounded apparently close to me. I must tell you that I had been

for some time past trying a simple remedy, recommended, if I rightly remember, by your good old housekeeper; persevering in it according to her directions, though I had but little faith in its efficacy. How far the softening lotion might really have taken effect when more stringent remedies proved unavailing, or whether my relief arose simply from the voluntary bursting of the swelling or obstacle which had caused my previous misery, it is impossible for me to say; but neither of these explanations occurring at the moment of my deliverance, my senses were confounded by the shock. My only impulse was to look about me in dismay, expecting to see the building rent asunder, and the doomed crowd that were hurrying along the hall, overwhelmed with myself, in one common ruin; but when I beheld every thing in its ordinary state, and not a single countenance shewing signs of unusual emotion; and, more than all, when I had sense to remark that the sounds following this seeming explosion were not the dull muffled murmurs incident to deafness, but real and living noises proceeding from human lips, and the stamp of human feet upon the pavement—(you may have observed the peculiar and ceaseless echoes of that place when it is thronged with passengers.)—no lapse of time, my dear Cranston, can ever weaken the impression of what I felt at that moment! I was literally overborne as with a flood of happiness, and, reeling with the intensity of my sensations, caught for temporary support on the nearest object

which presented itself. It happened to be the arm of one of the ugliest and most forbidding of all the worshippers in that temple of Mammon. I have his face of surly suspicion before me now. I had grasped him too tightly—or had trod upon his corns (he was a fellow to have every toe studded with them)—or he probably gave me credit for being an accomplished member of the swell-mob, having my gang at hand ready to hustle and relieve him of the dividends he had just been receiving. At all events he shook me off with a curse; and though, at such an instant, I had not a thought to bestow on the bear, yet a mournful moral, Dick, might surely be drawn from the fact, that the first use I was to make of my recovered hearing—the first proof of my being able to distinguish the voice of a fellow-creature—was to be conveyed in the sound of a brutal oath: my welcome, forsooth, to the outer world from which I had been so long excluded! Of course, this was but an after-thought. Had the most tremendous malediction contained in all the Romish ritual been launched against me then, I should have hailed every word with delight—any thing that was intelligible—any thing that I could hear, and understand without the aid of mechanical means, or even the pretty little fingers of my sweet shepherdess. While the general tumult might have passed for a mere aggravation of the malady, this one coarse anathema, in English unmistakeable, sealed my joy.

And yet what an almost intolerable confusion seemed

to surround me! It is a common case with those who regain their hearing after any long suspension of the sense, that every noise seems painfully increased in power and acuteness. But this simple explanation of what I experienced, failed at first to occur to me. I feared that my brain was affected, or on the point of being so, and I flew from the place as fast as the crowd would let me. Perhaps the uproar which appeared to salute me, as I went forth into the streets, might not be less in volume than the awful din from which I had just escaped; but these noises were more familiar in their character: most welcome to my ear—even while they seemed to be striking upon its naked nerve—the rumbling and crushing of wheels, horses' hoofs, clattering in every direction, and all the bustle and clamour of a great city!

"It was well for my reputation, as a sane and sober man, that I was walking in a district where the population is far too busy and self-engrossed, to attend to the deportment of a fellow-passenger, provided his eccentricities are not such as to occasion a stoppage on the Queen's highway; for, certain now of my happiness, it is no exaggeration to say that I hardly felt the ground beneath my feet: moving as if I had been in a trance, and making my way more by instinct than volition. And yet I would rather believe it something beyond a blind impulse that directed my steps towards that great and glorious Cathedral which shortly rose upon my sight. I could not have passed any church standing open by the wayside to receive me;

but where could I have found one more according with the vastness and exuberance of my emotion than this grand St. Paul's! It seemed, as I came in sight of it, to be looking down upon me with a grave though mild reproof, that my deliverance should have been accomplished so many minutes, and yet that I should be still dreaming only of the earth, and losing myself in the vague ecstasies of an unbridled exultation.

"But it was not till I entered the walls of the Cathedral, and felt the influence of its high and solemn architecture, its grand proportions, and its cool, calm atmosphere, that my sensual raptures subsided into the tranquillity meet for such a place—the humility of praise and prayer. Subdued yet strengthened as I was by this awful magnificence brooding over me, something was yet reserved to elevate the character of my joy, and give it the impress of another and a better world. I should have been contented, doubtless, to feed my ear with the resounding footsteps and distant echoes ever floating about the building, and have departed humbled in my gratitude, and desiring nothing more; but then there came chanting in the choir, and presently the organ!—Oh, Cranston, think what it must have been to one who had mourned so hopelessly; who had looked forward to nothing but years of soulless monotony, without one note of music to gladden his spirit or soften his heart! I know not if the service they performed that day was any thing more than ordinary; but it seemed to me that angels

from heaven could not have given forth melody more unearthly—more touchingly divine. My soul wellnigh fainted under the excess of its rapture and adoration; and, from what I felt at that moment, I can well comprehend the state in which those of old time dreamed dreams and beheld visions. It might have been good for me if I had died then; for, as long as I inhabit this world, I can never again expect to be so purified from human desires, and willing to bid it an eternal farewell.

"What a pity it is that impressions like these should wear away so quickly! Before I had reached home I was feeling myself so thoroughly the Manley Frere I used to be, that I could hardly bring myself to believe that the twelvemonth I had existed under the curse of this malady, was any thing but one long sleep, varied by strange and fantastic dreams. I had been wandering in the wood near Athens, that was all! You will say, perhaps, that the idea was a foolish one, but that there was no great harm in it; but, Dick, in my inmost heart I have reason to fear that a wicked wish was father to that thought. Such a tide of old feelings came rushing in upon me—such weak regrets—such vain longings for what, I solemnly declare to you, that if, by any possibility it could be offered to me now, I would resolutely reject. I could not prevent the entrance of these silly notions, but exerted myself so fiercely to expel the intruders, that I have tolerably succeeded. Though even still there is an impression I cannot get over, as if I had suddenly emerged from

Fairyland; and as the place and people most connected with the season of my deafness, bear not the slightest reference to any other state of things, it seems only natural that, the disease having vanished, these accompaniments to it ought also to die away, and become as a tale that is told.

"I beg you to understand, however, that I am far from acting on the principle of this fantastic impression. I am as much alive as ever to the responsibilities incurred during the period of my transformation —for in that light I shall always regard it; and in my sane moods am perfectly content to abide the issue of the singular adventure that has ensued thereof. Something tangible I have, at least, remaining in the letter I am daily receiving from my good little shepherdess: and very nice productions they are, doing no discredit to the head or the heart which dictates them, or to the pretty hand that guides the pen; with just such a flavour of mannerism and individuality about them as one values in the letter of a friend. Things so pretty and quaint do not deserve that their author should be held only as a will-o'-the-wisp; and, while owning the foolish fancies in which I sometimes lose myself, I can truly add that, supposing I were to be deprived of this interesting young creature, I should experience a void in my heart and existence not easily to be filled. I please myself continually with anticipating the sudden lighting up of her animated countenance when the strange truth

first dawns upon her: for you may suppose how carefully I mean to conceal my recovery till I can reveal it in person; so I shall hurry post-haste to Etheridge, lest by any chance my secret should escape. This, of course, was my motive for asking you, in note No. 1, to keep the matter even from your own family—even from old Martha herself, as I then intended remaining longer in town. Now, however, having changed my intention, the request becomes superfluous: I shall merely wait over the morning, which is breaking while I write the words, to get the opinion of Dr. ——, as to whether I may place a comfortable reliance on the permanence of my cure, and, in case of being threatened again with the disorder, what had best be done to check its progress.

"About seven o'clock, then, and just as the twilight is beginning to steal over Sheen rectory, its grave and reverend incumbent may fancy—if he will condescend to do so—the sort of interlude, with its 'startling effects' and 'unbounded applause,' that will be playing off at the good old manor-house. It would really annoy me, if by any mischance Phebe should come to the knowledge of my recovery, and I be not by to witness her natural and warm delight. For I venture to presume that, although Miss Divet did me the honour of choosing me in spite of all deficiencies and drawbacks, she will not persist in preferring a lover nearly stone-deaf to one who can hear whatever she pleases to say to him. A few years ago, it would hardly have been necessary to keep

the secret till I had actually left London, mine not being *quite* a world-wide reputation; but with the fear of railway expresses and electric telegraphs before my eyes, I do not even for the few remaining hours dare to give up what I may now call my incognito. It is less difficult to preserve this than might be supposed; for as I am still wholly unsuspected, and consequently approached as heretofore with signs and gestures, it requires but little care still to preserve habits which have become a second nature to me, and to answer in the usual way.

"One material bar to the preservation of my secret is removed in the person of that rogue, Druce, whose observation it would have been harder to elude than that of all the house besides. I lately detected him in certain irregularities so little in accordance with his puritanical pretensions, that I got rid of him immediately, and have not yet found any one to supply his place. If I were to mention as one reason for his dismissal, a manifest disposition on the part of Mr. Druce for tampering with my private correspondence, you might possibly retort upon me, that the prying into other people's letters is a species of delinquency which *I* ought to regard with some indulgence, instead of visiting it with such uncompromising rigour. And thus it is, you see, that in this world of injustice, one man is punished for deeds which ensure only profit and pleasure to another: such, at least, I trust to derive from my divergence out of the right line of good faith and good manners.

But in the meanwhile, being fairly rid of my household spy, the amusement I find in maintaining this odd sort of duality, has in it such a touch of the whimsical and absurd, that I am childishly glad of having formed an excuse to myself for playing the deaf subject a little longer than is absolutely needful.

"And now, Cranston, the tumult I have described to you as agitating my whole being when first this estimable faculty was restored to me—the wonder and mad joy, and that sensation of strength and independence which it seemed to renew—in short, all that was exuberant in my delight, has tamed down sooner than you might expect; and I am already in danger of contemplating my altered condition in almost too sober a spirit—am even going the length of admitting that a time may possibly arrive when I shall detect myself looking back upon the last year, or, at all events, the latter months of that year, with something like regret. My letter is much too long, and the night too far spent, to allow of my entering into the why and wherefore of this seeming perversity. Perhaps, for such a monstrous assertion, it will be well to have the warrant of experience before I venture to proclaim it further, even to you; yet certain it is that now, while estimating at their fullest extent the privileges I have regained, I can still apprehend that deafness, with all its deprivations, may have its advantages to a thinking and immortal being. Such is the force of daily habit, or rather, let us say, such the

merciful allotment which smooths and adapts the most trying circumstances to the weakness of our mortal nature."

It is needless to expatiate on the emotion with which Richard Cranston perused this most welcome narrative. How long the fountain of his joy ran pure, and clear, and quite undisturbed by any under-current, it is also useless to inquire. A very few weeks since, and Cranston's sympathies might have been honestly concentrated on the hero of what was to him a most touching story; but circumstances had of late involved him so intimately in Frere's adventures, that this marvellous recovery of his friend, promised in its consequences scarcely a greater relief to the patient himself than to his trusted associate, the incumbent of Sheen.

It was Mr. Frere's peculiar disadvantages, as one cut off from the highest and most direct medium of information, which had induced Richard Cranston to assume the direction of his affairs. But, with the restoration of his hearing, his powers of observation would of course have returned to him in all their former strength and activity. The discriminating faculties, and especially the facility for reading character, with which nature had eminently endowed him—these good gifts of Frere's, no longer obscured by any imperfection of the mortal frame, would henceforth be asserting themselves as clearly and promptly as ever; and, as a necessary consequence,

Cranston might hold himself honourably discharged from his office of director—a service which, notwithstanding the blind zeal and forward conceit he had shewn in accepting it, had brought with it (as he bitterly confessed to himself) little beyond disappointment and self-reproach.

In the first gush of his satisfaction, in truth, Mr. Cranston was disposed to overrate the real blessing that had lighted on himself as well as his friend. He was assuming it as a matter of course that Frere, being placed as of yore at the head of his own administration, Richard, the late premier, had from that very moment nothing to do in the matter, but to sit a quiet spectator of coming events: never an uninterested one; for in all that concerned Manley Frere he must needs be an earnest and lively partaker, but still relieved from the painful impression of moving as a responsible agent in affairs for which he began to suspect himself wholly unfitted.

On calmer thoughts, however, there occurred the unwelcome question as to whether these new circumstances did effectually clear away the perplexities which had oppressed him. Frere, thoroughly enlightened as to his position with Phebe Divet, might be safely trusted to walk alone; but if allowed to return to the manor-house, still wrought upon and prejudiced with what Richard knew to be a false impression of existing circumstances, where then would be his ability of discernment, where his power of self-guidance and protection?

If Cranston would act honestly by his friend, it could only be done by putting him in immediate possession of all that he himself had learned through the interposition of Miss Palliser. The truth, with all its mortifying circumstances, must be told; and, spite of his inward reluctance, and his sympathy for Frere's disappointment, the young rector set himself to the ungrateful task without another hour's delay; comforted only by reflecting that the explanation could not possibly reach Frere before his return to Etheridge. "Let him at least rejoin the shepherdess while she and all about her were still tinged with the pleasant colouring of old times: some advantage from the innocent fiction through which she had made her way to his heart, ought, in all honour and fair dealing, to be afforded the unconscious little creature, ere the moment of her lover's disenchantment should arrive. So much—so *very* much might depend upon an auspicious meeting!"

Thus, with a certain leaning towards the Etheridge interest, did Cranston argue with himself; and in the same spirit of secret partiality, whilst in the prosecution of his irksome task he went straight enough to the point and concealed nothing of what the Colonel's mistress had said against Phebe and her relations, he indulged himself by enlarging to the fullest extent on the questionable nature of the evidence he was adducing, and the more than doubtful character of her who volunteered it.

"Who, in any case," he asked, "would receive, without the utmost caution, the word of a rival, exasperated by disappointment and envy of another's felicity—a person whose strong and undisciplined passions bespoke her as one given over to all sorts of bad influences? Every word Miss Palliser had uttered in the bitterness of her spite, seemed to be flatly contradicted by the high estimation in which the Divets were generally held, and by their own personal acquaintance with Phebe's engaging qualities. Her partiality for her father's deaf guest had indeed been more tardily acknowledged, and in a more commonplace mode than they had originally imagined; yet surely it was unjust to her modest worth to assert, that the love in itself was *therefore* less worth the having—less true and tender, and calculated for the wear and tear of life. Her tearful eyes at parting, and her frank and delighted acceptance of Frere when the offer was made, afforded the fairest presumption that the affections lately manifested had in truth been merely lying dormant throughout the earlier period of their acquaintance. In guarding the secret of her woman's heart, Phebe might well be said to have done only that which every delicate and self-respecting woman is bound to do."

He that takes upon him gratuitously to play the advocate, will assuredly find himself ere long imbued with a portion of the one-sidedness so generally characterising the profession; and Richard, warming with his

subject, and pleased with the ingenuity of his reasoning in favour of the shepherdess, grew, by the time he had finished her defence, almost as firm a believer as ever in her worth, her artlessness, and devotion to his friend.

Then, with one more philippic against Miss Palliser—whom, with a sidelong glance at poor Barbara, he stigmatised as a fresh example of the perfidious in woman—Cranston came to the end of his letter; which, supposing Frere to carry out his declared purpose of returning to Etheridge on the morrow, would reach him by a cross-post the day following.

And now Richard Cranston could breathe freely again, and, with a conscience comparatively untroubled, might give himself up to the full enjoyment of his friend's communication. He required but another letter, dated from the manor-house, to assure him that all was going on well there, and Phebe and her family standing as high as ever in the opinion of the writer; and then (as far as concerned his dear Manley Frere) Cranston would have nothing more to desire.

CHAPTER VIII.

ANOTHER "SPARK" UPON HIS TRAVELS.

It has been said that time never lags so hopelessly as with him who is travelling to the arms of his mistress. No matter under what condition his mortal machine may be impelled; whether the way has to be got over in ducal carriage or humble cart—in a snug corner of the express train, or under the tilt of the broad-wheeled waggon—the sincerity of the true lover is still to be manifested by the impatience and loathing with which he denounces the tediousness of his progress.

But, though we are bringing Mr. Frere back to Etheridge as an enamoured swain, we are obliged to confess that, in respect to these signs and characteristics, he was strikingly deficient. The various stations generally came in sight before he expected them; and when the railway whistle announced his approach to the last tunnel on the line, issuing from which he knew that the town of Etheridge—the scope and boundary of his present desires—the goal of his wishes—the paradise of his hopes—would be lying plainly before his eyes, the

much-adoring man made not the smallest scruple of agreeing with a fellow-passenger, who declared he had never performed a forty-miles journey in shorter time.

Then, on reaching the Etheridge station, what was his next proceeding? Did he spring into the first vehicle at hand, and promise double pay to be driven straight and speedily to the door of his shepherdess? For the sake of his consistency it would be well to have some such course to describe, rather than the perfect self-possession which really did attend him throughout this interesting epoch of his adventures. Being without a servant, he looked after his luggage with almost as much circumspection as the mercantile traveller who was counting his boxes a few yards before him; and then, having directed that it should be forwarded in good time to the great house in the High Street, he gave his head three distinct and negative shakes in answer to the officious offers of two flymen and an omnibus-driver, and took his way tranquilly on foot. So deliberate, indeed, were his movements, that although, for the sake of surprising his little Phebe, Frere had carefully abstained from giving her any hint of his approach, it was not impossible that his portmanteau might get the start of him, and spoil his scheme by appearing at the mansion before its owner.

Probably Mr. Frere himself had some misgivings on this score; for at one point of his walk he turned, as if to observe whether the truck with his moveables was

coming, and, though it was not yet in sight, he seemed a little irresolute as to his further proceedings! This happened at the junction of two paths, the one leading to the town by the shortest and most public way, while the other lay through private grounds—an extensive and finely-wooded park—from which, luckily for the neighbouring residents, the proprietor of the place did not think it essential to his own enjoyment of it to exclude them.

But then this walk, agreeable as it might be, diverged considerably from the main line; and Frere's hesitation would probably have ended in his following the shortest track, when, just as he was balancing the question, a country cart came up, with its machinery so woefully in want of greasing, that it creaked and shrieked with every turn of the wheels: the knitting of his brows shewed how painfully susceptible he still remained of any thing which could offend his lately recovered sense.

The common road, therefore, was abandoned at once; and although, at the bar of that court where Cupid and his disreputable mother preside, Manley Frere would probably have stood a convicted traitor, there are, I believe, other tribunals wherein his frailty and peculiar temptations might be dealt with more leniently.

For be it ever remembered that, with the exception of the last hour and a half, consumed in the hurry and din of the railway, Frere's time since the recovery of his hearing had been spent entirely in London; and one

may surely imagine how intensely—with his love for every thing good and beautiful—he longed for the voice of Nature.

It is true there was at this season of the year comparative silence in the woods: melodious spring long past, and summer herself beginning to wane; for the harvest-moon was rising at that very moment. But a starving wretch will snatch at the poorest and scantiest fare; and, at this early stage of his recovery, Mr. Frere was too truly humble—too much obliged for the smallest offering that came in the tone of pure melody to his eager hungry ear—to be over fastidious as to the quality of the feast. Voices were not wanting even then, sweet though indistinct, to greet him with their old familiar sound: low twitterings amongst the underwood, and now and then, a wild clear note above his head. Any one following must have wondered why he paused so often on his way, in spots where there seemed so little to arrest the attention of eye or ear. For who but one rescued as by a miracle from the monotony of deafness, could comprehend the voluptuous pleasure, the dreamy delight, into which these murmurings of the air were plunging him—the emotion, almost painful in its excess, which was inspired by things too simple, and of too common occurrence, to attract their slightest notice; even to the hoarse cawing of the rook that was lagging behind its companions, or the mere flutter of the wild-bird's wing as it thrilled past him? To his now un-

accustomed ear, the rustle of the foliage as the evening breeze played over it, gave forth innumerable modulations in its uncertain but most sweet whispering; and even the crash of his own foot upon the dry ground and fallen leaves, possessed an indescribable charm for one who had for months been moving in silence, dull and dreary, and, as it were, treading on velvet.

Let us not, then, be harsh upon the loiterer, if, under these very peculiar circumstances, he should idle by the wayside a little longer than is, strictly speaking, necessary. When he emerges from the pastoral division of his walk, Mr. Frere will be inspired with feelings more directly appropriate to the gentle errand that has recalled him so suddenly into the heart of sweet Surrey. Other anticipations, sweet also in their way, and not so indelibly commingled with rural images, will shortly be swelling within his loyal bosom; and the aspect of the quiet, quaint old market-town of Etheridge, as he threads its well-known causeway, will revive all his latent tenderness for his little shepherdess, and his kindly feeling towards her affectionate family.

To most of the inhabitants of the place, the deaf gentleman at "Muster Divet's" is well known; and some of these, as he passes them gossiping in their shop-doors, fail not to recognise him. In their mute salutation, Frere reads a kind of respectful pity for his supposed condition; and he thinks well enough of his species generally, and the Etheridge community in particular,

to believe that there are few of these humble acquaintances of his who would not be, to a certain degree, glad to know of the blessing that had been bestowed upon him since his last appearance in their town: and if it be so, and he may reckon on the sympathy of such as know him only by sight—the interest of mere strangers—how great will be the rejoicing, how full and deep the sentiment, of the true friends he is about to join! No! whatever might have been Mr. Frere's previous failings, there was no loitering along the High Street, with the good old manor-house rising full in sight.

And now, before Mr. Frere has time to apply his hand to the heavy knocker of the mansion, we will slip up the steps before him, and ascertain what is going forward there; for, as the Divets' close carriage is waiting at the hall-door, it is not to be doubted that they have some engagement for the evening in prospect.

Of course, so very plain an inference does not escape Mr. Frere; and he feels a little vexed to think that he must either interfere with the projected amusement of the family, or be himself disappointed of the quiet domestic evening he had anticipated with so much satisfaction.

Knowing so well the ways of the house, his conjectures vibrated between a late dinner somewhere beyond the pikes, or a friendly affair—tea and sandwiches, nearer home.

Had Frere's preoccupied mind allowed him to examine the huge bills—blue, green, and yellow—which were

posted in every direction as he passed along the town, he would have learned that there was a concert to be held that evening at the great room of the Institution; and he would never have dreamed of the family at the mansion absenting itself on such an occasion.

The furthering of a fashionable charity was the ostensible purpose of this entertainment. Two singers, of sufficient reputation in London to pass for celebrities at Etheridge, had been engaged, and were to be supported by the amateurs of the place, with the further assistance of a madrigal society from an adjoining county; and the Divets who, albeit not particularly musical in their predilections, never slighted any opportunity that might present itself of making themselves popular in the town of their adoption, had been conspicuous in promoting the affair, procuring subscriptions, and settling all manner of preliminaries.

As a further means of signalizing their high-spirited hospitality, they had taken the earliest opportunity of securing the company of the London stars when their professional exertions should be over, and had invited a select party to sup with them at the manor-house after the concert.

We know how our friends in the High Street were calculated to manage and enjoy a thing of this sort; comprising in its execution some good-nature and the civil wish to oblige, with all the personal distinction, so dear to them, which might accrue from puffing and

patronizing, bustling and directing, and so conducting themselves as to have it understood that had it not been for these "dear, clever, active-minded Divets," the enterprise must have fallen, a dead failure.

Up to the current moment every thing with reference to this concert had proceeded with almost unparalleled prosperity; and, amongst other causes of unanimous felicitation, the Divets were reckoning, as by no means the least, the still protracted absence of their deaf guest.

It had been Phebe's duty to send, in her frequent despatches to her lover, messages of sweet and pressing import, imploring his speedy return; wherein the sight of "Mr. Manley" was pronounced to be indispensable to the welfare of the whole house: nay, even beyond its living inmates, the influence of his absence was said to cast a shadow thick and ominous. The shepherdess believed "There was not a flower in the garden that did not miss him; and the Friar's Walk looked *so* desolate, when she stole there, as she often did, to wander and think about him!"

Then "she missed the dogs so!" and it made her "so wretched" to see the dear old screen folded up and put aside: that charmed enclosure, behind which she had spent so many, many happy hours! She "was sure—quite certain of it"—(for the innocent creature preserved her characteristic playfulness even while holding forth in this dolorous strain)—"quite sure" she was, "that those

ugly old mandarins felt his desertion of them very sensibly. She thought they had tears in their eyes the last time she looked at them: but perhaps" (it was touchingly added)—"perhaps that might be a mistake of hers; she might have been a little blinded by the tears in her own!" Could Mr. Frere, or any open-hearted man, read paragraphs like these and pause to question their sincerity? or scruple at dropping unannounced into the bosom—nay, had it been possible, the very heart of hearts—of such a simple, affectionate family?

And yet about this time, when Frere's letters came in at the manor-house, there seldom failed to be some anxious questioning of his fair correspondent.

"Not coming just yet—eh, Phebe?" and then the little black eyes would skim the cream off the writing, and there would come the welcome answer—"No, thank goodness, he names no day—a reprieve for the present, at all events!"

"You naughty, naughty child!" her sister would rejoin, a little reproachfully. "How will you relish spending the rest of your days with him, if you rejoice so much in his absence now?"

"Oh! but it will be a very different thing when I find myself Mrs. Frere of Old Court. I shall have plenty to amuse me then, without pottering eternally along with its exemplary master. You must allow, Kezia, that such a courtship as I am likely to have of it, is but a triste affair."

And then, if Miss Palliser chanced to be within hearing of these discussions, her eyes would be lifted to the speakers with one of those glances of inward loathing, which had acquired for her the reputation of being "righteous overmuch:" for so did the even-tempered Mrs. Barclay observe upon the opposition she felt to exist between the principles of the manor-house and those of the Colonel's mistress. "Poor Maria! so mighty particular and precise about trifles. She sadly wanted a little more acquaintance with the world; and there was nothing better than a garrison-town for giving her that: Gibraltar in the first place, and a few years in India afterwards, would make a rational person of her, if any thing could."

But Phebe, arrogant and irritable wherever the smallest shade of censure seemed to be implied, was sure to hate the monitor by whom it was administered; and scarcely was Maria out of hearing but she would talk about the "evil eye," and wonder, "for her part, how any thing but ill-luck could have happened to a house that had had Maria Palliser for its inmate!"

And now it wants only a quarter to eight, the hour at which the concert is to begin; and the Divets, next to nobility on the list of patrons, surely it is incumbent on *them* to be present at the tuning of the instruments! So thinks at least the master of the house, as he stumps up and down the hall, fully prepared to start as soon as he can gather his ladies together. Twice has David

looked in upon his revered father, and wished him "good-night," urged on the first occasion by filial attention, but on the second seeking merely to pass away the time.

From both visits he comes bustling out, calling at the foot of the staircase to the loiterers above.

"Come, girls! come, girls—Kezia, my dear—come, Mrs. George! Why, Phebe, are you never coming down? Here's Miss Palliser—a pattern to you both—always ready; always first in the field: she knows the duty of a soldier's wife, don't you, Maria—eh? Ready for the baggage-waggon whenever the drum beats and the—the other things sound—eh? Come, come girls, no more dawdling, or you'll have all the best seats taken, and you will be obliged to sit amongst the tag-rag and bobtail behind: and I must say it will only serve them right if they are, Maria. I say, Dawkins, run up and knock at your mistresses' doors—tell them I will positively go without them unless they are ready in two minutes. There, there! off with you, never mind answering the bell—Abraham will see to that. Why, who have we here, I wonder? a railway porter with a portmanteau—eh? A portmanteau, as I'm alive, and a carpet-bag, and a—God bless my soul! Why, I say, Maria, they look mightily like Manley Frere's traps; and yet he'd never be dropping in upon us in this harem-scarem fashion: that's not at all like his serene highness, as Phebe calls him—is it, my dear?"

Meanwhile Maria had approached near enough to dis-

tinguish the name on one of the packages, and Divet chattered on unheeded by her.

"Coming down to-morrow perhaps, sir, and has sent his things by a luggage train"—suggested Abraham; but the porter, better informed, settled the discussion at once! "The gentleman arrived by the last train, and was walking from the rail. He had passed him at the corner of the street."

"Oh that's it—is it, my friend? Very well—very well—thank you for your information!" It was said with the calmness of desperation; for scarcely had the man disappeared before David burst out into an ecstasy of complaint.

"Now, was there ever any thing more provoking than this? He might have come down any day for the last fortnight, and welcome too: just as well here as any where else, in fact. But no! no! Nothing suits my gentleman but he must rush in upon us without a moment's warning, and overturn all our arrangements, and make every thing uncomfortable. Now I ask you, Maria, what's to be done with him? We can't all go to this confounded concert, and leave him at home—it would affront him at once. At all events Phebe must stay at home: she can't possibly leave him behind; and, when she is forced to give up her evening's amusement, she may find that her silly old father was not quite so officious as he appeared to be. If she and that loitering Mrs. George had been ready when I first called them, we

should have been off, and had our entertainment comfortably together, without running the risk of affronting any living soul."

"It might not be too late even now," insinuated Dawkins, "supposing the ladies were to make haste?"

"Well, at any rate, run up and bid them look sharp. But no, no—it's of no use. There's his knock. I should know it amongst a thousand! Dear! dear! dear!"

"Must I open the door, sir?" said Abraham, fearful in the present crisis of acting on his own responsibility.

"Why, of course you must open it. But I'll tell you what, Maria, you and I will be off. As the others have brewed, so let them bake. As soon as they are at hand to attend to him, we'll take French leave of the party, and—eh? Why, what's become of Miss Palliser? She was here not a moment ago."

"Went up-stairs just as Mr. Frere rapped, sir," said Dawkins; and his master, with a shrug of petulant resignation, intimated that "the ladies must have their own way. They were quite beyond any control of his!"—and the next moment saw him bustling to the door, to welcome Frere with all his customary *empressement* and grimacing.

"How-do-you-do? How-do-you-do? Delighted—delighted to see you! (Where the devil are those women? Do somebody give them another call.")

It was a peculiarity of the master of the house, when

thoroughly out of temper with his daughters, to term them "those women." Phebe, in one of her funny little confidences with her deaf lover, had mentioned this custom of her father's; and Frere, hearing of course all that was passing, observed the angry epithet, and could easily divine that something was going amiss with his host and future father-in-law.

"Manley Frere, upon my honour! Was there ever any thing more mal-apropos?" Such was the exclamation with which Kezia caught a hint of what had come to pass, and came running down-stairs three minutes too late.

But Mrs. George Barclay was capable of preserving her self-possession under circumstances even more trying than this; and nothing could be better than the style in which she dissembled her real feelings, as, gliding across the hall, she seized Frere by both hands, and commenced a pantomime descriptive of the lively satisfaction his presence afforded her.

"How good of you to give us this agreeable surprise!" mouthing her words, of course, after the old fashion. "We never dared to promise ourselves a sight of you so soon."

"Ha!" said David snappishly. "Five minutes sooner, and we should have got the start of him—three minutes, in fact, would have done it well."

"Well, it can't be helped now," was the reply to this. "Pleasure"—looking up at Frere with another affectionate pressure of his hands—"pleasure is always

enchanced by surprise—sur-prise," nodding complacently at each syllable.

"Humph! The deuce it is!" murmured her father in a very different tone.

Frere, though a little mortified to perceive that his appearance was not causing all the satisfaction he had anticipated, could not help smiling at the bye-play which was now so perceptible to him. He was "afraid," he said, "that he had arrived at an unseasonable moment. You are going out, I see?"

"Tell him where, Kezia," said Divet; and Mrs. George, not having her slate at hand, began speaking with her fingers—but Frere stopping her said, "No, no; talk to me with your lips: I understand you well enough."

"*He* understand! Lord help him!" grumbled David, with a world of contemptuous pity in his tone.

"Con-cert," said Kezia, moving her lips slowly. "Going to a concert."

"In-sti-tu-tion," said David, helping her out, with such superfluous labour that Frere, who had always thought the old gentleman ridiculous enough in his efforts to enlighten him, now found the absurdity of the scene irresistible. But Divet, wholly misinterpreting Frere's look of amusement, exclaimed in his natural voice, "Lord! he's deafer than ever. What a bore it is, to be sure!"

"Never mind," was Kezia's answer. "We'll persuade him to go, at any rate."

"*You* persuade! Not a bit of it, unless he likes to go. There never yet was one of the name of Frere that wasn't as obstinate as a pig."

At this Frere laughed outright—"Going to a concert, are you?" said he. "Well—don't let my coming be any hindrance to you. Where's Phebe?"

"Ahem!" said David, significantly. "Suppose you run and tell her the joyful news. Eh, Kezia?"

"Going directly," was the answer in the same key.

"I'll go, too," said Frere. A covert glance was exchanged between father and child; though the next moment Kezia's ecstatic looks were raised to Frere, while she assured him syllabically, that "the dear child would be so transported with joy!"

Of course she would! The fact being self-evident, Mr. Frere did not trouble himself to make the smallest comment upon it.

Away they went, therefore; Kezia striving to distance her "dearest Mr. Manley," whilst he was no less resolved to lead the way. What Frere proposed to himself was to knock with his own hand at Phebe's door, and enjoy the enraptured expression of her countenance when she should open it, and perceive whom it was that was "tirling at the pin."

But the door of Miss Divet's bower was not closed; it stood wide open, and, as Frere approached, he could plainly see what was passing within. Phebe had been on the very point of leaving her room, when it was

discovered that Betty, the tirewoman, had failed in an important part of her mission on earth: something was amiss with the head-dress—a comb loose, or a flower escaping from amongst the braids; something that must be set to rights spite even of the paternal exhortations to make haste. And there, at the swing-glass, stood the shepherdess, simply but elegantly attired—for she had admirable taste in dress—while Betty (herself a pretty girl, and no unsatisfactory addition to the picture) was resettling the refractory ornaments, and combing out certain ringlets, whose spiral glories Belinda herself need not have feared exhibiting to men and sylphs.

The little Divet was talking very fast during this operation; and her voice—never till that moment heard by Frere—struck him as so pretty, and (as Cranston had truly told him) in such excellent accordance with her childish person, and the unsunned innocence he delighted to attribute to his little love—that, enchanted with the sound, he drew Kezia back as they neared the scene of action, touching his lip to intimate that he would not have her sister immediately disturbed: Phebe was to finish her toilette at leisure, and on voluntarily moving to the door, was to find *him* on its threshold.

The proprietor of Old Court and its dependencies, was so accustomed to have his minutest wish exalted into sovereign law at that house, that he was quite surprised when he found his signal disregarded, and Mrs George

twitching her dress from his grasp, and pressing on to speak to her sister.

Whisking into the room before him, she hurriedly exclaimed—"My dear child, you must have done fidgeting now. Here's his high mightiness!"

"Nonsense!" was the utterly incredulous reply, just as Betty inserted the last hair-pin.

"Upon my word, it's a fact. He came down by the last train, and here he is close behind me—he is, upon my honour!"

"Lawk-a-daisy! To come just now!" said Betty.

"Dear, dear!" said her little mistress, slowly looking round. "How *very* disagreeable!"

But she suffered Kezia to draw her from the glass, and, discovering Frere so near her, contrived on the spur of the moment to get up a well-feigned aspect of surprise and joy. She would even have flown into his arms; but he did not open them to receive her.

"Why—Phebe," he said, "am I come too soon for *you*, as well as the rest of your family?"

Nothing could be more earnest than the gestures to which both ladies had immediate recourse to assure him how ungrounded and dreadfully unjust was any such suspicion. In the height of their demonstrations, however, Frere distinguished a whisper of Kezia's that he had "some crotchet in his head. What could possess the man?" and with an odd mixture of feelings, in which disappointment struggled with a sense of the

absurd, he silenced her at once—warning her, for Heaven's sake, to say nothing she would not wish him to hear. And then followed in briefest terms the astounding explanation which was to put an end for ever to these stage-whispers.

There was, perhaps, no fact within the range of possibility more calculated, on every account—considerations prospective as well as present—to shake the nerves of both the sisters than this most unexpected recovery. In their first surprise they could but stare bewildered, gasping out a few faint exclamations—"How strange! How wonderful! And so—oh, so delightful, if—— Oh yes!" and Phebe seized eagerly the welcome idea—"Yes—if he is not deceiving us. But—yes, Kezia, I see it in his face; it's nothing but a joke. You naughty, naughty man! You *know* you are only hoaxing us!" Once more she turned gaily to him, talking with her fingers; and again Frere stopped her, taking the little hands in his, and speaking gravely, though with no unkindness—

"No, Phebe," he said. "My deafness was the last subject I should have chosen for a jest. I assure you that I distinctly hear every word you utter. The slightest whisper that occurs in my presence is audible to me now. And therefore, my love," he added mildly, but significantly—"therefore, be upon your guard!"

Sore was the pang—dull, dead, and heavy the weight—which fell on the heart of both Mr. Frere's fair friends when obliged to believe him! But, awaking from the

stupor of consternation, they now assailed him with such a running fire of congratulation—such vehemence of delight—such thanks to Heaven—such smiles, nay, tears of rapture—(for Phebe was quite enough agitated to be hysterical;) in short, when, thoroughly convinced of the odious truth, they so conducted themselves, that Frere had not the heart to say any thing severe. In his character of deaf guest and lover, he had been too long habituated to regard this whole family as the most sincere and devoted of friends, to be able, all at once, to doubt them. With those kind eyes of Kezia's fixed upon him, as she seized one of his hands, and Phebe's loving, worshipping glance, as she clung to the other, what could he do but return the grasp of the elder sister with a cordial shake, and take the youngest to his bosom?

He thought he could see so clearly how the case really stood. The Divets were all interested about this provoking concert—it was their way to waste a little too much energy on trifles; and at Phebe's age, it was perhaps not to be wondered at, that her love of amusement should be strong enough to counterbalance even her love for him. Aware of his previous dislike to company, and making sure that a musical evening could offer him no temptation to accompany her into public, she had contemplated his return as dooming her to a *téte-à-téte* at home, when she, poor simple child! had expected to be enjoying herself in the great room of the Etheridge Institution.

Frere could have wished it otherwise; but it was not so very long ago that a still harsher lesson had been administered to him: a far sterner and more convincing proof of woman's instability—her innate and invincible frivolity of character; and ever since that period the self-conceit and sweet romance of youth had been so thoroughly taken out of him, that this fresh instance of female levity met with a more lenient sentence than might otherwise have been pronounced.

While reflections of this sort were passing through his mind, Mrs. George was reminding the pet lamb that it was the height of selfishness to keep the good news to themselves. "Papa does not know a word about it—not a single word, dear—and the good grandpapa! Oh, dearest Mr. Manley! it will bestow upon him another century of happiness! In fact," Kezia exclaimed ecstatically—"Mr. Frere was so idolized by that household, that every member of it would partake in the general joy—I really must fly to tell them all!"

To which trifling exaggeration of the truth, Frere was tempted to add, that perhaps it might be "most *prudent* so to do;" and the emphasis upon the adjective was so significant, that a guilty blush rose to the cheek of Mrs. George, and she was for the moment as nearly out of countenance as she had ever been in her life.

Frere saw it, and smiled good-humouredly. "Never mind, Mrs. Barclay!" he said; "don't distress yourself about an accident which ought to have been foreseen,

and guarded against. His *high mightiness* had no business to listen to what was only intended for a deaf ear. And, if he has met with a few things to lower his vanity, it is only the fate of Haroun Alraschid and all eavesdroppers, little and big, who wander about the world in unseasonable disguises."

"Oh, don't say that, dear—dear Mr. Manley! Pray, don't say such things!" It was all the answer the sisters could make in their utter alarm and confusion; and perhaps they could not have shown their discretion better than by abstaining from any laboured apology for a mischance which, while it had evidently wounded Frere in no trifling degree, could by no possibility be explained away.

Mrs. Betty having forestalled her mistresses in publishing a hasty report of Mr. Frere's "blessed recovery," it was found, on joining the gentlemen below, that both were fully prepared to take their share in the common round of congratulation. David, indeed, had an uncomfortable impression of something having gone amiss, and, in the midst of his boisterous exultation, kept searching his memory to recall exactly what he and Kezia had said upon the arrival of their guest; but the Patriarch, secure and uncompromised by a single sentence too rashly and sincerely delivered, was, as usual, all that could be wished. Serene benevolence pervaded every shrivelled feature, and pious thought and apt reflection flowed unceasingly from his venerable tongue.

Playgoers of long experience will tell you that there are few actors of the present day who can bear comparison with those of former generations; and the doings at the Etheridge mansion may well be quoted in confirmation of this opinion, as it is without a doubt that the performance of the oldest member of the amateur company there, exceeded by many a degree the best exertions of any of his descendants. One might indeed imagine the spirit which had possessed the scenic giants of old, the Garricks, the Macklins, the Kembles, the Keans, as deigning for the nonce to inhabit the decrepit form of the worldly-wise lawyer, animating and chastening his efforts at deception, while the inferior artists, working less delicately, were ever on the point of overacting their part.

Thus, in spite of Frere's steady opposition to their proposal, Divet and the ladies insisted on giving up the concert, that they might pass the evening with their dear Mr. Manley. They would neither consent to go without him, nor accept his proposal of accompanying them thither, and it required the judicious intervention of old Jesse to settle the amicable contest. "What matters it where you are, my children?" he blandly observed; "the time cannot pass unhappily if it be spent together! Mr. Manley would for once," he was sure, "condescend to a provincial entertainment, when he was made aware that the absence of the family on this particular occasion would be a matter of disappointment to the town; in

fact might create some ill-will, and prove detrimental to the charity for which this performance was undertaken."

Frere cut short the discussion at once, "Say no more about it, but let us be off without further delay; and, as for its being only a local affair, I for one ought to be thankful for the mere tuning of the instruments."

"I declare," said Phebe, in her most artless manner, "I was just going to speak to you with my fingers. Ah, Mr. Manley! I am afraid I shall lose all my consequence with you, now that I am no longer to be your interpreter!"

This was a chord that, delicately touched (and the shepherdess, when quite mistress of herself, knew well how to finger it), could not fail to bring back some very pleasant memories, and so elicit a tender reply.

But now Miss Palliser was called for: in the general excitement her absence had been all but overlooked, and it was not till they had taken leave of the Patriarch, and were hurrying off, that the cry was raised of "Where was Maria?"

Mrs. Barclay, ever alert and obliging, ran up herself to summon the absentee, and tell her the good news about dear Mr. Manley; but, after remaining longer up-stairs than Phebe's patience would tolerate, she returned alone, and with a countenance of some gravity. Maria had changed her mind, and now refused to accompany them, though she would give no reason for declining

an engagement she had in the first instance freely acceded to.

"So much the better!" her sister said, as with Frere's assistance she tripped lightly down the steps, and into the carriage. "They would do vastly well without her —with her cold looks and supercilious speeches she never could wish for Maria Palliser as her *vis-a-vis* in any coach but a mourning one. *There* she would be quite in her element, and a charming addition to black scarfs and crape hat-bands."

But Kezia spake more thoughtfully, and indeed with a more human feeling. She had, she said, been uneasy about Miss Palliser for some time past. Even prior to the Colonel's accident she had noticed a marked change in her manner; and, since her stay in town, she had been constantly in extremes, either flighty and excited to an unnatural excess, or sunk in long fits of silence and abstraction. All this was so contrary to Maria's usual even temper, that Mrs. George knew not what to make of it, and she trusted that nothing would interfere with the Colonel's intended arrival on the morrow, for as long as he was away she felt a sort of responsibility with regard to his betrothed bride.

"For my part," said Phebe with careless contempt, "I consider it nothing on earth but temper; for though you call hers an even one, Kezia, it only deserved that epithet because it was so invariably cross. And as for wishing so much for that poor dear Colonel, why, if his ladylove

is really going crazy, she would be sure to bite him before any of us. Mad people are always furious against those they love best;—isn't that true, Mr. Frere? And if I go wild for joy, don't I know who will be in the greatest danger—don't you?" and she looked softly at him. "Come, now, you are not to answer me with that grave look, or upon my word and honour I shall wish you deaf again—for you were always kind to me then."

Reason enough had the shepherdess for this remark. The coaxing attitude she was assuming, and the little childish pout which accompanied her complaint of ill-usage, might formerly have charmed her lover into overlooking whatever was questionable in the substance of her speech; for it would have come to him softened and distilled through the medium I have elsewhere described, the correcting influence of the tablets or the tube. Now, in all its coarseness, it struck upon his moral sense at the same moment that it jarred upon his ear, and he calmly replied that he could not but look serious to hear her talking so lightly of what was to him one of the most touching stories he had ever met with in real life—"this accident of Colonel Hussey's happening so near his wedding-day, and the admirable, the heroic spirit in which his betrothed had met the blow!"

These few words gave the party their cue. Phebe, though inwardly rebelling, tried to look penitent, and Mrs. Barclay did the wisest thing she could, by simply saying, "Ah, Mr. Manley, our poor little pet is almost

in the state she is describing! The inexpressible joy of such a meeting as this, has nearly turned her dear head."

Frere was on the very point of saying that the effects of both joy and sorrow, when carried to excess, were likely to be "very *disagreeable;*" but he checked the ungracious allusion as it rose to his tongue, and was, indeed, vexed with himself for the strong temptation he felt to refer to it.

And yet, do what he would, those words, in the fractious drawl in which they had saluted his ear, haunted him perpetually.

Without being very unreasonable in his requirements, Frere had hoped for some slight portion of consistency in the character of the woman he was promising to marry; and yet his utmost indulgence for youth and high spirits would not enable him to reconcile the little Divet's conduct at their meeting, with the warm partiality she had voluntarily confessed for him, and for the sincerity of which he held himself as morally certain as man could be.

The enigma was both unintelligible and provoking. Here was this little girl, at one time eager to devote her whole time and energies to his service, incurring the blame of her best friend for the ardency of her attachment; and, as he could see from personal observation, never so happy as when playing about him, or sitting contentedly amusing herself at his feet. Then comes a

few weeks' separation—the idolized lover returns, and finds his mistress balancing against the charm of his society the sacrifice of a night's diversion with the Etheridge musicians—and *such* diversion, forsooth!

Had Manley Frere's return to Etheridge been blessed with all the soothing circumstances upon which he had so firmly and fondly calculated, it is probable that the performances of the town would have found more favour in his sight than they were now likely to meet with; for it was no part of his disposition to be generally intolerant of the harmless amusements which gave pleasure to other people, though they could afford none to him. But that night, so utterly poor and pretentious appeared to him the whole entertainment, that, observing the unanimous applause which followed every portion of it, he began to fear that the science he loved so well, and in its higher manifestations honoured with a sentiment almost devout, must have gone back a step or two during the season when his senses were closed against it.

In justice to the neighbourhood, however, it must be remembered that Mr. Frere was too ignorant of its local politics to comprehend the extra enthusiasm (extra parochial it might be called) which was got up for this special occasion, civility governing the behaviour of the amateurs much more than musical feeling; as it was plainly a point of etiquette for the Etheridge people to applaud to the very echo the singers of the neighbouring parish, whilst these, on their side, paid a no less vociferous

tribute to every thing that issued from the throats of the Etheridge chorus.

Could Mr. Frere have listened to the mutual criticism which took place the instant the rival musicians parted company, he would not have found reason to accuse either party of being *too* charitably-minded, or over-easy in their judgment of each other.

But, ignorant or unmindful of all this, and much engrossed in his own concerns, he sat for the most part of the evening silent, and, it is to be feared, slightly supercilious.

Was it the still voices of the woods so lately listened to, and still haunting his memory, that caused the music now to sound so much amiss, or the influence of that one little human voice which had yet more recently poured out its free, untutored sentiment upon his awakened ear; casting over every thing that surrounded him a shade of disappointment and painful perplexity, so that even the very London stars seemed to him to be singing out of tune?

Nor was Mr. Frere the only one in the room who considered his position there a decided mistake. The audience generally were very sarcastic when they beheld a person whom they had every reason to believe nearly stone-deaf, sitting out a concert till the final chord was struck: they thought the Divets had done a "very silly thing in bringing him so out of his proper sphere. How much better for him, poor man!

to have been at home playing cribbage with old Mr. Divet."

Of course, at the convening of the notables, which took place at the manor-house when the concert was over, Frere appeared in his new character, and for a time quite superseded the original attraction which had brought the party together. He was undeniably the lion of the night, and had to tell his story to a wondering audience, and be put upon his experiences, and answer an infinite variety of questions, some of them rational enough, but others betraying such a measure of ignorance, stupidity, and narrowness of conception, as went very nigh to make him suspect that mind as well as music had retrograded perceptibly since his retirement from society. It was curious to remark how a single sentence from lips which had hitherto been dumb to him, admitted Frere at once into the capacity, and almost the character, of many so familiar to him by sight.

"How strange it must seem to you to hear our voices!" some one observed.

"Yes!" he replied. "Up to this hour you have all been but shadows before my eyes; but now I find that my Etheridge friends are really flesh and blood like myself."

"And have I been only a shadow all this while?" murmured a little voice at his elbow; for Phebe, playing her part correctly now, hung upon his accents and

caressed him with her looks—looks which he, regarding his shepherdess as (like many of her pretty sex) more frail than faulty—could not but reciprocate with much of his old complacency.

Frere was ill-disposed just then for the work he found cut out for him as chief entertainer of the Divets' guests, and yet he could not long withstand the interest and good-will of which he found himself the centre; and he was soon sympathizing with the sympathizers, and charming those who circled around him with the intelligence, fine feeling, and playful humour which so often raised his conversation above the common level.

Amongst Frere's closest and liveliest interrogators was young Moss, Mr. Jones's assistant—admitted to this distinguished assemblage on the reputation of some musical taste, and the having a baronet for an uncle on the maternal side; and it was refreshing to turn from the talkers in general, to one whose professional knowledge made his opinion and remarks worth having. He was soon deep in investigating the secondary causes which might, as he supposed, have effected what most of the company were pleased to characterize as a "miracle," and would have been deeper still in the subject; but he was a vivacious, not to say harebrained youth, and he had by no means forgotten *another* professional matter connected with that house, in which his liveliest interest had been at the time enlisted; and this occurring to him just as he was in full discourse

with Frere, he turned suddenly to Kezia, with—"By the by, Mrs. Barclay, have you had any news lately of our charming patient, Miss Girdlestone? I should very much like to know how she is going on, and whether"——

"I hear them announcing supper, Mr. Moss; will you favour me by conducting one of the young ladies?" and, as she spoke, Mrs. George glided before the young doctor, and reminded him by a warning glance that their guest was deaf no longer, and intently listening to all he said.

Turning off without another word, the young man obeyed her hint; for, in common with all the neighbourhood, he was pretty well acquainted with the delicate and painful circumstances which had formerly connected Manley Frere with the beautiful Barbara Girdlestone.

The quick turn of Frere's eye, and the immediate heightening of his colour, shewed that the interposition, prompt as it was, had nevertheless come a moment too late, and that, for the second time that night, he had overheard more than was desirable; nor did the frown with which Mrs. George silenced the loquacious guest pass unobserved by the subject of it. It inspired him, however, with no suspicion of underhand dealing; he saw in it merely the act of a kind and prudent friend, naturally desirous to shield him from the public discussion of an ungrateful and embarrassing topic.

He gave her credit for her discretion, therefore, yet

could not help wishing it had been exerted less successfully; for it was impossible for Frere to catch the sound of that name—a name once so dear, and still so interesting to his fancy—without feeling some curiosity excited as to the circumstances which could have introduced it.

The matter was probably not really deserving a second thought. Frere concluded, upon seeing Mr. Girdlestone at Etheridge, that his daughter was staying also in the neighbourhood; and there was nothing remarkable in Jones's assistant having, in his medical capacity, had some acquaintance with either of them.

In some such unromantic way accounting for the incident, and calming the sudden throbbing of the pulse which it had excited, Miss Phebe Divet's professed admirer addressed himself with virtuous resolution to the business of the passing hour; fulfilling his duties, social or leonine, to the best of his ability, and only in himself conscious of a secret inclination to follow the movements of Kezia and the young mediciner, when they came again into temporary collision, his fancy supplying pretty correctly the short colloquy that did ensue: her whispered reproach—"How *could* you be so incautious!" and his penitent apology, that "upon his word and honour, he had quite forgotten himself, and thought, at the moment he mentioned Miss Girdlestone, that their friend was just as hard of hearing as ever." These words could hardly fail to revive within Kezia's

breast a gentle memory of the past—the pleasant past! The safe, the comfortable time gone by—alack! too quickly—"when one might talk treason in the ear of this provoking man, and he be never the wiser."

Such was the reflection of Mrs. Barclay, as, sighing in the spirit while smiling in the flesh, she proceeded to marshal her company round the supper-table.

CHAPTER IX.

THE JUDGMENT OF THE EAR.

At a house which coveted the praise of liberality more than that of a scrupulous refinement, the supper was ever a prominent feature in the social meetings held beneath its roof.

Whether cards were the order of the night, sober-sided whist, quadrille, dear to the venerable spinsters of the town, or a rantipole round game, with its licensed trickery and clamorous glee—whether a stately ball was undertaken, or a brisk dance on the drawing-room carpet set on foot at an hour's notice—in any case, as the guests toiled on in their several vocations, they were always cheered and sustained by the deep and moral certainty, that something well worth waiting, and dealing, and dancing for would come at last—that the attentions of Mrs. Barclay were no hollow strain of courtesy, nor the rough heartiness of her father a mere parade of good-will, breeding false hopes which were destined to lead only to a refreshment-tray.

There have been hundreds of families as eager to

stand well with society as our friends the Divets, and to all appearances gifted with far higher claims to distinction, who have notwithstanding failed to secure the prize they struggled for so strenuously, and have eventually slid down the ladder of public favour almost as quickly as they mounted it.

The superficial observer will simply wonder at their ill-success; but groping our way amongst causes and effects, and all that queer network of human motives which crosses and re-crosses and crosses again below the surface of society, we shall often find that these candidates for popularity have set forth too determinately upon the maxim of obtaining the largest amount of social intercourse and amusement at the least possible expense—a maxim utterly opposed to the principles of the manor-house, where flattery and good fare walked ever hand in hand in loving guise, which might be styled both sweet and savoury.

Something of special power must plainly have been working with the Divets, to enable them to mingle as they did with classes and coteries of the most opposite character, each regarding them as its well-wishers, yet allowing them to remain uncompromised as positive allies.

Under certain restrictions they entertained all parties in and about the place. The scientific, the literary, the philosophical, were delighted to adjourn from their solemn lectures at the institution, to the snug library,

and still snugger supper-room, of the mansion. On one evening, the Archæological Society would be discussing matters of mediæval interest in these same hospitable quarters; on the next a charade would be got up, always livelier and more successful than the acting at any other house in the neighbourhood; whilst the following night, perhaps, would see them busy with phrenology, or doing a little in the way of table-turning.

On the same principle of being all things to all men, they specially distinguished the regular clergy, and were profuse in giving to all the established charities of the place, and yet could find an occasional hour or two for sectaries of various shades and denominations. They had even been known to have had the Roman Catholic priest at their table more than once, while they still managed to keep on decent terms with their connections the Mudges.

One morning the drawing-room tables would be strewed with frippery for fancy fairs of the most orthodox and aristocratic description: pincushions and antimacassars, *ad infinitum*, mixed up with cigar-cases and smoking-caps, embroidered by nice young ladies, to be bought at an exorbitant rate by "fast" young men; dolls, as viciously overdressed as the children for whom they were destined; and Bible marks with awful emblems, worked in floss silk and tinsel, and marked "half-a-crown a-piece:" these, with sermon covers, being the special bait for curates. And when all had been duly

examined, criticised, and priced, you might see Kezia sweeping away the trumpery to make room for a convocation of the members of the Dorcas society, which held its meeting once in each winter month at the Etheridge mansion.

The suggestion we have thrown out in relation to these seeming contrarieties, is far from being complimentary to human nature; but this is an inquiring age, and I see not why the interior construction and the outer development of such an influential little group as the Divets, may not, if rightly considered, prove as useful and instructive as a great deal of the scientific minutiæ which our reverence for the abstruse leads us to regard with a grave and respectful attention. I will venture, therefore, to repeat, that if we are to find a clue to the singular capacity displayed by this family for keeping well with classes utterly irreconcilable in habits, manners, tastes, and pursuits, it must be sought for in the substantial method through which they demonstrated their common philanthropy, and sent every visiter from their house physically as well as morally pleased with the entertainment it afforded.

People less instructed in the ways of the world than were these dignitaries of the High Street, could hardly have escaped the jealous detraction of that great majority, who, going upon the economical principle, must have perceived in these banqueting propensities a tacit sneer at them and their meagre housekeeping—their relays

of dry sandwiches, and condiments of the gelatine tribe. But the Divets, aware of the shoals and pitfalls, and the little green patches of tremulous bog, that lie intercepting the straight road to popularity, were careful on every occasion to mark out their conduct as something exceptional; and in fact demanding humble excuse, rather than boastful laudation.

From his place at the well-covered table, David would pronounce every thing as "simple"—"simple to the last degree. But the truth is, we look upon this sort of thing as wholesome. It is not the custom, we know; but it suits our constitutions, and it gives us no small pleasure to find that our friends are so good as not to cut us entirely on account of our old-fashioned ways; for we allow that we are sadly out of fashion—quite behindhand with the age we live in. But the fact is, we are homely folks (Dawkins, champagne to the Archdeacon); we are homely people, and never pretend to be any thing besides."

Then Kezia, with smiles of cheerful humility, would take up the same strain—"Yes, indeed, there are few—really very few—of our kind neighbours who quarrel with these old world fancies of ours; scarcely one, I think, who does not condescend to sit down with us, and in some degree keep us in countenance. And so I hope, my dear Lady Mary," addressing some distinguished visiter—"I hope you will allow me to send you the smallest portion of this dish before me, just the least

bit in the world to tempt your small appetite: I hardly know what it is, I am so purblind," and Mrs. George would lift her eye-glass and peer at the delicate dish with a doubtful expression; though that very morning she had stood in her kitchen with its receipt in her hand, reading and enforcing upon her cook the minutest attention to each of its ingredients. "But, if I am not very much mistaken, it is a thing we were rather celebrated for in mamma's time—the dear old lady was very partial to it."

Often had it happened to Frere, as he left his intellectual solitude for a starlight stroll in the Friar's Walk, to be sensible of fragrant odours arising from the culinary quarter of the mansion, and expanding luxuriously through the hall and passages adjacent; for some time careless as to the habits and propensities of those he dwelt among, but latterly casting a passing thought on the subject, and hoping that "that simple little girl, his host's youngest daughter, was not given to epicurism, like the rest of her family."

On this night, however, the banquet, though good and profuse as ever, was unwontedly hurried over, in order to afford time for the professional guests to favour the company with their performances after supper. Certain of the county people had been lured to the mansion by the prospect of this extra gratification, and their long drive home had to be considered in settling the programme of the night.

To none present could such curtailment be more welcome than to Frere. He longed for the time when, being honourably superseded by the more legitimate attraction of the entertainment, he might quietly subside amongst the crowd of spectators, and become acquainted, orally as well as ocularly, with those about him: or, at least, with a certain portion of them. Mr. Frere has his feelings greatly too much under control on this occasion to suffer his countenance to betray much of what is passing within; yet, as he stands aloof from the instrument round which the party are thronging—his looks following thoughtfully the slight form of his shepherdess, while it flits about and crosses to and fro, doing the honours of the evening with its own peculiar grace—his expression is certainly *not* as placidly contented as it used to be.

For worlds Manley Frere would not resign the sense restored to him; yet he cannot but perceive that much of the poetry, and all the peculiarity, attending upon his second essay in the tender passion, has vanished with his deafness.

Never till his hearing returned had he suspected how wonderfully his interest in Divet's daughter was excited and sharpened by the unusual terms on which they had stood together.

Phebe, with her playful movements and her varied gesticulations, hovering so amusingly between the graceful and grotesque, had been to him a sort of Fenella—a being

wholly original and distinct from all her race—whose native ingenuity, admirable in itself, was, as he fancied and flattered himself, perfected by the secret passion she had conceived for *him*. Divested of these characteristics she might still be regarded as a pleasing person, arch, animated, and agreeable; but he sadly missed the many odd yet pretty little actions, in which every limb and feature was trained to express some meaning, hidden from all but him. The man who is not desperately and blindly enamoured of a ballet-dancer, had better not follow her behind the scenes.

In the Divets' drawing-room, accompanied only by the pianoforte, the London singers, who were really but third or fourth-rate, shone to much more advantage than when straining their voices and playing off their bravura airs and graces amidst a larger audience: so at least it seemed to Frere; and, though not quite as rapturous as his little shepherdess, who tripped up to him ever and anon to whisper her expressions of delight, he was contented to have her applauding with the rest of the room: even a more objectionable taste would have been well atoned for by the graceful style in which she was careful to defer to his better judgment and experience, "You know, Mr. Manley," she said, continuing to address her lover with the mingled respect and familiarity which her family had always observed towards him—"You know I am not blessed with your superior taste and genius; and, besides, I have not been much in town, and have heard so

little of what you call good music. Some day"—added the pet lamb, raising its eyes modestly to his, and then dropping them with a pretty shyness—"some day or other, perhaps, you will not mind the trouble of teaching me better?"

Touched by the sweetness of her humility, Frere's answer was conveyed in the kindest language. "There are many things, Phebe," he said, "that I cannot teach you, for you are perfect in them already. And these are more valuable than any thing education can bestow, or mere human experience inculcate!" for with such a just appreciation of her own deficiencies, and such a willingness to be guided by him, he began to think it would be strange indeed if he could not mould the little Divet according to his fancy. Somewhat too volatile and impulsive he was prepared to find her (her reception of him that evening had proved the fact); but if he made it his earnest endeavour to eradicate whatever was amiss in her education and habits, and imbue her with higher and purer tastes, his little wife might prove, in due season, as pleasant to the mind and ear of her husband as to his sense of sight.

Yes! he must resist, even as a temptation of the Evil One, that disposition to look back upon the past, of which he was so often remorsefully conscious; and must justify "the sweet trust his little playmate was confiding in him, by leading her gently and by degrees—enticing her forward, as it were, with all

prudence and tenderness into the paths he would have her take."

This virtuous resolve, as well as the self-complacency attending it, lasted a little while longer; when, lo! the prospect darkened again, and Frere relapsed into the uneasy misgiving which, in greater or less degree, had been clouding his mental horizon from the moment he re-entered the manor-house.

By way of humouring the prejudices of a very influential family, whose tender consciences were known to shrink from any thing of an operatic tendency, Mrs. George had, without actually publishing her motives for patronizing a severer school of melody, contrived, while they were present, to exclude all such enormities from the private orchestra. But, luckily for the popular taste, early hours comport best with scruples anent Rossini and Meyerbeer; so that, having listened in a state of high edification to one or two most correct but rather ponderous compositions, the serious ones departed, leaving the company to disport itself according to its genuine inclinations.

From this moment, indeed, a vast increase of ease and enjoyment was seen to spread itself over the assembly. Once more the champagne was set flowing, under the inspiring influence of which the professional Bass volunteered one of his best buffo performances, and was followed by the Tenor, who shewed himself equally obliging, and not a whit less vivacious in his own

department. In short, all went well and with redoubled glee; and Frere, charmed to hear some of his old favourites again, could cordially sympathize in the natural delight of his shepherdess, when she clapped her little hands and declared it to be "*so* nice—oh, so *very* nice!"

But the night wearing apace, the fumes of wine and vanity combined to overpower the slight remnant of diffidence which had kept the amateurs from measuring their pretensions against those of the London stars; and these also were easily induced to favour the company, each in his own peculiar style. One gentleman sang Irish songs in a brogue most fearfully exaggerated, and was succeeded by a leash of brothers, celebrated in Etheridge for their execution of Ethiopian melodies.

But the most prominent as well as the most admired of all the private band of vocalists was a certain Mr. Murrell; whose name, though it has doubtless escaped the reader's recollection, has nevertheless been mentioned before, as a person who had found some degree of favour in the bright eyes of Miss Divet. With nothing save impudence and volubility to sustain him through one of the most arduous achievements that a man of ordinary abilities can possibly undertake—viz., the singing of a comic song with appropriate gesture and expression—this gentleman set off with a composition which had been brought into notice solely through the merits of one of our greatest comedians; and which,

having no intrinsic value of its own, required the whole force of his inimitable talents to render it endurable.

Now, Frere had borne the other feeble efforts with philosophic indifference. He had never attributed much taste or refinement to the Etheridge people, and was in this instance tolerably prepared for what he was to undergo; but in the performance of this young man there was such brazen assurance, and such a want of all artistic perception—his mimicry of the original singer was so servile, yet so coarse and ineffective—that, ere he had finished a single stanza, the listener felt himself attacked by that uncomfortable sensation which overtakes us when we see a fellow-creature glorying in some exhibibition of presumptuous folly, such as (supposing him to have ventured upon it in an interval of mental or physical derangement) should haunt him ever after in his saner moments with a never-failing blush.

And, unhappily, the annoyance, ended not here; for, on looking across the room to Phebe, in full assurance that she would reciprocate his dissatisfied glance with the pretty little gesture of disgust so familiar to the once deaf guest, Frere had the mortification of seeing her convulsed—positively convulsed—with laughter, and presently joining the admiring audience in encoring the performance of this vulgar buffoon!

"And do you *really* like that, Phebe?" he asked her when the song was finished.

She felt the reproof which lay in the tone if not the

words of his question—rebuke to herself, and depreciation of her special favourite; and, losing her temper for the moment, answered him defiantly—

"And why should I not like it, Mr. Manley? I hope I am Englishwoman enough not to like a good song the worse for its being sung in my own language rather than in any foreign one."

"Ah! I grant you, if it be *really* a good song and worth hearing; but there lies the pith of the argument."

"W-e-ll," she replied, softening her tone, "perhaps there may not be much in the thing itself; but then it was *so* well sung, you know!"

Frere turned away, sorely disappointed.

To many less particular and fastidious than this gentleman, the matter which overturned his equanimity may seem almost too inconsiderable to be recorded; but to a person so sensitive and observant, it unfolded a train of consequences such as it sickened him to contemplate.

From the instant of obtaining this proof of Phebe Divet's obtuseness and low taste, he grew almost hopeless of improving her; and of course lost proportionally all that alacrity of zeal wherewith he had been prospectively addressing himself to the task of re-educating his little wife.

Here, then, is one of the instances from which we are surely justified in saying, that there may be degrees of compensation even for the loss of hearing.

Had Mr. Frere been still under the bondage of his old complaint, his actual experience of the evening's proceedings would have amounted to nothing more correct than might be gathered by his strolling into the drawing-room in the course of the night, to observe the aspect of the party and of things in general, and to see, amongst them all, how sweet and artless his shepherdess was looking, how prettily she seemed to be behaving, and how nicely she was dressed. And, having spent some ten minutes or so in this way, he would have sauntered back to his solitude, satisfied to believe that the little girl in whom he was beginning to take an interest, was passing her time in a rational and cheerful manner. And the next morning David would have made signs at him, descriptive of the high success of the evening, and the ladies would have regretted, in the sweetest terms, that he should have been unable to participate in the pleasure they had enjoyed. "Such charming music! highly scientific the first part, and exactly calculated to please him. And then they had wound up the night with some of the most delightful comic songs imaginable. Some of their friends were remarkably clever in that line, especially Mr. Murrell, who was a perfect genius—quite equal to Robson: in fact, many people thought him superior. Ah, dear Mr. Manley! if you could but have heard our excellent performers, our gratification would then have been complete!"

Thus it would certainly have been, and the deaf man,

revelling in his dreamy solitude, would have gone on unsuspicious, duped, and satisfied. If knowledge is not always to be defined as power, still more rarely is it synonymous with true content.

The Divets, on their side, were not a whit better pleased with the altered state of their affairs. Even the high success which had signalized their endeavours at entertaining half the town, and some portion of the county besides, failed to compensate them for the mortification of having Frere thrown upon their hands so unexpectedly; and, what was worse, so perfectly restored to the use of all his faculties. There was embarrassment and misgiving in what had occurred already; and, as to the future, its whole character and capabilities were so changed, that it could scarcely be recognized for the same prospect which had glittered so temptingly before their lively fancies. How sanguine the hopes in which they had indulged, of having this dear Mr. Manley ever subservient to their management! As husband—brother—son-in-law—ever under comfortable control; and by a very little skilful manœuvring, while nominally the head of the fine property he was soon to share with Phebe, to be rendered no more really the master of his own house than he was of the mansion at Etheridge!

The prize was, even in its altered condition, too considerable to be rejected; but in the eyes of all the family, and especially in those of Phebe herself, it was grievously lessened in value. The complaints of that young person

were unqualified by a single kindly sentiment towards the man she had been so sedulously flattering.

"I thought," she exclaimed with tearful fretfulness, as they seized the first opportunity of talking the matter over after the late departure of their company—"I thought to have been my own mistress in every thing; and, instead of that, I shall be worse than any slave! He was always inclined to domineer and treat me like a child; and now I see he will be perfectly intolerable, with his old-fashioned notions and nonsensical particularity. Marry him? why, of course, I shall marry him! I would do that if it was only for the delight of plaguing his heart out; which, I promise you, I trust and intend to do. But I never liked him, even when I could manage him best; and now I hate and detest him worse than ever!"

To this Kezia replied by soothing remonstrances; for no one but the Patriarch himself could control the temper of the pet lamb when it was thoroughly aroused, and at that late, or rather early hour, the services of the old gentleman could not be made available.

Her father, for once perhaps, took the best course, by displaying matters in a more hopeful point of view than was usual with him—that is to say, by predicting pretty decidedly the speedy return of Frere's deafness.

"Depend upon it," said he, "he is only flattering himself! He'll find to his sorrow that his recovery, as he calls it, poor fellow! is merely a flash in the pan: nothing more, depend on it! He'll get bad again the first cold he

takes, and then I'll venture to say the thing will be settled for life. Lord bless you, child! it runs in the family; and I'm a firm believer in hereditary complaints. Why, there was his father—never could hear distinctly: didn't like to own it, you know (nobody does), but he was always a little deaf with one ear. And as for his mother—I don't say she was deaf exactly, but she was very dunny: constantly bothering you to repeat your words. And then there was an aunt of his—you must remember her, Kezia? your grandfather would, at all events—his great aunt, old Lady Trelawney. Why, before that old lady died, you might have let off a blunderbuss at her ear, and it wouldn't have startled her. So you see, Phebe, there's no occasion to make yourself uneasy: a family disorder is not so soon got rid of as Frere imagines. I pity him, poor young man! because it will be a disappointment to him; but he'll get over it you know: he'll get used to these ups and downs: what can't be cured must be endured. He'll get over this vexation as he did over the last, and we shall all be as happy together again as we were before this little drawback—you'll see, you'll see how it will all turn out!"

With which cheerful prognostic of our good friend David's, we will leave the family conference, and follow the unconscious author of all this vexation, as with a jaded air and languid movement—most unlike the light and eager step with which he had entered that house—he was now mounting the stairs to his bed-room.

CHAPTER X.

STILL WANDERING IN THE WOOD NEAR ATHENS.

The party had been so late in separating, that by this time the dawn was stealing through the lofty windows of the mansion, and shedding its cold tint on every thing it touched; insomuch that Frere, knowing the house so well, might have found his way without the candle he had taken as a matter of course:—that earth-born flame which, though a portion of the same element which had been streaming from lamp and candelabra, and making the Divets' drawing-rooms look so bright and gay, took now a coarse and dusky tinge as the grey gleam encircled it. It was in the depth of night, with only the distant stars to break the universal darkness, that that candle in the window at Belmont shone like "a good deed in a naughty world:" here, struggling with the purer light from heaven, the little flame might be taken rather as a type of the weakness and imperfection of man's best works!

As Frere ascended the stairs leading to the passage or lobby where his rooms and the work-shop of George

Barclay were situated, he "was aware," as they say in old ballads, of something in white and flowing garments which stood at the head of the staircase, and seemed to await his coming.

Any surprise he might feel at finding his own undisputed territory so tenanted, quickly gave place to a sentiment of kindly compassion; for in the graceful apparition, bending over the balustrade above him, he recognized his old acquaintance Maria Palliser, and to meet her wandering about the house at such an hour as that, was quite enough to confirm all the melancholy hints that had been given him of her unsettled state of mind.

Upon ascertaining who it was, Frere accosted her immediately in as cheerful a tone as he could assume, and yet so as to mark his surprise at her strange behaviour.

"This is a most unexpected pleasure—I had no idea of seeing Miss Palliser to-night, as she did not condescend to favour us with her company down-stairs."

And then came a clear and rather deep voice, till that moment unheard by him—"I have been waiting a long while," it said; "but I knew you would come at last."

He kindly assured her that, had he been aware of her desire to see him, he would on no account have kept her waiting.

"But is there any thing the matter? Any thing in which I can be useful to you?" he asked; and the tone

of her reply was so collected that it well-nigh staggered Frere in his opinion of her flightiness.

"If there was nothing the matter, Mr. Frere, do you think I should be here now?"

"True—just so," he answered soothingly. "And now that we have met, tell me what service I can do you?"

"Service!" she repeated with a faint smile—"Oh, the service is for *me* to render; though it will be slight now, to what it might have been. Somebody told me that you had regained your hearing; and I did not believe the news, for they were false lips that spake it; but now I see there was some truth in what was said. You *do* hear me, Mr. Frere?"

Frere told her that he would not now detain her with the particulars of his strange story, but that it was perfectly true that he had suddenly received back this inestimable gift.

"Inestimable, indeed!" she murmured; "he above all others might well call it so;" and then, fixing her beautiful large eyes upon his with a sweet earnestness, Maria added, "I thought to have been your guardian angel myself, Mr. Frere; but I suppose I am not held worthy of such an office."

"Do not say so, Miss Palliser," he replied; his heart bleeding for what seemed to him the utter confusion of a fine, though always gloomy mind. "As you stand before me in your white robes, I can hardly call up a vision of mercy more bright and pure."

A gentle smile rewarded his soothing speech: bewildered and awe-stricken as she was, Maria could not listen to such language from Manley Frere, without something of her former pleasure in his respectful gallantry.

"I have no faith," she said, "in celestial wardrobes, with their store of wings and palms and spotless garments. Such puerile fancies were never to my taste; but that there *is* something more than human watching over you, I can make no doubt. Those who told me what had happened to you, called it a miracle: the very servants caught up the word and repeated it, like other human parrots. And they were right; though they little knew what reason they had for calling it so. Without some preternatural interposition, every effort to save you might have been in vain. Even at this moment," she went on mysteriously, "the same dark influence that has overshadowed us ever since we were dwellers together in this fatal place, would have been at work to hinder our meeting;" and looking about her with more of the disordered air of madness than she had yet displayed, Maria muttered, "that they could not move or breathe without witnesses: there were myriads of eyes and ears to be shunned! Is it likely, then, that we should be suffered to talk together, unless some counteracting force, something more mighty for good than evil, were exercising its controlling influence for our defence? Yes, *our* defence," she repeated with lofty emphasis; for

the compassionate smile with which Frere listened to what seemed to him a mere tissue of unintelligible fancies, did not escape her quick observation. "I spoke of our fate as being united, and I have full warrant for my words: in shielding you from ruin, I save myself from repentance, such as the grave itself may not be able to extinguish."

"My dear, dear Miss Palliser!" Frere exclaimed, "what gloomy thoughts are these? How foreign to the happiness that is really awaiting you, and which you have so admirably—so nobly earned! Considering what you have gone through lately, it is no wonder that your nerves should be shaken, and that every thing should wear an aspect somewhat subdued. But you must not—indeed you must not let Colonel Hussey find you indulging these melancholy fancies. I hear that we are to have the pleasure of seeing him early to-morrow; so you must endeavour now to get all the sleep you can, that you may be in health and spirits to receive him cheerfully. Come, take my arm, and let me light you to your room, or, well as you know the ways of this old house, you may get a little bewildered amongst its intricate ways."

"Its ways!" she repeated, with a peculiar flash of her eye—"Yes, I do know them well! Every nook and dark corner of this house, I know them all, Mr. Frere, and I only wish they were as visible to you as they are to me."

Solicitous to humour his wayward companion, and

dispose of her safely, Frere had suffered his purpose to become too apparent; and Maria, with the acuteness and tenacity which so often characterises a disturbed brain, felt the supposed indignity, and secretly resented it. He was tired of her already, she thought, and was treating her as one incapable of conducting herself; and though she made no resistance when he offered to lead her in the direction of her own chamber, she walked silent and sullen, like a spoiled child whom the nurse is coaxing to go to its bed.

They had not proceeded many steps, however, when the fit left her, and she asked him abruptly—"Do you love to foil your enemies, Mr. Frere?"

"Really, Miss Palliser," he answered cheerfully, "I am not aware that I have any to overcome."

"Ah!" she said, softening the harshness of her tone, "why are you so confiding? Is there one in this house that has not been your mortal foe? Even the erring creature that is speaking to you now?" she looked mournfully in his face as she said the words.

"*You* an enemy of *mine*, Miss Palliser! Nay, that I can never believe!"

"Ay, Mr. Frere—*I* more than all the rest! More than any living creature have I been your enemy! For I am persuaded that, without my influence, you would never have dreamed of taking a viper to your bosom, and associating yourself with all that is vile and refuse."

"Poor Phebe!" said Frere, half smiling to himself; for he was more amused than angry at what he imagined a mere ebullition of spiteful insanity.

Stung by his careless tone, Maria turned upon him with flashing eyes: yet what could she say further? or how justify her wrath against Phebe Divet, and her disdain of his credulity? All would be made clear to him before long—but not by her! The shame, the misery of enlightening him, that at least she might avoid. Some shadow of respect she believed Frere entertained for her, which was dearer to Maria's wandering fancy than the love of the whole world: this she would preserve, and treasure it while life endured. When, indeed, that life should have passed away—and oh! that the time were come!—then let him know all: their mutual weakness and blind conduct; but not till then!

With these reflections darting through her heated brain, there was a real connection between what she had just said and the subject which succeeded it; yet, while the intermediate links were hidden from him, Frere might well be justified in regarding the fresh topic as simply another proof of the speaker's unsettled intellect.

"Do you believe that the dead are able to revisit us, Mr. Frere?"

Though startled by her question, Frere quietly answered that he did not see how any one having faith in a future existence, could deny the possibility of such a thing. "Even supposing it an error, the belief is a

harmless one, and must have afforded consolation to thousands before now."

"That is true," she replied: "but, like all human speculations, this has its darker side; for if we suppose the soul in its earthly clothing to have been wise and virtuous, and so communicating its own fine qualities as it went upon its way—then we may fancy it pressing to return to the scene of its fleshly imprisonment. But if it has been here only to work out its inborn wickedness, and to prove the ruin and curse of (perhaps) the very friends most loved and honoured by it—for I can imagine such a case, Mr. Frere!—if it should have cast temptation in the way of but one of these beloved ones, and left him an eternal legacy of disappointment and remorse—what will be the fate of this poor wandering spirit, if it lives beyond the present world, and is free to return to it invisible, and witness the misery it has accomplished—the full growth of the tree of evil that it has planted, and pruned, and watered, all with its own miserable hands? Can you figure to yourself any torture purely material, that could compare with the horror of such a penance? And might we not be almost justified in desiring utter annihilation rather than an immortality like that?"

"So, then," thought Frere, "her flightiness takes a religious turn, the most difficult of all to cure; and I must be doubly cautious how I treat her."

He would willingly have evaded a direct answer; for,

independently of Maria's very questionable state, Frere was little disposed at that time of night to be launching into the subtleties of theology or metaphysics; but the rapt attention with which she evidently hung upon his words, warned him that, in attempting to soothe, he must on no account appear to trifle with her.

He answered her, therefore, in the same grave tone; all the time gently, but resolutely, resisting her inclination to linger by the way, and plunge deeper and deeper into the mysterious subject.

"If," he replied, "the spirit's immateriality, or its union with a body of unearthly texture, implies—as is commonly believed—a higher phase of existence than it enjoyed before death, we may be encouraged to hope that it will, at the same time, be gifted with a more penetrating and certain judgment; and although, as you rightly argue, this may on the one hand necessitate a deeper horror of the sins and follies committed here, yet, on the other, the same increased intelligence will tend to demonstrate the wonderful government, the wisdom, and the love, which has been ruling and subjecting every thing according to its own unerring knowledge, and the eventual good of all created beings. The wandering soul you are supposing, though forced to look back on the crimes of its mortal career, may still be immeasurably consoled to discover how powerless all its efforts have been to arrest or precipitate the progress of events, or to influence materially any destiny but its

own ; its worst actions, and those that lie heaviest on its conscience, may be found to have been the means only of fulfilling some merciful purpose—eliciting, for instance, some virtue or good quality in those it shall have seemed to injure, and so bringing down a blessing instead of a curse on the head of its supposed victim."

Finding how tractably his companion was listening to him, Frere went on to illustrate this view of the subject, by taking as an instance what had happened to Colonel Hussey.

"That accident of his was thought, at first, to present not a single redeeming feature ; and yet what calamity, less trying and severe, could have sufficed to bring out all the nobleness of your character, or to evince, in the same degree, the mingled strength and tenderness of your attachment to him ?"

Becoming sensible, as he said this, of a kind of thrill or shudder affecting the arm which rested upon his, Frere repented having made any allusion to her lover and his sufferings—the originating cause, as every one believed, of Miss Palliser's light-headedness, or whatever it might be termed. He dropped this part of his harangue, therefore, and merely added that, in like manner, we might be assisted in our reflections on things beyond the grave, by trusting that, if permitted to look deep enough into the causes of sin and grief, we should find that still and for ever would real good be evolving out of apparent evil.

"And here, I believe, is the passage that leads to your chamber."

Frere meant this as a civil hint that it was time for them to separate; but, silent and absorbed, Maria still leaned upon his arm, and, as he could not release it immediately without a greater appearance of rudeness than he could bear to display, they entered the gallery together.

Then, pointing to the window as they slowly advanced, she said—"It was there, just on that spot, Mr. Frere, that I saw you for the first time in my life."

"You have an excellent memory, Miss Palliser: I fancied we had been introduced to each other on quite a different occasion." But she continued, without seeming to heed him—"Yes, you were standing at the window, just there. But that was in the brightest moonlight—now all is dark and dismal!"

Frere looked at her with the utmost compassion, and answered gently—"The brighter the moonlight the deeper the shadows which lie beyond it, and the more unreal and fantastic will be the illusions which those shadows produce. Not so this grey morning, which grows lighter every moment, and will steadily increase till it is lost in the brightness and truth of day."

"Truth! truth!" Maria echoed the word with an expression he could not fathom. "Yes, you are very right! All *was* fantastic and visionary about that time. Illusions never to be renewed. Never—never again!"

For a few seconds she rested in melancholy abstraction, Frere growing more than ever at a loss how to treat her; when she surprised him by suddenly raising her drooping head, and addressing him in her ordinary cold, firm tone.

"Mr. Frere, before we part—and part we must—I have a commission to execute. In an incautious moment I pledged my word to deliver this trinket to you. Take it, and let my conscience be so far at least at rest."

Frere saw something glittering in Maria's outstretched hand, and thought to himself—"She evidently confuses me with the Colonel. Her case must be more serious than I or any one imagined."

But he could not refuse to receive what she offered him, and no sooner had he done so, and held it to the light, than his composure at once forsook him, and he exclaimed—"In the name of Heaven, where did you get this? Stay, Miss Palliser!" for at sight of his emotion a visible gloom overspread her expressive face, and she made a movement to pass on—"stay one moment, and listen to me, I entreat you! Two years ago I gave this locket to Miss Girdlestone, who promised me to wear it till the day when I should offer her a still more sacred pledge of my affection."

"Oh, yes!" interrupting him peevishly. "It was a birthday present: the first you ever gave her. You see I know the story—if it is worth knowing."

"It is that which surprises me!" Frere replied in a

tone of amazement. "The history of my engagement to that lady, and its sudden rupture, has been matter of common talk. But what relates to this trinket was known only to ourselves; and I cannot conceive how you can have heard the particulars from any lips but her own. Yet where you can have seen her, and why she should have made such a communication! For mercy's sake, Miss Palliser," he went on more imperatively, "try to collect yourself, and explain this mystery! I can easily suppose that, after what passed between Barbara and me, this bauble lost all value in her eyes."

Here Maria reproachfully interrupted him, "Yet with that persuasion you still trouble yourself to inquire about it! But I have no intention, Mr. Frere, to conceal from you any thing you wish to know. I have already told you I received that locket (the bauble as you justly call it!) from the hand into which you gave it: from Barbara Girdlestone, the woman who used you so cruelly—who deserted and spurned you, when you would have given worlds that you might have laid your aching head on her false bosom!"

"That is an old story!" he answered haughtily. "Let it rest in peace, and tell me at once what message accompanied the trinket. It could not have been returned without some explanation! Come," continued Frere, softening at the sight of the keepsake; or perhaps touched by the forlorn condition of the Colonel's mistress —for it was a painful thing to see her, as she leaned

against her door, so wan and haggard! "Come, my dear Miss Palliser! you who are so good, and have shewn yourself such a bright example of constancy in your own person—you, of all others, ought to comprehend the sort of interest that attaches—and ever must—to such a remembrance of the past as you have restored to me. Be now as kind and considerate as I have ever found you, and tell me every thing I want to know!"

He took her hand as he thus earnestly adjured her, but it hung cold and heavy in his; and the more he sought to persuade her, by so much the more perverse became the unhappy Maria.

"I am tired," she said sullenly: "I can talk no more;" and when he gently reproached her for this indifference to his anxiety, urging "that it was surely not so *very* unreasonable," she turned upon him with fierce contempt.

"If you are not satisfied to remain the slave and puppet of the vile thing that rules you now, but must needs turn back to your first deceiver, go and question the people of the house."

"The Divets?"

"Yes, the Divets—they can tell you if they will: ask Mrs. Barclay who it was that lay pining on her bed, wounded in body, sick in soul!—Ask her sister;" and here the eyes which, a few minutes before, had been regarding him so sweetly, gleamed like those of some fallen creature, beautiful even in the depth of its wrath

and malice. "Question that *innocent* child, whom you have bound yourself to marry—bid her tell you who it was that she tricked and tortured with all the strength of woman's ingenuity in mischief!"

"What *can* she mean?" Frere said to himself; "for there must be some shadow of meaning in it."

"Or, there's your own particular friend—the moral, the *pious* priest!"

"Cranston!" he exclaimed incredulously. "Oh! this is madness altogether; and I am mad myself to listen to it!" But still Maria murmured on, and still he *did* listen.

"Yes, if the Divets refuse to answer you, ask your bosom friend, the high-minded Richard Cranston. *He* can interpret my wild words if he pleases, and tell you other things too," she added dejectedly—"things that I have not the courage to say: and woe to you both should he leave them unspoken!"

Frere tried to win her back to the subject of the locket, and the circumstances under which she had obtained it; kindly, however, and with much caution, lest he should unawares excite her strange displeasure. But of this there was no longer any fear. The angry fit had passed away, and now she stood silent and subdued, her eyes riveted upon him all the while with such sweet sadness, that he had not the heart to press her further.

And yet it was tantalizing to have to give way to

what must be mere caprice, when one sane sentence would save him from that troop of wild conjectures and misrepresentations of the truth, which he knew would be haunting him for the rest of the night.

Frere looked wistfully at the locket, and then at his bewildered companion. But no—not for any gratification of his own would he trouble her further that night. The unaccountable yet evident anguish of her looks, seemed imploring him to leave her in peace; for in no other way could he translate their deep expression.

Again, then, he counselled her to secure all the sleep she could before the arrival of her lover; but believing, as Frere did, in the very crazy state of his companion's brain, his surprise was not wholly free from alarm when, upon his offering her his hand at parting, she took it, and, detaining it for a second or two, suddenly raised and pressed it slightly to her lips. His first impulse was to snatch it hastily away, his next to rejoice that he had not yielded to the cowardly emotion; for, resigning it immediately, the strange act was followed by a quiet "Good-night, Mr. Frere," which seemed to give him his dismissal.

And thus it was they parted. Frere looked behind him as he left the gallery, and saw Maria standing where they had bidden farewell; her figure strangely illumined by two opposing lights—the dawn with its cold and ghastly hue, and the yellow gleam of the candle, which shone from the open door of her chamber.

And long after that last look of Manley Frere's, had he returned, he would have found Colonel Hussey's betrothed lady in the self-same spot and attitude; her eyes still fixed upon the door where he had disappeared, and growing more and more wild and vacant in their expression; her increasing malady attested by the low, indistinct murmur in which she communed with her secret misery.

CHAPTER XI.

DISENCHANTED.

The remainder of the night—or rather morning—was consumed by Frere in feverish alternations of thought and feeling.

So apparent was the failure in Miss Palliser's mental powers, that but for the love-token she had presented to him, he would have regarded her whole behaviour as a plain case of hallucination. But here was a palpable proof that some sort of communication had passed between Maria and Frere's first-love.

Moreover, the suggestion that Barbara had actually been in Etheridge, and had even visited the mansion itself, was borne out by the hints of the young surgeon—reproved as unguarded, but by no means contradicted by Mrs. Barclay; and by the sight of Miss Girdlestone's father, whom Frere himself had encountered walking in the immediate neighbourhood of the manor-house.

This latter circumstance, also, by fixing the event of the mystery about the period of Frere's departure to London, made it possible for Cranston to have been

cognizant of whatever was passing at that time; and much that had appeared inexplicable in the conduct of his friend, might be traced to some embarrassment relating to the Girdlestones:—the extreme intimacy into which Richard plunged with the Divets, a family until then personally unknown to him—the earnest discussions from which he was so carefully excluded—and, above all, the sentence of immediate transportation which he had pronounced upon Frere: a measure easily to be explained, supposing that something was going forward at the mansion or its vicinity, which, in their tender regard for his feelings, his friends held it expedient to hide from their deaf guest.

Long before Frere had threaded all the passages and stairs which occurred between his own and Miss Palliser's room, so much as this had become apparent to him; and then how easy it was to gather up another link in the chain of probabilities, and presume that there must be something of so painful a nature attending the restoration of the locket—that gage of a most unfortunate attachment—that all who loved and pitied him shrank from its communication.

Shortly after the rupture of Frere's engagement with Miss Girdlestone, she—or her friends acting for her—had observed the custom established in such cases, of restoring the presents made during the season of courtship. These, returned upon the hands of the heart-stricken donor, he had thrown hastily aside, as

things too full of painful association to be ever again voluntarily looked upon. But on one occasion, Frere, searching for something else, had by chance lighted on these jewels, and even in the hurried glance bestowed upon them, he had been aware that the locket, his first and dearest gift of all, was not amongst the number.

Not to any living soul, not to Dick Cranston himself, would the slighted lover have confessed the extent of his gratification at this discovery, or how he had dwelt upon it as the surest proof that Barbara, coldly as she had acted, changed as she seemed to be, was still treasuring the most sentimental of his love-tokens; perhaps still—for how else could the action be construed?—still clinging with hopeless yet fond yearnings to the memory of their lost happiness!

But now all this was done away by one harsh stroke; she was tired of the toy, and had sent it back to him.

Had the incident occurred a few weeks later, it could have occasioned neither surprise nor mortification; for then, regarding him as the accepted suitor of another, Miss Girdlestone would have done well to divest herself of every relic of their former intimacy; but it was evident to Frere, that she had meant him to receive the locket some time before his having proposed to Phebe Divet, and many days ere the news of their betrothal could by any possibility have reached his first love. Placing this incident, therefore, in connection with the officious solicitude of his friends, it seemed to Frere that

Barbara's conduct admitted but of one reasonable interpretation. She must herself be contemplating a fresh engagement, was probably on the very eve of matrimony, and had thought fit to adopt this method of informing him of her purpose, and ridding herself of the last reminder of her former broken troth. And though it was now little else than a sin to regret that the gulf between them should thus be rendered wider and deeper than ever; and though, no doubt, it was utter barbarianism (for the word cannot be made too long) to wish his false love to be for all her life a lonely wanderer in the bleak realms of celibacy, yet Mr. Frere was certainly sensible of an icy sensation settling round his heart, as he found himself forced upon this natural solution of a mystery not otherwise to be explained.

With what message or form of words the keepsake was to have been accompanied, the light-headedness of the messenger who delivered it prevented him that night from ascertaining; but Frere could not believe that it was intended to have been thrust into his hand without some sort of preparation: and yet, be the form of its transmission what it might, the fact itself—the real substantial part of the transaction, stood unaltered—a token of true love presented with such devotion, accepted with such blushing grace, was again in his possession, discarded as a trifle not worth preserving: not even as the poor witness of a bygone friendship!

With this persuasion, jarring and grating, as it were,

upon every nerve, the dignity of the man strongly counselled Mr. Frere to destroy the locket, and prosecute no further inquiry on the subject; but the nature of the lover offered other and more tempting advice. In that weak character, so nearly bordering on the contemptible, some portion of interest, and much curiosity, must still be felt; nor was it until he had been long pondering over the adventures of the night, that Frere reflected how improper it was for a gentleman in *his* position, the favoured swain of the most artless and disinterested of shepherdesses, to allow himself to be thus disturbed and excited. With an ear once more alive to the vibrations of the air, was he still to be deaf to the solemn voice of wisdom, or the smaller whisperings of propriety? Surely we may suspect as much, when we find him rejoicing, as he lays him down to rest, that the morning being so far advanced, the world must soon be astir again, and in a capacity to answer any questions he may desire to put to it.

In all his perplexities Frere had still a compassionate thought to bestow on the person from whom they principally sprang, and whose wild discourse, while it revealed to him much of that old heart-ach of his which he had been so sedulous to cure, evinced a state more nearly approaching to positive insanity than any one had yet suspected. Even Mrs. Barclay, though showing some anxiety and consideration for Maria Palliser, did not seem sufficiently awake to the fatal havoc which love and grief, sleepless

nights and days of racking uncertainty, had evidently produced on the health, if not actually the reason, of this interesting and eccentric lady. Nor was *she* the only person to be pitied. As Frere was leaving his room, after the short interval of rest which he had forced himself to take, his ears were assailed by the ringing of bells and barking of dogs, and then a sound of men's voices clamouring loud and cheerful in the hall; and he remembered Colonel Hussey, whose arrival, as he justly concluded, was occasioning all this domestic uproar.

Little did that exulting lover anticipate the unsatisfactory state in which he should find his mistress. Those lines about true love never running smoothly in its course are fearfully hackneyed, yet how impossible to help thinking of them in reference to recent events, and the inmates of this house!

Nevertheless, Frere had to check himself in his quotation, as it occurred to him that, among the society of true-lovers congregated there, one little member of the honourable association might be named on whom fortune could not be said to have looked with her usual perversity.

Now, the very simple circumstance which caused Mr. Frere's reflections to take this turn, and drop down directly upon the shepherdess—urging him, in the very teeth of Miss Palliser's spiteful innuendoes, to go on still attributing to Phebe the praise of single-minded and approved sincerity—was merely his happening to

look out of one of the side windows in his way downstairs, and catching from thence a glimpse of the gilded vane of the Dutch summerhouse, towering over the trees of the garden, and burnished by the morning sun. There it stood, slightly tremulous in the breeze of early autumn; and doubtless all the more gay and glittering because it was not nailed to one point.

In the peculiar state of his mind just then, it would be difficult to determine how far this prospect was calculated to please Mr. Frere. We only know that, instead of confining himself to a grateful remembrance of the very curious adventure over which that true impersonation of all inconstancy had once upon a time presided, his imagination would be taking a wider circuit—yea, a far wider and increasing range beyond the horizon which the frisky little weathercock commanded from its high elevation: suggesting to him how very different a fate would have been his; and how his whole position must have been changed from what it was now likely to be, supposing this adventure in the Friar's Walk had never taken place at all.

Nay, as straws no less than weathercocks show plainly the way the wind is blowing, there was another minute incident before Mr. Frere's reaching the door of the breakfast-room, which might afford some index to his thoughts; for, as his dogs left off sniffing at the Colonel's trunks and ran to caress their master, he stopped to pat the old dog, whilst at the gambols of Shako he

seemed to look askance: and he even reprehended that lively little terrier for officiousness in growling at the postman's knock, recommending him to give up for the future all meddling in literary affairs; as he might fairly consider, Frere told him, that "he had already done enough in *that* line for the whole remainder of his little existence."

For my own part, I think there are more persons in the world of letters than Mr. Frere's Skye terrier who might be benefited by this advice.

Through his correspondence with Phebe, Frere had appeared to be fully informed of Colonel Hussey's accident, and might have expected to see him bearing the traces of it; but yet he was hardly prepared for the damages which had really been made in that once pleasant countenance and stalwart figure.

Those friends, indeed, who had visited the patient daily, and seen him languishing on his sick-bed, or propped up to receive the visits of the fair sex, might fairly congratulate him on his present "turn-out" as a manifest change for the better; for no one could deny that doctors, dentists, and wigmakers had done for him all that came within the compass of their respective callings.

And yet, even now, so rough had been the shock—so irremediable the devastation—that had Frere entered the parlour ignorant of the Colonel's arrival, or had he encountered him for the first time in any other company,

he would undoubtedly have passed his old acquaintance as a total stranger.

"Unmerciful fortune!" for so ran his secret reflections —could this apparently aged man, who came limping up to him with a gait far more uncertain and a back more bent than that of the grandsire of the house—could he really be identical with the upright and handsome officer whom Frere had so lately watched—ay, and envied, too, from the very ground of his heart!—as he saw him walking up and down the terrace arm-in-arm with his beloved mistress?

It was a relief to turn from the Colonel's hearty though nervous greeting, even to Frere's former aversion George Barclay; who, having made out his visit to cousin Sally, had travelled down with Colonel Hussey, and now came forward to congratulate Frere with a frankness and alacrity that took him quite by surprise. Strange as it seemed, there was not one amongst that household of attached friends, that had evinced his satisfaction at the recovery of the deaf guest in a style more warm and natural than this usually listless person.

"And now I shall be able to talk to you," he said. "For you must know, Mr. Frere, that I am such a good-for-nothing lazy dog, that rather than take the trouble to make myself understood by a deaf person, I should be dumb myself all the days of my life. But now you are up to the mark again—a match for us all, eh? For the precious world we live in, and all its innocent little ways"

—here he subsided into his accustomed sneer. "Yes, as they say in church (or something like it), now you may '*hear*, mark, learn, and inwardly digest'—and, if you take my advice, you will make the most of your privileges."

But it was while the family were grouped about, and busied with the Colonel, that this advice was volunteered; for though few things would have pleased Mr. Barclay better than to see the interested schemes of his relations totally upset, he had not the moral courage to attempt their overthrow by his own unassisted efforts.

On the subject of Colonel Hussey, there was some sympathy between Frere and Kezia's husband; the latter whispering him, that his travelling companion was in a worse condition than he had supposed—"Cousin Sally, who went to see him, told me how he was mauled, but I thought they would have managed to patch him up a little better than this"—and George concluded, with a shrug and a declaration, that "Miss Palliser must be a bold woman!"

"An admirable one, at least!" was Frere's amendment, fervently pronounced; upon which Barclay turned upon him a quick and rather searching glance; but Frere, at once attracted and repelled by the sort of interest which attached itself to this family episode, had his attention again directed to Maria's shattered lover.

In the despotic manner in which we often find some stray quotation forcing itself on our memory between the

interstices of things of weightier import—a Latin verse out of some old school exercise, or perhaps a fragment of holy writ—a proverb of Solomon, or the fag-end of an old song—as Frere examined the wreck before him, he caught himself inwardly repeating a passage from Marmion—

> "Poor wretch! the mother that him bare,
> If she had been in presence there,
> Would not have known her child!"

But though it pleased Mr. Frere, following the words of the quotation, to designate the Colonel as a "wretch," that gallant officer would not have described himself by any such pitiful epithet. Why should he? He had long ago shaken off every old misgiving, as arguing a want of confidence in the beloved one, and was now approaching his Maria in the full persuasion that, having struggled successfully through a season of tribulation and anguish, he was there to bestow comfort, as well as to receive it at her hands.

Even the report of Miss Palliser's indisposition failed to repress his exuberant content for more than the passing moment.

"Excited—nervous! no doubt of it, dear girl! No doubt it must be so! How should it be otherwise, considering all she had gone through on his account!" But he trusted the sight of him would be her best panacea: the seeing him on the high-road to health, so very nearly himself again, must and would do every

thing for her. Maria, though by no means belonging to that odious class of strong-minded women whom men must all abominate, was not one to give way to unnecessary fears and fancies. For his sake, he knew the dear creature would strive against any tendency to low spirits, and that sort of thing, and he should have her ready to sail with him by the end of another month. The voyage alone would be enough to bring her round. A capital vessel—delightful society on board; in fact, the passage would be only too short—much too short!

It is impossible but to suspect that some very evil passion must have been working in the breast of Mr. Frere, something strangely opposed to his usual candour and benevolence, or he could never have given way to the displeasure—it will bear no milder term—which overtook him as the poor Colonel continued holding forth in this self-satisfied strain—"Surely, considering the disadvantages under which he was come to claim his bride, some slight repose of manner, even a shade or two of diffidence, would be but graceful." Yes, we can plainly trace in this acute perception of another's weakness, a pang of envy—real, unadulterated, bitter envy! For then, he asked himself, "Why should Colonel Hussey take the trouble to put on any affectation of modesty? Revolting, as his whole aspect appears to me, a mere mass of mortal ugliness, upon which it costs me an effort to keep my eyes steadily fixed—this man, blessed in the midst of his deformity, continues an ob-

ject of devoted affection to one of the finest creatures in existence—is loved and doated upon to the very verge of madness,—whilst *I*—*I* have been deserted!"

Oh, that ever-recurring "I!"—the smallest of pronouns, and the slenderest letter in the whole twenty-four. Where shall we find such a vehicle for containing and conveying every conceivable amount of mischief and wickedness? There was surely something more than meets the eye in the rude illustrations so often garnishing the old editions of our Bible. At the beginning of the book of Genesis stand little pictures of our first parents, divided from each other by one perpendicular line. It seems to be a sort of pillar about which a snake is seen to wind—and, if we mark the moral which lurks perdue under that initial-letter, we shall see that the serpent is allegorical of the Devil, and that the upstart column, around which its deadly coils are twining, signifies at once the tree of evil, and the letter "*I*."

With these questionable emotions, then, seething within his heart, Frere takes his place at the breakfast-table amongst the rest of the party. Not that they are quite assembled; for Colonel Hussey, loath to sit down without his betrothed, who still lingers in her own room, takes his stick and limps up-stairs to Miss Palliser's door, that he may exert his persuasions, in addition to those of Mrs. George and various other messengers who have preceded him, to prevail on her to quicken her movements and hasten down.

The Colonel's temporary absence affords opportunity for a few remarks, more free than complimentary upon his personal defects: Phebe exclaiming that poor cousin Ben is really grown such a horrid old Guy, she is confident he must have a dark lantern and a bundle of matches hidden somewhere about his person; and, when the object of her ridicule hobbles in again, she persists, in spite of warning frowns and whispers, in humming gently a portion of the popular stanza, which once in every autumn resounds through the streets of old-fashioned Etheridge—"Remember, remember, the fifth of November!" and, while repeating the words, there is such a bewitching archness in her glance, as it is directed to Frere, that though he shakes his head a little at her sauciness, he is himself in too bad a humour with the fortunate lover to be very severe upon his own little shepherdess.

The Colonel's painful journey up so many stairs, however, had, it seemed, been undertaken in vain. Maria was still backward in her toilette: so little advanced, in fact, that she could not even open her door to speak to him, but sent word that they were on no account to wait breakfast for her.

Still the Colonel was all the happier for even this short conference, and boasted, as he sat down to table, of the smart things he had whispered through the keyhole on the subject of late hours and rakish habits: for to the party of the previous night he naturally attributed his

mistress's dilatory proceedings; and the Divets, though they could have undeceived him, did not think fit to do so. "Let him be comfortable as long as possible, poor fellow!" was the maxim with them. "If Maria is as odd and disagreeable to him as she has lately shown herself, his spirits will be lowered soon enough."

Then Colonel Hussey, observing a letter for Miss Palliser, which that morning's post had brought, lying beside her empty plate, declared he would have a "little fun" with his Maria: he would put it into his pocket, and tantalize her by withholding it till she should promise to behave better for the future. Whereupon a few covert glances were interchanged amongst certain of the party present; for it was the opinion of the Colonel's more mercurial relations, that the "fun" with which he and his intended occasionally diversified their courtship, was always of the most solemn and awkward character—the Colonel's puns, especially, being so very far-fetched that Miss Palliser seldom could (or *would*) understand them till they were explained to her.

Kezia, however, who never missed a fair occasion of flattering a friend, observed that, as the Colonel was now under the same roof with her, Maria's solicitude about her letters would henceforth be but trifling.

This afforded the good man an opening to expatiate on the merits of his beloved; characterizing her as one whose affections were so strongly concentrated, that he had heard her often say the human heart required but

two warm sentiments—one love and one friendship ought to satisfy it.

"Just in the same way that she reserved the first place in her esteem for him, he doubted," he said, "whether she could ever be brought to bestow her friendship upon any one with such unlimited confidence as she had always displayed towards her old associate and relation, Miss Lucy Ainsworth. If he could be jealous of any one it would be this one favoured cousin"—the writer, as he concluded, of the very epistle he had so playfully pocketed.

At the moment Colonel Hussey made this remark, Frere, who was breaking the seal of a letter from Cranston, smiled, and turning to Phebe with more complacency of manner than he had lately manifested, said—"That name of Lucy seems singularly favourable to friendship. You, I think, have a friend, and a rather confidential one, called Lucy?"

"No, I have not!" she simply replied; holding out her plate as she spoke, for "just the least taste in the world, papa, of that delicious curry."

Mr. Frere did not generally approve of young ladies regaling themselves with savoury dishes so early in the day; but on this occasion he must have regarded it as a venial error, for, still leisurely opening his letter, he eyed the shepherdess with a peculiarly searching, but by no means stern expression, and, subduing his voice so that it should reach no ear but her own, he whispered,

"Think again—no one that you can remember?—no trusted friend and counsellor who owns that Christian name?—To whom you write long letters, and sometimes—sometimes, Phebe, venture to make confessions that you would not willingly have known to any one in the world but her?"

"Now, what are you after, Mr. Manley?" replied Phebe. "As soon as I have finished my breakfast, I shall insist on knowing what you mean."

"Some day, perhaps, I may tell my little Phebe, but not yet;" and Frere kept on kindly, almost tenderly, regarding her, while she persisted, with a very natural shake of her pretty curls, that "indeed there was no one belonging to her acquaintance of that ugly name—for it was one she detested. I don't think I *could* take to any one of the name of Lucy—I couldn't, really! No!" (carelessly:) "Kezia is my only confidant: I have no scruple of making a bosom friend of Mrs. George, married woman though she is, for I am not afraid of her telling *her* husband any of my secrets;" and she went on quietly eating her breakfast. It was not Phebe's composure that surprised Frere: of course she was unconscious of what was passing through his mind, and of his motive for questioning her; but her stout denial of what he supposed an indisputable fact, *did* puzzle him considerably: he deferred any further cross-questioning, however, till he should have read his letter.

The despatch from Sheen rectory was of more than

ordinary length, as, indeed, Frere had reason to expect it would be; for it was the first communication from thence which had had time to reach him since his recovery. And he could well imagine that a long letter would be required to contain the overflowing of Cranston's affectionate heart, when expatiating on an event so unexpected and delightful to both of them. Accordingly, the commencement of the epistle proved very much what Mr. Frere had anticipated; but, reading a little further, the placid smile faded rather suddenly from his lip: he grew extremely red, and shortly after altogether as pallid. Then the letter was laid down for a second, as if it contained something of such deep importance that he could hardly master the subject without an effort. But, rousing himself the next moment, with a strange and rapid glance over the unconscious group he was quitting, Frere rose abruptly and went out upon the terrace, the door of which stood invitingly open, and afforded him the shortest possible access to the solitude he needed.

This movement of Frere's happened so quickly, and with so little outward demonstration, that it failed to attract even the hawk's eye of a Divet. "Mr. Manley's" seceding from the company, eliciting merely the supposition that he had been so long unaccustomed to the human voice that he could not read his letters comfortably in the midst of their talk; and it was not for some time that any one thought fit to invade his retreat,

with the reminder, that his breakfast was waiting for him, the tea getting cold, and the coffee quite undrinkable.

Once more then, as in the days of their early acquaintance, did Phebe run out to call "that tiresome, dawdling man. Oh, dear! why can't he come to his breakfast like any other rational being?" It seemed like turning back to the page of some book, grown by this time a little obsolete; and by way, perhaps, of gracefully reminding him of that same period when she had been so useful and agreeable to him—his guide, play-fellow, and ready interpreter—Phebe went dancing and playing along the broad walk, at the further end of which she saw Frere standing, not reading his letter but lost in thought; and the little messenger, checking her steps when she had nearly come up to him, executed the pantomimic movement, the three turns and the pretty pirouette, by which she had been wont to summon him in-doors.

The time had been—and not so very long ago either—when Manley Frere would not have failed to acknowledge the little girl's approach with at least the smile of brotherly kindness; and, if not caring to be interrupted, would have told her so with good-humoured courtesy; but now it was as though she were dancing round a statue, a thing of wood or stone, so all unmindful was he of her antics. And when she came so close to him that he could no longer remain insensible of her presence,

he turned with a start and a look so strange—so foreign to any expression which Phebe had ever seen in those eyes before—that even *she* was alarmed, and, losing for the moment her forwardness and self-possession, drew back with the aspect of a frightened child.

"Did you take me for a snake, Mr. Manley?" she asked him timidly; and the gentle reproach recalling Frere a little to himself, he gulped down his emotion as well as he could, and hastily answered—"No, Phebe—no! I took you only for what you are—a very nice, good little girl; but oh, my God!" and lifting for a moment his hands and eyes to Heaven with the impulse of uncontrollable distress, he shook off the little finger that was laid upon his arm, as if it had indeed been the fang of the reptile she had named.

And yet Frere had hardly given way to this burst of impatience than he repented it,—"For what had the poor child done to be ill-used and insulted by him?" By him who had freely and willingly wooed her to be his own—his *very* own; but who would now have given all the broad lands in his possession that she had never crossed his path!

He turned once more, therefore, and taking the little hand he had repulsed so rudely, Frere compelled himself to speak kindly, and seem the fond lover he never more could be to Phebe Divet.

Reassured in some degree, though still aware that something was amiss, she ventured to say to him—"I

am afraid you have had bad news this morning, Mr. Manley? Something that doesn't please you?"

Frere inwardly winced at the unconscious allusion, but he answered her quietly—"Yes, Phebe, I have heard news that has annoyed me considerably, and made me impatient and unreasonable, as you see. But I shall soon be better—quite rational in a little while. So, go in, my love, and I will follow you presently. And, Phebe," he called her back as she was preparing to obey him, "it will be as well to say nothing of what has occurred. It is a subject on which I do not wish to be questioned."

Nothing could be more placid than the words or the tone in which they were uttered, so that it must have been some peculiar expression in the eye of the speaker that took such immediate effect on Miss Divet; for it was curious to see how thoroughly the young lady was subdued, and ready to comply with Mr. Frere's directions.

Whether it might be ascribed to the wisdom of reflection, or mere instinct, is hard to determine; but the shepherdess evidently perceived that this was no time for the childish blandishments through which she had occasionally prevailed with the deaf guest in things of slight importance. Without one word of trifling or remonstrance, therefore, she left him to himself, only venturing a modest hope that he would come in again "as soon as he felt himself inclined."

Frere again constrained himself to answer her with civil forbearance: and yet, as she relieved him of her company, he might have been observed to send after his little playmate a glance of such intense aversion—such unreasonable disgust—that it was well for Miss Divet's tranquillity that she did not happen to look behind her at the moment that eye-beam was launched.

The observations of the preceding night had done much to lower Frere's favourable impression of her, as well as the rest of her kindred; and, long before he had read to the end of Cranston's confession, poor little Phebe was stripped of every charm that had hitherto made her grateful to his fancy. As a friend, an acquaintance, the companion of an hour, her society might still possess a certain attraction for him—but as a *wife* the thought had suddenly become more intolerable to him than words can express!

Mr. Frere's was indeed no common case. Many a man (and many more than the world suspects) grows tired of the woman he has unwisely chosen, and discovers, even before marriage, that he has committed an irretrievable mistake. Under any circumstances, the discovery must be appalling to a right-minded and sensitive person; but Frere's disappointment was heightened, and the act of his disenchantment doubly embittered to him, by his seeing the peculiar merit—the charm which had so captivated his imagination as to soften every defect in Phebe, and render even her family

endurable—this most potent spell, transferred at once and for ever to another.

And then that other! Alas, alas! Sadly as he surveyed the consequences of his self-deception, Frere's remorse on *her* account was greater still. For the scornful tone in which Cranston recounted the story of poor Maria Palliser, awoke no echo in the bosom of his friend.

It was but natural, and doubtless proper, for the correct and severely-judging rector of Sheen to set forth Maria's conduct in the coldest and most mortifying terms, and to characterise her as one whose unruly inclinations, and fickleness of heart, had created a world of perplexities, and possibly placed others besides herself in a false position; but it was not for the object of her predilection thus to revile her. Morally inexcusable it might be; he could not justify it. But the more wild and hopeless Maria's love for him, so much the heavier would be the penalty she was doomed to undergo; and Frere shuddered as he figured to himself the extent of her misery.

"What—what was to become of her?"

Supposing they had not met since his return to Etheridge, he might have trusted that Miss Palliser's strong sense, aided by the interest which Colonel Hussey's recent sufferings could hardly fail of exciting, might have sufficed to chase every image of man from her mind, save that of her true and lawful lover; but with

their last night's interview fresh in his memory, Frere could not so deceive himself.

How plainly was every part of her conduct, and almost every sentence she had spoken, explained by this wretched discovery! The style in which she shrank from every allusion to the Colonel, her half-veiled tenderness towards himself, and her strange emotion on restoring the locket. And now, too late enlightened, how he wondered at his own incomprehensible blindness, in having lived so long an inmate of the same house with her, without perceiving the fatal impression he was making!

Bitterly did he repent his return to the manor-house before her marriage was concluded; for to his sudden appearance there, Frere justly attributed Maria's increased derangement. With the exception of some nervous irritability, she seemed by all accounts to have borne herself with a fortitude and consistency in strict accordance with her apparent strength of character. An eternal separation had seemed to have been pronounced between them; and, under the full belief of this, she would probably have succumbed to her lot in calm resignation, and might ere long have learned, in the active exercise of her conjugal duties, to honour the husband who loved her so truly, and recover that inward peace which Frere was not coxcomb enough to believe had been irremediably destroyed by him. Just such a natural and easy course he could have traced out

for Mrs. Hussey's future history; but *his* unexpected reappearance had thrown every thing into confusion, had startled her from her self-command, and unsettled her very reason. Under this persuasion Frere came at once to the conclusion, that his presence having wrought such mischief, the kindest course he could adopt with regard to this unhappy lady was to relieve her from it as soon as possible: though unable to remedy the past, it was in his power at least to spare her the distress and confusion of ever beholding him again.

He might make the letter he had just received his excuse to the Divets for an abrupt departure; and, if untoward circumstances should oblige him to meet Miss Palliser again, he would take care that their intercourse should be of the briefest possible description. He could see from the terrace that her place at the breakfast-table still remained vacant; another half-hour, and he might get clear of Etheridge and all its anxieties, and have the pleasure of reflecting that he had saved her from one more painful trial.

CHAPTER XII.

ALACK! AND WELL-A-DAY!

Conscious as Frere had now become of the injury Colonel Hussey was sustaining through his visit, he heartily wished that, in leaving the manor-house, he could avoid any further communication with him as well as his betrothed bride. But for this he could find no decent pretence; and in fact, while considering its feasibility, the Colonel settled the question himself, by coming into the garden to seek him.

In common with the rest of Mr. Frere's friends, Colonel Hussey professed the liveliest interest in that gentleman's recovery, and could not be satisfied, as he presently assured him, till he had had the relation of it from his own lips: the fact really being, that the good man was all the while much more intent on recounting his own adventures, than listening to those of any other earthly individual.

He had pretty well exhausted the subject with the party within doors, had entered into the details of his accident, and expatiated with infinite feeling on the

admirable qualities it had been the occasion of developing in the character of his mistress—for, indeed, it was on this portion of the story that the Colonel loved best to dwell; and Mr. Frere having been absent at its recital, what could the exulting lover do better, while waiting for the heroine of the tale, than tell it all over again to a fresh auditor?

There was now, as he facetiously told Frere, only one drawback to their freely conversing, and that he should soon get over, as it merely consisted in what he understood all Mr. Frere's other friends to be experiencing no less than himself—a constant temptation, viz., to make mouths and grimaces, and to shout in his ear as formerly. And then the Colonel enlarged on the great pleasure it afforded him to think that this mode of proceeding was no longer necessary, and accompanied the congratulation with many hearty shakes of the hand.

How different were now the feelings with which Frere regarded this kind-hearted man, from what they had been scarcely half an hour ago! No more pitiful quotations on his account, nor half-satirical praise of the lovely woman who was sacrificing herself for the sake of such a bruised and battered sample of manhood. Towards both victims (for in that light Frere could not but regard them) he felt only the sincerest sympathy; and, touching his own involvement in their concerns, such a keen sense of compunction, as made him desirous, above all things, of cutting short the present conference.

He hastened, therefore, to break in upon the poor Colonel's complacent tautology, by mentioning his own intended departure. He "was sorry," of course, "that it should so happen—but news of an unexpected nature —advices received by that morning's post," &c.

The Colonel, in his capacity of lover, could hardly be made to comprehend this retrograde movement; and, when quite convinced of his fellow-suitor's intention of absconding to London by the next train, expressed his earnest hope that Mr. Frere's business was not of a nature to detain him long in town.

"He must consider," the Colonel reminded him, "that the happiness of another was now involved in all his proceedings; a reflection, Mr. Frere, which I am sure you must feel to be fraught with no small importance. You see, my dear sir, what high ground I am venturing to take with you on the score of a long apprenticeship in this line of business." (Colonel Hussey was surely forgetful of Frere's former history, or he would never have accused *him* of being a mere tyro in philandering, and he did not atone for his mistake by adding)—"My sweet little cousin, Mr. Manley, has a tender heart hidden under that charming vivacity of her's—a very kind and tender heart, and we must not try it more than we can avoid."

To which well-intended, but rather officious counsel, Frere frigidly replied, that he was not under any apprehension on that head; he had himself not the least

doubt of Miss Divet's being perfectly able to survive a "week's or even a fortnight's separation from him."

"Well, well—a week—perhaps *one* week!" The Colonel could grant no extension of the leave, as he explained that his own wedding (the "first," with a simper, "that was to come off at the mansion") was fixed for the Thursday week ensuing, and he and his dear Maria would be equally disappointed if they failed to reckon Mr. Frere amongst the guests to be assembled on that occasion. Colonel Hussey took some pains to persuade Frere how great a favourite he had always been with Miss Palliser, and the other murmured something by way of acknowledgment, and tried to break loose; but the Colonel loved talking at all times, and had now a special motive for declining to part with a friend; for he had left off his crutches rather too soon, and found all the convenience of having Frere's arm to lean upon, in addition to the single stick to which he had imprudently limited himself.

Pinned to his side, therefore, and led at a snail's pace, he was doomed to hear about the Colonel's approaching nuptials, and have the list recounted to him of relations who must be invited, and others less near or dear whom it was impossible for even the hospitable Divets to accommodate; the placid narrator still pertinaciously recurring to his previous assurance that a place, and a prominent one, too, should be kept for Frere himself, both at church and breakfast. "And, when the speech-

making begins, we shall none of us be contented without one from Mr. Frere. I have heard them called foolish things; but, as a means of expressing the genuine feelings of the speaker (as I am sure your's will be on this particular occasion), I do not see why this sort of friendly oration should come amiss. It is not because a few silly or vulgar people degrade the custom into mere buffoonery, that it should be discarded altogether. For really it seems to me, Mr. Frere, if we regard it properly, that there can hardly be a finer opportunity for the outpouring of our sentiments, and the display of whatever natural elocution we may possess, than this sacred institution of marriage."

Frere listened with a forced and ghastly smile, and looked eagerly about him for some one to whose shoulders, less impatient of the burthen, he might shift his old man of the sea. But it happened unfortunately that the elder Divet was later than usual in taking his morning's exercise; and the rest of the family remained equally invisible. All Frere could do, therefore, was to steer directly for the nearest port; namely, the garden-door, from whence they had both issued. But his companion, though halting continually from pain or weariness, seemed bent on defeating this intention, shewing an inclination, only to be resisted by main force, for skirting along the side of the mansion, where there was no possibility of ingress.

Presently the mystery was cleared up. "I see my fair lady's window open," said he; "a sure signal that she must have nearly completed this important toilette of hers, and if you do not mind giving me your arm (it is a very little way further round), we can go in by the back-door, and have a little talk with Maria as we pass by."

But at this proposal Frere came to a sudden halt, and affecting a bantering tone, though his laugh had but a hollow sound, he answered—"Nay, then, Colonel—it is full time for me to take my leave. The balcony scene in Romeo and Juliet is strictly confined to a *tête-à-tête*, and in these critical days we must beware how we meddle with the original text."

The poor Colonel was in a humour just then to applaud many a worse joke than this, which he pronounced excellent, and promised to repeat to Miss Palliser. "And, before I met with this unlucky accident, Mr. Frere, I dare say I might have taken you at your word, and wished you a civil 'good-morning;' but you see, my dear fellow, the Romeo who stands before you is such a rickety sort of an actor at present, and finds it so difficult to keep on his legs, that I promise you he is only too glad to get a friend's arm to help him on in the world;" and, as the Colonel spoke, he grasped Frere's with an inflexible hand, and went limping on with a spirit and energy that seemed to shame the reluctant step of his companion: who was

also watching Miss Palliser's window, but with an anxiety very unlike her lover's!

"What would be her feelings when she should look out and see them together? oh, horrible!"

Yet it was a mortification from which Frere saw no mode of preserving her; for the Colonel kept calling her as he slowly advanced, affecting to scold, and complaining that he was neglected.

"Though I can pretty well guess what keeps her away from me," he said: "I would lay something handsome now, Mr. Frere, that she is busy finishing the purse she has been making for me. She promised it should be done by the time we met; and even in a trifle like this, my Maria, I assure you, is not one to break her word. I could not get her to work me a cigar-case," he continued in his complacent prosing—"for I have still to overcome her extreme antipathy to all manner of smoking. It was some time ago, however, that we discussed the subject. Poor girl! she would not refuse me now, I fancy!"

Then, stopping to take breath, and gasp out a moral reflection, the fond lover proceeded—"Ah, Mr. Frere! we are selfish fellows, even the most attached of us; are we not? See how we encroach on these dear creatures of ours, and take a mean advantage of the love they bear us! Just because my Maria is showing her devotion to me by acting the noblest, kindest part that ever woman did to man, it only incites me to indulge

myself the more in a vile and dirty practice which I know to be hateful to her. And so it is, you see; these excellent beings are for ever giving up to us, and we tyrannizing over them; and so it will be to the end of time!"

Then, obliging Frere to stop with him opposite Maria's window, the Colonel looked fondly up at it, calling out, "You loiterer! here's Mr. Frere come to speak to you—come to say 'How-do-you-do' and 'Good-bye' in the same breath. I know you'll have a kind word for *him*, though poor I can't get so much as a look from you."

"For Heaven's sake, let her have her own way! Leave her—leave her in peace!" Frere exclaimed, almost beside himself in his anxiety to escape from a position which was becoming each moment more painful to him. The recollection of Colonel Hussey's betrothed, as she had appeared to him at their last parting, rose up before him; and he dreaded nothing so much as the sight of that beautiful, woe-stricken face looking out upon him from her window.

The Colonel suffered Frere to drag him a few steps further, himself suggesting that Maria might have left her room, "Though I am pretty sure, Mr. Manley, that she is peeping at us from behind the window-curtain. Have patience a moment, and I will try the effect of a little small-shot"—and stooping, with considerable difficulty and sundry expressions of pain, the lover succeeded in picking up a pebble or two to throw against his

mistress's window, and attract her attention. But before he could effect his purpose, a shriek—a scream of fear or agony—and women's voices crying for help, were heard to issue from Maria's chamber, and female figures rushed quickly—wildly as it seemed—across the window.

The two exchanged a silent look; and if Colonel Hussey could have doubted that something tragic was acting above, Frere's face of ghastly horror would have been enough to inspire the thought. "She is ill—you think she is ill?" the other faltered out—"They have found her fainting, perhaps! Oh Frere, my poor Maria!"

"Let us go in"—was all Frere could say; and the Colonel, almost helpless in his agitation, resigned himself wholly to his guidance.

Fain would Frere have rushed on at his utmost speed; but Colonel Hussey's enfeebled frame could scarcely bear up against any mental shock, and common charity demanded that he should not be left alone at such a moment. Clinging almost a dead-weight upon his companion, and gasping at every word, he kept incessantly reproaching himself as they toiled along.

"I knew she was ill—they told me how sadly she had been, and I made light of it, and thought the sight of me would cure her. Heaven have mercy, and forgive me for my thoughtlessness! Oh, Mr. Manley, if she gets worse—if any thing bad *should* happen to her—it may have been all my doing!"

"*Your* doing!" was the only answer, uttered with a groan whose origin the Colonel little dreamed of.

Toiling, struggling on, they reached the back premises, now their nearest entrance, and plunged into a labyrinth of passages; through which, but for his companion's better knowledge of the mansion, Frere must have found some difficulty in penetrating.

Here, throughout the offices, usually so fully tenanted, there reigned an unbroken silence and an air of temporary desertion, that struck to the hearts of both the men. Not a soul of whom they could inquire—not a servant to be seen! the whole household must have fled with one accord, and been gathered together elsewhere by some sudden, perhaps terrible, summons.

They made their way to the hall before any living creature came in sight. There they encountered Divet coming down the front staircase, pale as death, and hardly able to support himself. He had been specially despatched to intercept Colonel Hussey's approach, and prevent him from repairing to his mistress's chamber; but ever excitable and tender-hearted, where the distress touched no selfish chord, David on such an occasion as this was the worst of dissemblers.

The Colonel's passionate questioning robbed him at once of all self-command, and all he could do was to seize and squeeze his cousin's hand, and murmur with a choking voice, that it was—"something of a

faintness—a slight fit:" they "hoped and believed it was only that. Nothing, Ben, my dear fellow—nothing more. Nothing else, you know, Mr. Manley—eh? Jones is coming: Barclay's off to fetch him, and he'll be here directly, and do every thing that can be done—every thing right and proper. We may depend on Jones for that—and there's plenty of advice to be had if he should fail us. And, in the meanwhile, we must not be too anxious, but hope for the best—hope for the best, you know, my dear Hussey, and sit down quietly below stairs till we have his opinion. Nay, nay, nay! You *must* stay below—you must, indeed! Help me, Mr. Frere; for God's sake help me to keep him here! He must *not* go up-stairs—for the world he must not go to that dreadful room!"

But their united efforts failed to restrain the Colonel. Resolved to learn the truth, and only maddened by resistance, he broke from them and scrambled desperately up the stairs, calling as he went on the name of his "beloved," his "darling Maria!"

David, with every nerve unstrung, sank upon the next stair, and with hands uplifted cast a lamentable look upon Frere.

"Fainting?" the other asked in a hollow whisper.

"Dead! dead!" was the shuddering answer; and Frere grasped the rail against which he leaned, for there was darkness before his eyes.

Divet proceeded: "They found her lying on her

bed with an empty phial beside her. I tried to break it to our poor cousin by calling it a fit, and talking about Jones—and of course we *have* sent for him and Dr. Burrowes besides. But no doctor in the world can be of any service to her, Mr. Manley; she has done it too effectually. Lord have mercy on us! What a misfortune to have happened in our house!"

Divet had no need to impress upon his hearer the utter hopelessness of the case; there was a fearful consistency—a palpable sequence in what Frere already knew of Miss Palliser's history, with this termination of it, which forbade his entertaining the slightest doubt. A strong foreboding had haunted him from the very instant that wailing cry first issued from her chamber; and yet, firm as was his assurance of some frightful catastrophe—even painting it in imagination, and entering into its supposed details—there is something in the actual mention of death that falls upon the human ear and the human heart so heavily that no presentiment, however full and true, can ever ward off its cold, benumbing power.

Just such a momentary stupefaction fell upon Manley Frere, causing him, upon the sound of this awful word, to lose every syllable that was said. But then there arose an impulse irresistible to look upon the ruin which had been his own unconscious work—to gaze once more on the outer shell of a soul which had sacrificed itself for him; for thus, though hidden from

all mortal cognizance but his, Frere too truly interpreted the end of this dark story.

As he went his way, and came upon the scene of their last meeting, Maria's form in all its grace and fine proportion—her expression, so pure and so pathetic—seemed to float before his eyes, or move beside him step by step, almost as a thing of substance; and, with this impression strongly upon him, it required an effort of resolution to enter the room where the wretched girl had tempted Heaven with a deed so unhallowed. Yet if there was any thing revolting in what Frere beheld there, it sprang less from the aspect of the dead than the unchastened emotion of the living; and for the crowd of shuddering gazers, he had neither eye nor ear. Shrinking, yet eager in his errand, he sought but one object; and, finding that, the beings in attendance upon it, might have been angels or fiends for any thing he heeded of their presence.

Maria lay stretched upon her bed in the same white garments in which Frere had last beheld her, her head resting on the pillow as one who slept the calm sleep of innocence, and with such serenity in every feature, that it was difficult even for him who possessed the key to this doleful mystery, to conceive the whirlwind of misery and remorse—the hopeless, reckless agony—in which she must have rushed from existence.

Desirable as it was to believe her wholly irresponsible for her crime, it was consolatory to trace, in its accom-

plishment, many evidences of over-careful premeditation, such as can be reconciled only with an entire derangement of the reasoning faculties, or such an amount of pagan stoicism as it was impossible to impute, even to the calm-minded Maria Palliser.

If any thing had been wanting to favour the opinion of her temporary distraction—though her conduct for some time previously was enough to establish this—it might be discovered in the fanciful style in which Maria had arrayed—or rather disarrayed—herself for death. For, before lying down, she had uncovered her feet, which looked in their marble whiteness like models for a statuary, and her hair, that most beautiful veil with which woman can adorn herself, hung down, half enveloping her in its long and wavy tresses; yet not dishevelled in any unseemly fashion, for the combs which commonly fastened it were placed on the toilette table, and she must have employed some moments in untwisting its thick plaits and smoothing every lock before she laid her down upon the cold bed, which was only to be exchanged for one still colder.

To the bystanders, aghast in fear and pity, this theatrical attention to effect appeared the plainest indication of madness, such as the sternest of juries would be unable to gainsay: but there was one amongst them to whom these circumstances of the soul's exit carried another meaning; for Frere, well remembering what had passed at his latest interview with Maria, and how

he had likened the forlorn creature to some celestial visitant on earth—a shining angel hovering in the path before him—believed that she had been only carrying out this passing thought of his, and attiring herself to fulfil it still further. Thus the incident became a proof to him that he was in all her thoughts, even up to the last moment of her existence; for what but some predominating sentiment could have inspired her in her bewilderment with such romantic trifling? she who on other occasions, and in all relations of life, had shown such a keen perception and such unqualified disdain of the false and factitious? With this unacknowledged yet undoubted connection between himself and the departed, Frere experienced a strange impression of his own importance in that scene of sore distress; though to the rest he must have seemed a mere spectator like themselves; the general attention being naturally directed to Colonel Hussey, the devoted lover, whose disaster had been the cause of the overwhelming grief and consequent frenzy of his betrothed bride: for so it was that the tragic story would be told, and to the latest hour be held in popular belief.

As for that unhappy man, it seemed as if he were incompetent to take in the full extent of his misery. While grief or horror sat upon every countenance but his, he was still bending over the corpse of his beloved, refusing to believe that it was really lifeless. Taking his tone from what Divet had told him, he

asserted that Maria was only fainting—"one of those temporary insensibilities which all women are liable to. These good people, Mr. Frere, are over-anxious—too easily alarmed. Feel her hand, my dear sir—observe how warm it is—quite warm—warm as her dear, affectionate heart! Jones will bleed her, I have no doubt, the moment he comes, and then all will be right."

But here Mrs. Barclay, unobserved by the Colonel, pointed to the phial which had been found in Maria's hand, and mournfully shook her head. It might have been better for him to have seen it also, and known at once the futility of his hopes; but the family, in their mistaken kindness, withheld the truth, desiring that it should dawn upon him by degrees, and willing to shift upon any one beside themselves the pain of telling it.

Their appealing looks seemed to be asking counsel of Frere; but at present they could gain little help from him.

How he longed to be alone with the senseless form, that he might pour out the feelings that were struggling for utterance—that he might address it as his Maria, and implore its forgiveness for the woe he had caused it to suffer! Strange was the effect this morning's experience had wrought upon him; for Frere was actually conscious of a kind of jealousy stealing over him at the Colonel's attention to the dead.

"What right had he to claim her? She was *not* his own!"—rejected as Frere knew him to have been—

scorned—detested! Had not death itself been found preferable to this man's tedious caresses? And if, indeed, the lost soul could be restored to its beautiful habitation, that hand which Colonel Hussey was cherishing with such a full conviction of its being his undisputed, indisputable property, would it not shrink in mortal horror from his touch? And the eyes, which some kind friend had reverently closed, could they but re-open, with what cold aversion they would turn away from the sight of *him!*

It was in the fulness and perhaps the pride of his secret intelligence, that these reflections would be forcing themselves upon Frere. Yet there was an intensity and pathos in the Colonel's grief, when he was subsequently undeceived and made to perceive the fruitlessness of his hopes, which might have touched the hardest nature; and, in the case of Manley Frere, the very consciousness of how little Maria had deserved the fondness lavished upon her by her mistaken lover, could hardly fail to affect the man who had supplanted him in her affections. A sense of duty—of common justice—therefore, was superadded to the mere humanity which prompted him to help in assisting, and, as far as that was possible, in comforting the heart-stricken mourner. But still he found it so difficult to attend to what was passing around him, that when, at the close of the day, he was praised and complimented by Divet and the ladies on having been their chief and most active coadjutor throughout the

whole of its lamentable occurrences, he almost fancied they were extolling him ironically ; so sensible was he of his real state of self-abstraction, and his inability of thinking adequately on any one subject but that of his mysterious connection with the Colonel's lost love.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BLISS OF IGNORANCE.

One solitary and slight advantage might be said to accrue from the shock in which the whole house at Etheridge were more or less participating. It created for the nonce a common sympathy. All, whatever their secret views and sentiments, thoughts and feelings, must thrill in unison over the fate of Maria Palliser, and concur in the same kindly solicitude for her afflicted lover. But Frere had the mortification of perceiving that, when the immediate impressions annexed to the scene of woe and horror had worn off, much that had struck him as most tender and amiable in the feelings of the people about him, had vanished with them, leaving behind all the selfish and worldly ingredients which formed the principal basis of their character.

While he was still bending under a sense of the awful and pathetic, his betrothed and her relations were regarding Maria's wretched end with reference chiefly to themselves. Very sorry for their poor dear cousin, but

much more really concerned lest they might suffer in the sight of the world, in having had their house made the theatre of so frightful a transaction—a revolting crime, with its coroner's inquest and all the painful and vulgar details unavoidably attendant on such a catastrophe.

"What would this person think?" "What would that one say?"

They apprehended little from the remarks the town might make. With Etheridge proper, the Divets stood generally too well to fear more than a moderate quantity of ill-nature and friendly misrepresentation; but, along the grand highroads and aristocratic byeways diverging from that loyal borough, how would the matter be taken there?

The county journals would be teeming with it: it must be the talk of the whole country; and the Divets' conduct, as temporary guardians of this unfortunate young lady, would be subjected to the minutest investigation, and perhaps the most mortifying comment.

Ah! ye who sit so complacently loitering over your breakfasts, sipping your tea, and "enjoying your murders," how little do you strive to represent to yourselves the miseries set down for your amusement and the profit of the retailers!—the sin, the agony, the shame and ruin, which are gently stirring your sensibilities, and adding a higher relish to your morning repast!

The excitement displayed by Miss Palliser from the time of the Colonel's accident, established, beyond any shadow of dispute, the fact of her utter irresponsibility.

One doubt, on the other hand, could alone be suggested as to the manner of her death. For when it was known that Colonel Hussey had originally intrusted the poison to her keeping, as a medicine which, in certain cases, he had found of infinite service to himself, it seemed possible that his mistress might have swallowed the contents of the phial simply as a remedy, and unconscious of its deadly nature.

The Divets, though they were really too shrewd to give any credit to this conjecture, took pains to favour an opinion which would effectually remove the stigma of a disreputable crime attaching itself to them and their house; but the suggestion obtained very little support from any one except the Colonel. He, urged by his own trustful nature, and his horror of imputing to a creature he loved so dearly the ghastly deed of premeditated self-murder, seized at once upon this solution of what, in his way of regarding it, must otherwise remain to him an impenetrable mystery.

"The fault had been all his own," he said; "in giving those drops into her possession he must have seemed to her to be recommending them to her use. No doubt, dear angel! it was thus she had construed his conduct; and, being wholly unsuspicious of their power, had taken all that remained in the phial, and so had fallen an

innocent victim to his most culpable—most wicked—imprudence in placing such a dangerous remedy within her reach. Dear, confiding creature! She, who had in all things such a perfect reliance on him, how could she ever suspect him of such a mad oversight! "Not but what I thought I had warned her," he would innocently say: "certainly it seemed to me that I made some passing allusion to the nature of the medicine; but it is plain that I could not have done so effectually. Throughout the whole, mine has been the fault, not hers, dearest and best of women!"

And having, happily for his own peace of mind, made this idea familiar to it, nothing from thenceforth offended Colonel Hussey so seriously as to hint at the possibility of his mistress having been wilfully instrumental to her own death.

"Why should she be suspected of doing so dreadful a thing?" he would ask. "What earthly motive could any one imagine for it—so prosperous—even brilliant as her prospects were—so happy as they were going to be together? No, if there was one thing more improbable than another, it was the supposition that Maria could have done any thing knowingly, and of her own free-will, to separate herself for ever from him. Infirmity of mind! yes, that might account for it; and if it were so, and it could be proved that her reason had become so thrown off its balance that she had lost the distinction between right and wrong, what was it but her love for

me, and the intense anxiety my sufferings had brought upon her, which preyed upon her mind and drove her to this pass ?"

The warmest champions of sincerity could not have had the heart to combat this happy persuasion. Not, certainly, the Divets, who held that virtue at so cheap a rate ; nor Frere himself, much as he valued truth in all its forms, and had the best reason of any one for knowing how utter a delusion the poor Colonel was hugging to his faithful heart. And so he went on, deeply resenting the verdict at which the Coroner and his Jury had arrived ; but consoling himself with the reflection, that all who had enjoyed a personal acquaintance with his departed saint, must adopt his own view of the melancholy subject.

In the same spirit of reverence for the dead, Colonel Hussey resisted all the arguments and solicitations that were urged that he should spare himself the fatigue and excitement of following his love to her long home. The Divets being specially interested in their persuasions; as they feared some trying scene would be the result of such a proceeding, and further publicity given to an affair which had already been too widely circulated.

But vain were all their instances ; he grew even stern in his resolution. "She clung to me in a moment more terrible to both of us than death—and would you have me desert her now ?"

Well may we conclude that Mr. Frere was not amongst

the number who tried to inspire the Colonel with their own timid or selfish scruples; he judged by his own heart, and calculated full surely the reply that would put them all to silence.

And now it wanted but a few days of that which had been fixed for the wedding of Colonel Hussey and Miss Palliser, when the population of Etheridge assembled round the steps of the manor-house, expecting a very different procession to issue from its lofty doors—most touchingly unlike the gay group they had thought so soon to see there—the fair young faces, the favours and bouquets, the flutter and frippery, which are held to be meet accompaniments to the gravest solemnity (but one) which can take place upon earth.

No hothouse was rifled of its best to grace this assemblage—no garden made desolate of its floral treasures to furnish garlands for the arch-triumphal, and blossoms to be strewn under the feet of the willing bride. One dark and dismal tint prevailed throughout, rescued from monotony only by the white scarfs and trappings which typified the virgin purity of her whom the sickle of the old reaper had cut down in the pride of her youth and beauty.

There was a strong desire amongst all Maria's friends that she should be carried to the grave with the utmost quiet and simplicity. But the unfortunate notoriety which had marked her exit from life, rendered her funeral a matter of universal attention; and, though

they could divest the procession of some of its ghastly pomp, the crowd that gathered together to feast upon the spectacle of sorrow, was larger even than would have been attracted by the wedding festivities.

For the first time in their lives, perhaps, the sociable Divets would rather *not* have had so many people staring at them. Had Colonel Hussey's betrothed, indeed, come by her death in the common course of nature, or in any "decent and creditable way," as they themselves expressed it, they would have enjoyed her funeral with a comfortable mixture of sentiment and ostentation—would have passed their comments on each sad portion of the undertaker's work, modestly exulting in the propriety and liberal style of his arrangements, and prepared, if needful, to meet the whole county face to face. But now the ladies peeped anxiously through the chink of a window-shutter at what was passing outside, and David shuffled into his mourning-coach with as hasty a step as etiquette might sanction ; and, between the folds of his cambric handkerchief, took a stealthy survey of the prospect without, in the manner of one who is not quite confident of his reception from the public.

It was not on this occasion, however, that Mr. Divet need have distrusted either the feelings of Etheridge or even of its neighbouring villages ; the sympathies of the mob went much more with the hopeless Colonel than with his worldly-minded kinsman. Maria's previous

history was so well known, and the train of events seemed to flow in such natural progression from love to sorrow—from sorrow to madness—from madness even unto death! What could be clearer, or what more touching! Since the days of Shakspeare's Ophelia, never surely had suicide put on an aspect so gentle, so innocent, and (as was humbly trusted) so pardonable.

> "One more unfortunate, weary of breath,
> Madly importunate—gone to her death!"

It was strange that Maria Palliser, who had, during her lifetime, opposed herself to these common sympathies of our nature, should now at her death be attracting them in so high a degree: but closed for evermore were the eyes which had so often shot defiance to human opinion, and rigid the lip that had laughed it to scorn; and, whether she would have valued or contemned it, the reputation she left behind her was destined to shine henceforward with all the virtues which popularity loves to attribute to its special favourites.

CHAPTER XIV.

ANOTHER BLANK IN LOVE'S LOTTERY.

The same feeling which led Frere to accompany Maria Palliser's lover to the brink of her grave, continued to influence his conduct so long as the Colonel remained under the same roof with him—a period which was protracted somewhat beyond that gentleman's original intention, as he required an interval of perfect rest to recruit his strength, and fit him for the resumption of his professional duties.

As he recovered from the first overwhelming effects of his affliction, the Colonel found no solace so effectual as the talking about his lost love; and, with the instinct of his own true nature, he soon perceived that there existed a peculiar affinity on this mournful yet fascinating theme between himself and Manley Frere. While Divet's commonplace condolences soon grew tiresome, and the measured cadence of Kezia's doleful accents palled upon his ear, and even the mild wisdom of old Jesse, philosophical and religious though it might be, lost much of its value by repetition, his intercourse with

Frere never failed to afford him the sort of comfort which, in this early stage of his despondency, he was capable of receiving.

Colonel Hussey imagined this to be but a fresh evidence of the fine character so generally attributed to this gentleman; for, of course, it was impossible for the poor man to divine half that was passing in the mind of Mr. Frere, as he sat listening to him with such patient pity, or thoughtfully traversed the chamber, given over to contemplations in which no earthly being might participate, and the good Colonel himself least of all!

The day which had been fixed for the wedding brought with it a renewal of the bitterest feeling—a fresh access of affliction; and, during the whole of it, Frere was in attendance on his unhappy friend. In this believing himself to be fulfilling an evident duty, not only towards the man on whom he had innocently wrought such woe, but to the fair and unfortunate being herself, the object of such tender and profound interest to both of them.

Mr. Frere might possibly persuade himself that it was solely from motives of inward compunction that he thus acted; but, could he have read his own heart, he would have known that at that time Colonel Hussey's society, dull and heavy—a bore of the first magnitude, as it seemed to all the house beside—had attractions for him which no other was capable of affording.

If the Colonel was never weary of reciting the praises

of his Maria, Frere had no satisfaction so great as in listening to the theme; willingly subscribing to the most hyperbolical of her lover's exaggerations, and wondering to himself at the strange, the marvellous concatenation of events that had rendered *him* the destroyer of so much virtue and talent—such a bright constellation of all female excellence!

And so it was that these two good men sat confirming and strengthening themselves, and each other, in their delusion; for what but a delusion could it be, that induced them thus to transform the erring character of poor Maria Palliser, and endow it with graces scarcely less than divine? A delusion born on the Colonel's side of utter blindness and misconception, and arising on that of his sympathizer from the one simple but overpowering charm of knowing himself to have been the real object of Maria's attachment.

Falsehood, in whatsoever conceivable shape it may appear, is a dangerous thing to deal with; even in its mildest and most pardonable form, which we take to be this of magnifying the merits and flattering the memory of a departed friend. In the case of the acknowledged lover, surely an overstrained view of his mistress's perfections had an unhealthy influence; for Colonel Hussey, who had formerly incurred the sneer and reproach of being too prosy and systematic in his courting, now threatened to fall into the opposite error of a morbid sentimentalism. And, as for Frere, a worse thing could

hardly happen to him than the constantly dwelling on a theme like this; inflaming his imagination with a fancy portrait, so rich in colouring and exquisitely proportioned, that it could not but render him more fastidious than ever, and more painfully sensible of whatever fell short of this false standard of female perfection.

If he had begun to look askance at the homely fare which fortune had set before him in the person of his shepherdess, how did he loath it now that his taste was pampered with such an ethereal banquet as he and the mourning bridegroom were for ever concocting! Had poor little Phebe boasted then the charms which really fell to her share, it may be doubted whether, just at that giddy-brained season of Frere's existence, they would have been found adequate to entice him back to her.

Even the affair of the locket had declined in interest since the moment of its restoration; for what was it at the best but the witness of an attachment too weak to stand the test of adversity? The love of a woman who had refused him her companionship, could ill compete with the ardent devotion which had chosen death in preference to an eternal exile from *his* presence. It was, therefore, in a much more moderate frame of mind than he would have predicated at one time, that Frere sought to clear up the mystery.

The Divets had, of course, contemplated the probability of his becoming cognizant of much regarding

Miss Girdlestone's visit to Etheridge, which they desired to bury in utter oblivion; but, like him, their thoughts had been so occupied of late, that they had almost forgotten their anxiety on this particular point; and the ladies were not a little startled at the plain question with which they found themselves assailed one morning: Mr. Frere saying—"He had heard frequent allusions to Miss Girdlestone, as if she had been at Etheridge lately, and even—though he could hardly believe it—an inmate of that house. Could that be the case, and he be left in ignorance of it?"

It was Mrs. George who, on this occasion, seemed the most disconcerted, and hesitated at the answer it would be best to make.

Phebe, on the contrary, met the attack with undaunted effrontery. Putting on her most innocent look she replied, "Dear Mr. Manley, how odd! I knew you had been *very* deaf, but I could hardly have conceived its amounting to such a pitch as that. Do you really, now—really and truly—and on your very say-so, mean to persuade us that you knew nothing about that affair? Oh no, I cannot believe you! You took no notice of what was passing—no more of course did we; but you could not be quite so ignorant as you seemed of what was open to every body else!"

Frere's answer boded a coming storm: "I am not the adept in dissimulation you seem to suppose me; and should indeed be only too well pleased to observe

that you and yours, Phebe, were as averse to every shade and suspicion of it as I am myself."

At this Kezia came alertly to her sister's relief.

"Believe me, Mr. Manley, no one can share in all your high-minded scruples more thoroughly than ourselves. And though we are sometimes guilty of indulging in a playful little hoax (often, as you know, having the sanction of the most aged and honoured amongst us when we do so); yet, when any thing of a serious question is started, you will find us all true as steel! And even touching this affair of Miss Girdlestone, though I felt, as we all did, the embarrassment of introducing the subject of a lady who had treated you so ill, still, my firm persuasion of openness and sincerity being the only sure bond of union amongst friends, would have prevailed over every consideration."

"And what prevented your complying with so plain a duty, Mrs. Barclay?"

"Simply, Mr. Frere, the persuasions—I might almost say the commands—of Mr. Cranston."

Frere echoed the name in a tone of surprise.

"Yes, Mr. Cranston was here at the time of Miss Girdlestone's accident: it occurred the very morning of his arrival."

"What accident? What are you talking about?" he exclaimed impatiently. But Mrs. George, once more mistress of herself, proceeded now with her usual equanimity.

"Yes, an accident; supposed at the time to be more serious than it afterwards proved: in fact, there was an immense deal of foolish fuss made about it: merely a sprained ankle, arising from the overturn of the carriage which brought her and her father from Langton. It was that mischance which occasioned the young lady's being thrown for a day and a night (her stay extended only to that) upon our hospitality. You must feel that in such a case it was impossible for us to refuse her the shelter of our roof; though you may also imagine, Mr. Manley, after her behaviour to you, how much more reluctantly our neighbourly duties were performed than they would have been towards the poorest stranger who had sought refuge with us."

The glow which had flushed the face of her hearer at the commencement of this artful speech, died away as Kezia proceeded.

"It was chance, then, that brought her to this house?" he said in a more subdued tone.

A covert glance passed between the sisters, and Phebe took up the word, remarking carelessly that they were not entirely unacquainted with the Girdlestones. "Papa had had some business transactions formerly with the old gentleman, which of course induced them to come to our house in preference to an inn."

Frere looked up inquiringly—"Yet, she knew of my being here? Of *that* I have proof unquestionable."

"Of course she did," said Phebe, still preserving her cool assurance. "We made no secret of it: why should we, you know? After what had passed between you, the circumstance of your occupying the same house could make as little difference to her as to you—Could it?"

Frere stood looking at her in silence, still with a dissatisfied and inquiring eye. Provoked beyond her patience, the shepherdess suddenly burst out, passionately upbraiding him with caring more for Barbara Girdlestone, "abominably" as she had used him, than for her, who loved him so dearly—so devotedly! "A great deal too dearly for her peace of mind!" And then ensued a fit of weeping, half real and half pretended; which had not, however, all the effect she was hoping for. The day was gone by when a tear in the eyes of the Divets' pet lamb was sure to awaken some kindly interest in the heart of their deaf guest.

"Phebe," he quietly said, "we must understand each other; or, under the mask of affection, our intercourse will prove but one tissue of discord and fruitless repining. The sentiment I once entertained towards Barbara Girdlestone—that deep and absorbing passion—I can never again experience for any living woman. And if you expect"——

"No, Mr. Frere!" said Kezia, adroitly interposing and folding her weeping sister to her bosom. "No, Mr. Manley. Phebe does not expect to be the object of such an attachment as you describe. She is much too

sensible—too rational. Are you not, my pet? And let me add that I, as her sister and best friend, should scarcely desire her to be so distinguished; being quite satisfied that a more sober sentiment on your part is likely to be the more durable: a far better foundation for happiness in the conjugal state. But run away now, my dear child—run off, and dry your tears as fast as you can; for here comes grandpapa, and he must not find us looking sad."

But old Jesse, meeting his favourite descendant in the doorway, would needs have some explanation of her evident discomposure; so then, with admirable tact, it was set down to the account of "lovers' quarrels." "One of those little fallings-out, dear sir, which, whenever both hearts are in the right place, do but tend to draw the bonds of affection still closer."

Frere left them abruptly in sore disgust, feeling as if some strong but almost imperceptible network were restraining his free movements—a thing as minute in its meshes and interlacings as the cordage which kept Gulliver, in all his strength of manhood, bound low upon the earth. Like him, he seemed to feel the little feet of the Liliputians creeping, running—nay, even curveting in triumphant gambles—over his prisoned limbs; but before he could succeed in unfastening the tiny links on one side, the clever, busy little people had contrived to peg him down securely on the other.

All this he felt, but had nothing beyond a vague

instinct of insincerity in those about him to oppose to the steady faces and unwinking eyes with which they encountered his suspicious glances.

But it was not the conduct of the Divets that moved Frere most: they were common-minded people, and acted only according to their low impulse; but from Cranston he had had a right to expect better things! His pride, his self-love, and many a better feeling, were hurt and outraged by finding how he had been tricked and played upon by the friend he had trusted so implicitly. The letter which he began writing to Cranston under the influence of his mortification, was so stern and unlike the usual tone of their correspondence, that his heart relenting ere it was finished, he tore it up, resolving to let the sun set upon his anger; just though he believed this emotion to be. On his second attempt at expressing his feelings, Frere thought he had done so with infinite forbearance; yet Richard, who had long been dreading these reproaches, felt them from the crown of his head even to the very soles of his feet: for in his conscience he knew they were deserved only too well.

"What could you be thinking of, Cranston"—it was thus the expostulation ran—"thus to belie your own uprightness, and throw a stigma upon mine? What was there in the nature of my malady which should require my being hoodwinked and cheated into a blind obedience to your will? Whatever *you* might think, the loss of hearing brought

with it no such mental weakness as should entitle you to presume that I would in any case debase myself, even before the best beloved of my heart. But if, on the other hand, there was—as I still believe possible—some kindly feeling towards me—some generous relenting struggling in Barbara's heart, who can say what happiness might not now have been ours had we not been so sedulously—and I must add—so officiously parted? But it is useless to harp further on this subject; all I have to do now is, to encourage the conviction that your interference, and perhaps even that of your colleagues also, was well meant, and honestly intended to save me from a supposed danger."

And then, in a strain scarcely less torturing to Cranston than his more direct reproaches, Frere went on to expatiate upon the engagement into which Richard had been the chief agent in entangling his friend.

"The mischief of it is," he said, "that though I guess, by a hundred symptoms to me unequivocal, that I have been deceived in every creature under this fatal roof—that from the moment I entered the house I have been duped by a series of petty manœuvres and subtle flatteries, Phebe's partiality for me being, as I suspect, the frailest bubble and merest delusion of all—yet there is no reasonable objection to be made; nothing of sufficient weight in the code of morality or manners, in the conduct of either her or her relations, to serve as an honourable plea for breaking off this—the word will have its

way—this *accursed* engagement. Oh, Cranston! you who know my sentiments with regard to marriage—the horror with which I have always regarded a union between man and woman which has not perfect respect as well as the tenderest love for its foundation—fancy my sensations now, that I awake from the stupid dream into which I suffered myself to be lulled:—and that more through a contemptible vanity that I am heartily ashamed of, than any nobler impulse!

"What on earth could I have seen in this little girl—what did she say, what did she do—that so bewildered my judgment as to persuade me into making her my wife? Superficial in all her acquirements and common in her tastes; disingenuous certainly, and, as I fear, unprincipled, on many most important points. *This* woman to lie by *my* side—to act as the mistress of my home, and rule there as my second self! Heaven forbid it! And yet, though I live on in a perpetual grumble, not always confined to my own breast either, I see no possibility of escape. Then imagine the kind of sensation with which I shall perhaps hear some day that I am a father—bid to thank God that he has committed an immortal soul into my keeping, to be nurtured for His service and the benefit of His creatures—*she*, this Phebe Divet, being the mother of *my* child! My boys, if I have any, I may manage in some measure to preserve from her influence; but my girls—Oh! what it will be to see them gradually infecting with the curse of mediocrity—

through the inevitable evils of *her* companionship and example! I could not venture to write thus to any living soul but you; but I am not afraid of your laughing at me for what some might think a very long look into futurity: especially as you have, though innocently, had some hand in my fall."

By this time Frere had written himself into a better humour with his friend, and he begged him not to imagine that by this allusion he was intending any thing more in the shape of reproach. "The unlucky error into which I originally led you, cast, no doubt, the same false glare over every individual and incident of that period which was deceiving me so grossly; and you were much too short a time here to correct your earliest impressions, as I ought to have done long before."

And then, after a friendly reference to Cranston's own affairs, as if to do away with the shadow of unkindness which had crept between them, and to restore their correspondence to its old footing, Mr. Frere finished his letter with a sentence which has afforded me a name for this story of his adventures:—"I have had Three Chances in love's lottery," he said, "and all of them have turned up blanks!"

Frere had reason for thinking that every fair pretence he might make for breaking with the Divets, would be destroyed by the consummate art with which the family combined in opposing themselves to his secret wishes. They were perfectly sensible of the "grumblings"—in-

ternal as well as outwardly expressed—which he describes in his letter to Sheen; but the more backward he became in his courting, the more sedulous were they to seem contented with his behaviour, and careful to avoid any open rupture sufficient to endanger Phebe's chance of becoming mistress of Old Court.

This was the position of circumstances at the manor-house when Colonel Hussey took his leave of it; and Frere, in losing this last memorial of poor Maria, experienced not only the want of the stimulus which the Colonel had so constantly supplied to his dreamy musings respecting her, but was disagreeably roused to the fact of there being no longer any valid apology in his own eyes, or those of other people, for declining to sustain in all respects the character in which he was formally recognised at that house.

Relieved from the restraint which the presence of their afflicted cousin imposed upon them, the family began in a quiet way to bestir themselves; issued thanks for obliging inquiries upon notes with an appropriate breadth of black border; and, though ever with an eye to decorum, shewed manifest signs of returning to their ordinary way of life. Soon would the Etheridge mansion be itself again; subdued a little in its aspect, for the shadow of a fearful tragedy still rested upon it, and in the estimation of some might never be wholly removed; and Miss Divet, in compliance with the popular feeling (she dubbed it a prejudice), sullenly consented to

the propriety of contracting her wedding festivities—in the arrangement of which she trusted soon to be employed—to a much more limited scale than had been contemplated in the case of Miss Palliser's.

There was a deeper policy that seemed to actuate the Divets in the apparently careless manner in which they contrived to be constantly alluding to this event in the hearing of the bridegroom-elect; and Frere—though perfectly sensible of the coarseness of their conduct—felt that they had some reason to be dissatisfied with his.

If the thing was indeed unavoidable, he must display a trifle more alacrity in the preliminary measures—must enter with David upon the subject of settlements, and devote some time and attention to Phebe—must walk, and ride, and drive with her when she required it—loiter with her at home, and occasionally accompany her in her visits abroad.

This latter duty, it must be observed, was one particularly irksome to Mr. Frere, whose pride predominated just in proportion as his partiality diminished. As the Divets sank in his opinion, and he lost the kindly feeling which had once rendered him tolerant of their disadvantages, it was but too natural that certain old prejudices in favour of equality of connection should erect their snake-like crests, and cause him to wince and feel impatient in being recognised in all societies as the future son-in-law of his father's old steward; coupled continually with one who was growing odious to him,

even before he had placed the emblem of eternity round her finger, and condemned to pass through the ordeal of familiar allusions and commonplace jokes. Such trials as these were almost enough to make him marry the shepherdess out of hand. One thing especially required speedy reform: he must interdict Phebe from continuing any longer to call him Mr. Manley, as she and her family were still in the habit of doing.

When there was no prospect—none at least visible to the deaf guest—of a nearer connection between them, this mode of addressing him had been commonly adopted at the mansion; and seemed proper enough in its familiar yet respectful sound, and indicative of the sort of regard—affectionate, yet to a certain degree ceremonious—with which the family might be supposed to regard the son of their father's old patron. But in their new position this formal prefix was evidently out of place: the lover *ought* to stand on terms of perfect equality with the beloved. And yet the act of proscribing this "Mister" was so like casting down with his own hands the last barrier between himself and the shepherdess, that Frere felt the greatest reluctance to alter the accustomed style. The first night after Colonel Hussey's departure, as the entrance upon a new way of life, was the period when Frere proposed to himself to put a stop to this old custom; though, as they were still only a family party, the matter was of less importance. He knew that they would be alone, for Phebe had challenged him to a game of chess with her,

saying, in her most engaging way, that she "longed for another of those dear old games she used to enjoy so much, before all these dismal doings had come to pass—inquests and horrid things—and before he got so quick of hearing as to be up to all her naughty little speeches, and stray bits of slang."

He had smiled at her adroit reference to the pleasant past, though not without a cutting conviction of the truth of her words.

"And yet, poor child!" he said to himself, "I may be unjust to her; and a better and a sincerer nature may be hidden under her foibles than I have lately given her credit for possessing."

Nevertheless, though the evening wore on placidly enough, and without any fresh transgression on her part, or fault-finding on his; yet, when the chessmen were put by, and Phebe wished him "good-night, Mr. Manley," and held up her little mouth to be kissed, Frere returned the caress with his usual quiet "good-night, Phebe," and so went to bed, scolding himself for his want of resolution.

Had Frere known his real interests, he would have made a friend of George Barclay, whose thorough acquaintance with the family politics might have rendered him a useful auxiliary to the opposite party. And in the state of mind in which George returned from the inspiriting society of cousin Sally, a very slight encouragement from Frere might have induced him to shake

off his habitual inertness and selfish love of quiet, and reveal enough of the Etheridge conspiracy to have afforded Frere the most ample apology for withdrawing from his engagement.

But Kezia's husband had been the object of Mr. Frere's special dislike from the first moment of their acquaintance; and though the rest of the family were sinking almost as low in his esteem as this sullen sneering man, and he had seen cause to correct his former impression of poor George as the only blot in the circle —the sole exception to the general amiability; yet his opinion was by no means so modified as to make him meet Barclay's civilities with any increase of cordiality. Chilled, therefore, by the continued coldness of one whom he had always liked, and was now disposed to pity, if not to help, George drew back from the advances he had been tempted to make, and sank into a state of more gloom and moroseness than ever. "Hang the fellow!" he said to himself; "if he's too proud to associate with me, let him take the consequences. I'll e'en leave him to his own inventions, and the tender mercies of my precious sister-in-law."

In pouring out his feelings to Richard Cranston, Frere had sought for nothing further than the sympathy of a friend; and, with his own mind made up to what appeared to him the only honourable course of action, was so unprepared for the view which the young rector was now taking of his dilemma, that it required some strength of

resolution to overcome the effects of Cranston's plausible arguments. He had expected any thing rather than a vehement entreaty to throw over the Divets, and decamp from Etheridge without loss of time; for, divested of all superfluous matter, such was in fact the substance of Richard's advice: he adjured Frere to pause ere he finally committed himself with Divet's daughter.

"The whole aspect of things," he urged, "is so changed from what it was when you formed this unhappy connection, and you were so entirely and innocently misled, that in the sight of Heaven you must surely stand exempted from fulfilling your engagement. The world—for so we persist in naming the trifling number of persons sufficiently interested in our proceedings to canvass and criticise them—the majority of your acquaintance, then, may blame you; but, if your conscience absolves you in this matter, it is not the fear of a gossiping public that ought to influence your conduct.

"Believe me, my dear Manley, it requires no strength of language to convince me of the misery and sin that lie in an ill-assorted marriage. The actual binding of the living to the dead is scarcely a more revolting idea than perpetual companionship, where thought, words, and feelings are continually at variance. From your reports of Miss Divet, it seems to me you may fairly ground your defection on the old plea of incompatibility of temper; or, if that does not appear to you to warrant the step, why not declare at once the

singular misunderstanding which prevailed on you to distinguish a young person who would otherwise have remained an object of perfect indifference to you? I urge this not only for your own sake, but for that of the girl herself; towards whom you can never hope to make yourself an agreeable husband. You are a good sort of fellow, but it lies no more in your power than in that of any other of Adam's descendants to act the hero by your own fireside; and I imagine that, with all your reflection on the subject, you are yet scarcely aware of the inevitable destruction of your dignity as man—and even as gentleman—which the life you are meditating is sure to entail. In the domestic squabble and daily bickering there is something so poisonous and corroding to the character, that neither mind nor manners can long withstand their influence."

A melancholy smile accompanied Frere's comment on this passage. "Poor Dick!" he said as he read it, "that mother of his must have been particularly untoward, and the sisters very troublesome, the day he wrote that: I see it in the whole turn of his thoughts. Well! it cannot be very long before Micklesham-Basset is ready for him; and then he may pension off the old lady and the girls, and set up housekeeping, with nobody but honest old Martha to tyrannize over him."

"But I confess to you," Cranston proceeded, "it is chiefly on my own account that I implore you to let no romantic notions of duty prevail with you to complete

this rash—mad contract; for I regard with such sincere contrition the share *I* took in it, that nothing less than the assurance of your freedom can restore my tranquillity. I have not had a moment's peace of mind since my interview with that unfortunate Miss Palliser; who seems doomed to have been the ruin, not only of herself, but of every body connected with her."

Upon the subject of Miss Girdlestone, Cranston said as little as possible. He could not deny the charge of double-dealing which Frere had brought against him, yet would not express the contrition he really felt; having no wish that his friend should be incited to give up the shepherdess out of any lingering partiality for his first enslaver. For it must be remembered that Richard had heard nothing respecting Barbara that could tend to soften her in his favour; her real motive for throwing herself in the way of her old lover had been carefully withheld from Cranston, who was encouraged to impute her conduct to the impulse of a coquettish nature, anxious to reassert its power over a heart it had cruelly misused.

To Frere, who had still an aching desire to learn more of the particulars of Barbara's visit to the mansion-house than he had yet acquired, there was something disappointing in the cursory style in which Cranston hurried over a subject which he must know to be so interesting to his friend. Nor was Frere much better satisfied with the advice which the young rector offered him touching his engagement to Phebe. His arguments

for an immediate rupture with her were so plausible, and the urgency with which he brought them all to bear upon his friend's particular case was so persuasive, that, if not actually shaken in his own opinion, he was tantalized by being shown a plain and easy way of overcoming his difficulties; but which, nevertheless, was one that his conscience forbade him to follow.

Great and lamentable as had been the mistake under which he had proposed to Divet's daughter, *she* had had no share in it. His offer had been voluntarily made, and eagerly accepted; and Phebe, remaining precisely the same in person, mind, and conduct, as she had been before this transaction took place—the change he knew was in himself and not in her—it seemed to the conscientious Frere that, if the world were kind enough (and to the inheritor of Old Court he doubted not it would prove most complaisant) to forgive and make excuses for his perjury, he should never be able to reconcile himself to deserting poor Phebe, or hold up his head amongst honest men, when he remembered the stain he had brought upon his name and character.

No, he must simply do what many have done before him. Lay aside the dream of connubial happiness, domestic bliss, and so forth! Take care that his little wife did not bring any open scandal to his hearthstone, and console himself as best he might for the sacrifice of his inestimable hopes, by taking a livelier interest in matters not purely personal.

Perhaps his tenantry and constituents (for he supposed he should be in parliament "some of these days"), his own affairs and those of the country might not go on the worse for his being driven, by the discomforts of home, to seek amusement and occupation out of its immediate sphere. Many a magistrate would never have been renowned for his activity out of doors, if he had been encouraged to potter, according to his pristine tastes and inclinations, in the domestic penetralia; and Frere suspected that even patriots and philanthropists might be found, whose speeches would never have resounded on the hustings or the platform, had the orators been listened to with submissive and admiring attention as they stood on the hearth-rug before their own sea-coal fire.

Something, at least, to this effect meandered along the thoughts of Mr. Frere; and, if his meditations should seem to border a little upon the morose and sardonic, there was mingled with them so much high feeling, such a steady adherence to the principle he believed to be right, and so admirable a resolution to give up every prospect his soul had yearned for, rather than sully his conscience and good name by a broken promise, that he may well be pardoned if the sacrifice was not made with much complacency.

It was in the course of a solitary ramble that these final resolutions were adopted. Cranston's interference had only so far influenced Frere as to cause him to

defer the duties of suitorship and a proper attendance on his shepherdess, in order entirely to recover from the effect of counsel so agreeable to his inclinations, and enable him once more to bend his mind determinately to the disgusting alternative of a lifelong union with Divet's daughter.

CHAPTER XV.

PROMETHEUS UNBOUND—GULLIVER AT LARGE.

I HAVE said that, since finding his advances towards a freer intimacy invariably though civilly repulsed by Frere, George Barclay had grown more ill-humoured than ever; and it followed that the snarling which daily took place between this half-excommunicated member of the family and his pert little sister-in-law, waxed more spiteful on her side, and on his became still more deep and virulent in its expression.

The fear of utterly outraging Frere's sense of propriety was the only check which Phebe acknowledged; and, in his presence, she usually kept a tolerable restraint upon her temper; but whenever the necessity for self-command was removed, and with it the moral gag upon her tongue, she indemnified herself by making the freest possible use of that mischievous little weapon of annoyance.

Now, it came to pass that, during Frere's absence that morning, a fierce discussion had been maintained in the Patriarch's own parlour, and had arrived at what any

quiet auditor might have deemed its highest point of malevolent excitement, just as the absentee was re-entering the house.

Phebe, suffering her temper to get the better of her, had retaliated a sneer of Barclay's with a retort so cutting (for the degraded man had unfortunately many an open wound still left festering in his conscience) that he lifted his finger with a warning gesture, bidding her remember that, "bluster as she might, she was thoroughly in his power. One word to Frere, and you know well enough what would follow. And, used as I am in this house, if I were not the meanest-spirited fool on the face of the earth, I should have spoken it long ago, and helped him, poor wretch! out of a worse scrape even than the one I fell into myself."

"I defy you!" Phebe exclaimed; her excited voice and sparkling eyes suiting the tone of her bravado.

Kezia saw the dark expression which was working in her husband's features, and signed to her sister to forbear from aggravating him. But Phebe continued in the same high strain of defiance, telling Barclay, "He might do his worst. *She* was not afraid of him. Who could be? Who in their senses would ever give credit to a word that *he* should utter?"

All which, spoken in the most contemptuous accent, had its due effect.

"That is your opinion, is it?" he retorted slowly, and turning very white. "If you think so, it will be as well

to ascertain the fact without loss of time," and he turned to quit the room.

An occasional flash of resentment—a louder growl—a fiercer bark than usual—the family were prepared for; and its older and wiser members were always ready to soothe down the demonstration when it threatened to become dangerous, or suffer it to die away into the ordinary sulkiness of the half-tamed animal. But there was on this occasion a decision in George's manner, and a concentrated fire in his eye, which struck them as something more than usual. Even Phebe was awed for the moment, and his wife rushed to detain him; the old man even exerting his faltering limbs and tremulous voice that he might preserve the peace, or, at least, check any alarming outbreak.

Now, Mr. Frere had discovered, since the restoration of his hearing, that the Divets were a noisy race—often slamming doors, and talking in a higher key than was either decorous or necessary. A moderate uproar, therefore, would hardly have caught his attention, or interrupted his progress across the hall. But the disturbance which saluted him as he was passing old Jesse's quarters, was altogether of so unusual a character that he fancied something serious must have happened, and figured to himself nothing less than the old gentleman expiring in a fit, and his daughters weeping over his prostrate form.

He opened the parlour-door in haste, therefore; but a single glance upon the struggling group he beheld there,

pale with anger or red with apprehension, sufficed to explain the nature of the scene, and, looking about him with haughty displeasure, he ironically asked pardon for intruding. He had heard their voices raised to such a pitch, he said, that he had imagined one at least of the ladies' dresses must have caught fire. "But I see it is only a family brawl—a sort of thing," he added severely, "in which a bystander is apt to feel much of the humiliation which ought to belong only to the actors themselves."

Saying which he was moving off as quickly as he had entered, when George cried out, "Stay, Mr. Frere—stay where you are; for you have more to do with this matter than you think of."

"*I*, Mr. Barclay!" and Frere turned haughtily upon him. "How can *I* possibly be concerned in *your* disputes?"

"Of course—of course not!" Kezia and the old man both exclaimed. "It was merely an idle fracas—a family quarrel, with which Mr. Manley could have no earthly business—nothing whatever to do."

But George met their glances of warning and deprecation with one of savage triumph.

"No, by all that's sacred!" he cried, "I'll be browbeat no longer by any of you! For once in my life again, I'll do a good deed and speak out. I have been silent too long already—much too long!"

"What nonsense you are talking, George! But Mr.

Frere," Kezia added, in a flurry which scarcely allowed her to be intelligible—"Mr. Manley knows you too well to attend to any thing you can say against your wife and her family; and is too much of a gentleman, I am sure, to listen to a family dispute."

Her words, however, were drowned in the louder tones of her exasperated husband, declaring with an oath that Frere should not leave that room till he had heard how he had been duped and deceived by the whole tribe of Divets.

Here old Jesse, every aged limb shaking with nervous excitement, attempted to interpose, raising his shrivelled hands, and whispering his moderating—"H-u-sh—h-u-sh!" But he had better have remained quiet; for Barclay went on, fixing a relentless eye upón him.

"Yes—mark my words, Frere! Every one in this house has heen humbugging you; from that old hypocrite, tottering on the edge of the grave, to the young wild-cat there—whom her precious sister can hardly prevent from tearing my eyes out." And accordingly, while he was yet speaking, Phebe, incensed beyond all bounds of prudence, sprang upon him with almost the fury of the animal to which he had likened her; he caught her, however, as she advanced, and flung her back into the arms of her sister.

Shocked at this disgraceful scene, Frere at this point joined the old man in persuading George to leave the room; though considerably hampered by Phebe, who

clung to him with appealing looks, sobbing out that "Mr. Frere was too kind—too good to believe a syllable that that cruel, wicked, false man was saying against her. He was too well assured of her love and devotion to him."

Barclay echoed her words savagely. "*Your* devotion! When I have heard you twenty times over say how you hated him, and that it was only for the sake of his money and position that you wanted to marry him."

Kezia, almost distracted herself, kept asserting to Frere that her husband was out of his senses. "He's mad—indeed he is mad, Mr. Manley!"

But Frere answered her coldly, "I am not so sure of that, Mrs. Barclay. Your husband is a person of strong passions, and a temper not likely to be soothed by the treatment he meets with from you and yours. His expressions, I allow, may be a little too strong"——

"He's a brute!" exclaimed Phebe, raising her shrill young voice above all the others.

"It may be so," Frere said, determined also to make himself heard. "But Mr. Barclay's insinuations, I am sorry to say, are fully borne out and confirmed by what has reached me from a totally different source. I have been told before now," he continued, "that in this little girl"—looking down reproachfully at Phebe—"I was cherishing a thing that would one day turn and sting me. But I could not believe it of one so young and apparently ingenuous."

This speech, though short as Frere could make it, was not finished without frequent attempts at interruption. But it seemed that by one of the party it was distinctly heard and comprehended; for Phebe, suddenly resigning the arm on which she had been hanging with such a show of fondness, exclaimed with pert and angry decision—"It's no matter! I thank my stars I am not reduced to forcing *any* man to marry me; least of all such a lump of ice—such a cold-blooded, heartless being! Oh, I don't care, Kezia! I don't care a straw for what any body thinks! I *will* speak out, and tell him my mind once for all! How could you, or any one, expect me to like a man who behaved to me as if he had been a schoolmaster instead of a lover? If I had been weak enough to marry him, I should have been the most miserable creature under the sun: never allowed to utter a word or raise a finger, but under the permission of *his* High Mightiness. Yes, we *did* call you so—and well you deserved the title!"

"Oh Phebe, Phebe!" her sister exclaimed, clasping her hands in utter despair.

"Nonsense, Kezia! I'll keep terms with him no longer. He never cared—I know it from the first—he never cared for me, or any body but that jilt Miss Girdlestone; and now let him go and make it up with her, and grovel at her feet, and lick the dust off her shoes, if he pleases: so that I am rid of him, it's a matter of indifference to me."

During the first portion of her tirade, Frere had kept his eyes on the little vixen with an air of amusement, which predominated even over his wonder and disgust; but at the name of Barbara, a very different expression overspread his face.

"Yes!" cried George vehemently: "yes! and if it had not been for your detestable arts, they might have been reconciled long ago. I dare you to deny it; for there were more witnesses than myself to that plot, and you all of you know that it was only by lying and treachery that you kept them asunder."

"Good God! can there be a word of truth in this?" was Frere's earnest exclamation. But then such a clamour and confusion of tongues succeeded, that no syllable to the purpose could he distinguish; and it only ended by George Barclay protesting, with a volley of oaths, that he would leave the house and never set foot in it again, or voluntarily speak to a living soul of the name of Divet.

Accordingly he flew off, threatening to murder his wife if she attempted to restrain him: pursue him she did, however, her fears being by this time thoroughly aroused; and a very short struggle between them, ended by a sudden and violent slamming of the hall door, plainly intimated that Barclay had effected his escape, in spite of her opposition.

The old man, forgetting his crutch in the terror of the moment, made shift to hurry after them into the hall,

where he found his eldest grandchild trembling and subdued: how different from the alert, self-sufficient Mrs. George Barclay of everyday life! "What was she to do?" she asked with a bewildered air: her father was out; Dawkins, too, not at hand; and it would be worse than useless to send Abraham: even if the boy could overtake him it would only provoke him the more. "And there he is, flying wild down the town—without his hat, too—what will people think?"

"Heaven grant that a little idle gossip may be all we have to dread!" her grandfather answered. "I have not seen your husband so excited for many a day: he must be followed, or there will be mischief. I must go myself, if there is no one else to look after him—I must go myself!"

"You, my dear sir! It would be madness to think of it!"

Frere, scarcely less excited than the other actors in this strange scene, was leaving them in haste; yet bewildered and disgusted as he felt with every member of the family, the distress of these two—the aged and the helpless—was not to be disregarded. He turned back, therefore, and offered—coldly enough, but still he did offer—in the absence of any other efficient envoy, to follow Barclay, and prevent if possible further mischief; and receiving the earnest "Heaven bless you, Mr. Manley!" of old Jesse, and a look of shamefaced gratitude from Mrs. George, he found himself, in a few seconds more,

speeding his way out of the town, in the direction pointed out to him by the deserted wife.

For some little distance the way lay plainly enough before him, but then came a puzzling junction of paths, one leading straight to the mill-dam, the other to the railway; and just as Frere, impressed with the general apprehension, was taking the former road, he perceived the hatless fugitive proceeding, at a much more moderate pace than might have been expected, in the direction of the Etheridge station. Except, indeed, that he was bareheaded in the open highway, George Barclay presented by this time no very perceptible change from his usual demeanour away from his wife and her family; he had sunk back into the air of dogged indolence which characterised him so disagreeably. Yet, for all this outward repose, the fire was smouldering within; and when, attracted by a quicker step, he turned to see who followed him, he assured Frere, with a sarcastic laugh, that neither he, nor the anxious friends he had left behind, need be afraid of the disgrace of another suicide in the family.

"I haven't the pluck of poor Maria," he said. "If I had had half her spirit, I should have cut my throat long ago."

Reassured as to the actual danger of the case, Frere set about persuading him to act reasonably, and bend to circumstances; for, little as he liked this young man, he could not but have some pity for one who seemed so reck-

less and unfriended. And yet, as it presently appeared, not wholly friendless. One well-wisher he still could boast, in the person of cousin Sally. "He knew she would take him in," he said, "for as long as he chose to stay with her. To her he should go by the three o'clock train; and then to the diggings, or—the devil, perhaps! So that he never saw Etheridge again, or the face of one of its inhabitants, he cared but little what became of him!"

Soothed by the sympathy of one he so highly respected as Manley Frere, poor George's heart soon opened; and while the other walked quietly by his side, careful not to irritate him by unseasonable advice, he entered briefly but at full into the story of his wrongs; by this means opening to his companion, who had never heard them alluded to till this moment, a new view of the respectable family amongst whom he had been so long associated.

"They were the ruin of all my prospects," he said: "they managed to separate me from the only woman I ever cared for, or ever shall; and from that moment they had me, as it were, body and soul! Married me to Kezia, who is only a degree better than the vixen her sister; and when I woke up and found how I had been cheated, I hadn't the heart to care for character or any thing else. Mr. Frere, I was wild: I made a sort of vow, that they should never be the better for the miserable money which I knew was what they ensnared me for, and I squandered it like a prince—or rather like

a fool. I had the spirit to do that, but not enough to keep me from sinking into the poor, debased, dependent creature such as you have seen me—crowed over, ridiculed, insulted by the very set whose treachery had brought me to that pass."

In this way did the unhappy man pour his complaints into the ear of the friend now truly sympathizing with him. And Frere had his reward for the kindly attention he bestowed upon poor George; for presently, having finished the story of his own wrongs, Barclay entered upon those of the proprietor of Old Court; and during the ten minutes he was waiting for the train, as they paced up and down the platform, Frere attained to a full explanation of all the mysteries, the flying hints, and innuendoes, which had so startled him, and irritated his curiosity, during the latter part of his residence at the manor-house. Now he was made to perceive how thoroughly the Divets had misled him with regard to Barbara; George assuring him that it was no mere accident which had brought her to the house where her old lover was living, but the ardent wish—declared and known to all at the mansion—of visiting and communicating with him once more.

"And if you want to know more of the matter, Mr. Frere," George concluded, "your best way will be to travel the same road as myself. I don't mean to the diggings, or the other place I alluded to, although I fancy I am most likely to reach it first; but Sally Barclay knows a good deal more of what went forward at that time than

even I do: and, besides, I know she has got something to give you, that she might not like to trust to the post. And so, if you'll condescend to attend to the advice of a miserable blockhead, who never knew how to conduct his own affairs—and never will to his dying day—you will cut away from this confounded place as soon as you can, and call upon cousin Sally when you get to London."

Frere assured him he would not fail to do so; and at this point of the conference the train came rushing to the station. A few moments more of hurry and bustle—puffing and screaming—and away went poor George, all the better for meeting sympathy where he had least expected it; while Frere felt that he could not be too grateful to the man who—no matter how or from what original impulse—had saved him from the snares and pitfalls of the Etheridge mansion: or at least had expedited his deliverance.

So full was Frere's mind, that he hardly knew how intently his eyes were fixed upon the receding train, till, gradually diminishing in the long perspective, it vanished altogether in the tunnel. And then—so sudden had been the previous stormy scene, so short and yet so complete in its consequences—when every visible trace and reminder of it was thus literally buried in the bowels of the earth, he experienced for a second or two the strongest impression of unreality: he had to shut his eyes and open them again, and take a very long breath, before entering into the full measure of his

joy, and convincing himself that the incubus was actually lifted from his breast for ever.

A well-known voice pronounced his name, and roused him from this pleasant reverie. Frere looked round and beheld Divet; who, returning home just after the family affray, had received a hurried report of it, and immediately hustled off in pursuit of the missing gentlemen.

To Frere this encounter was not unwelcome; as through Divet he might transmit the intelligence he had obtained for Mrs. Barclay, of her husband's present safety and prospective intentions, and thus be saved the necessity of holding any further personal communication with the rest of the family. He found it disagreeable enough even to talk to David. It is always painful to meet an old friend under circumstances of coldness and estrangement, and Manley Frere was peculiarly alive to these feelings. No doubt, he had for some time past entertained strong suspicions that his host of the manor-house was not the honest-hearted, upright person he had once believed him to be; but he could not observe the looks of mortification and embarrassment that sat upon a face he had been accustomed to see the very mirror of good-humoured jollity and self-satisfaction, without pitying his old entertainer. And besides, David, happening to be absent from the late disgraceful scene, the scandal of it did not cling to him personally.

To comply with his timid, hesitating invitation to return to the mansion, was of course impossible, and

Frere felt convinced that it was only David's ignorance of the full extent of the foregoing fracas that induced him to hint at such an unlikely arrangement: he was quite sure that the trio which Divet had left at home, were much too acute to entertain any reasonable expectation of seeing him return arm-in-arm with the master of the house.

But in the kindness of his nature, and, we may add, the lightness of his heart just then, he modified and softened the tone of his refusal; and, while contriving to make it explicitly understood that he returned no more to the Etheridge mansion, Mr. Frere expressed himself with such consideration for Divet's feelings, and acknowledged so courteously the many hospitalities he had received from him, that the other—nervous, bewildered, and conscious-stricken—was so nearly crying, that Frere, under the liveliest apprehension of another scene ere he could get free of Etheridge, led him away as quickly as possible: taking care that their final parting should be accomplished out of sight of the station-master and the porters.

There is no occasion to accompany David up the High Street. The reader, if he have any further interest in the Divet family, will easily imagine the state of their feelings at the issue of this day's adventure: the secret shame, the intensity of mortification which for many a day continued to oppress every member of it; and the difficulty they found in accounting, satisfactorily to the

public, for the sudden evasion of the husband of one of the ladies, and the lover of the other. How they winced and chafed at the hundred exaggerated editions of the story, more or less injurious and absurd, which some kind friend was certain to repeat to them ; and how perfect was their conviction that the narrative they ultimately attempted to circulate, though framed and embellished with all their native ingenuity, was never believed by even the weakest of their acquaintance.

Resigning the Divets, therefore, to the retribution that has at length overtaken their duplicity and miserable intriguing, we follow Manley Frere ; who having, by this brief but decisive explanation with Divet, finished all his remaining business at Etheridge, is anxious to remove from its vicinity with all imaginable alacrity.

In the lingering hope that some accommodation may yet be effected, David throws all the petty obstacles he can in the way of so immediate a parting; meeting Frere's clear directions about the disposal of his servants, luggage, &c., with a difficulty of comprehension half real and half pretended. But all Frere's tenderness for the feelings of an old and once esteemed friend, will not prevail with him to dally much longer in a locality he so heartily detests. He gets clear of Divet, and then starts for a ten miles walk across the country, to the nearest station upon another rail ; where, if he makes good speed, he may calculate on meeting the last train, and so reaching London by nightfall. No matter if he do

not: Frere reckons on the efficacy of a brisk walk for soothing his excitement: at least he shall have a new scene and another range of prospect before his eyes than the hills of Etheridge; which, warmly as he used to praise their English verdure and graceful slopes, have now grown hateful to him, in conjunction with all things animate and inanimate appertaining to the place.

With this feeling strong upon him, Frere did not so much as turn his head in the direction of the Sodom or Gomorrah from which he was escaping. For a mile or two he went on as steadily as the effervescence of his spirits would permit; by which time he had reached the highest point of a gentle ascent, after passing which, Etheridge would be hidden from his sight, he hoped for ever! Here, then, the traveller stopped and looked behind him. Below lay the picturesque old town he had so often observed complacently from that very spot. No fire from heaven rained upon it, in spite of its iniquities; nor did he feel himself congealing as he gazed: on the contrary, Frere thought he had never seen the prospect to more advantage, nor ever felt more brimful of life and energy to appreciate its merits.

So clear was the atmosphere that evening, every object so sharply defined, that not only were the church and town-hall, and all the principal buildings, distinctly marked out, but the manor-house itself; which, from its size and position upon the sloping High Street, might well be accounted one of the chief structures of the place.

Every window on one side of the mansion was discernible from the point where Frere now stood; and as he singled out one of these, his brow grew clouded, and his colour died away. It was the window of what had been Maria's room: he thought of the bitter cries he had once heard bursting from it; and his joy abated, as the scenes of that lamentable day returned upon his memory.

Alas! How seldom it happens in this world that a heart of common sensibility, and a brain capable of any reflection, can be susceptible of unmixed pleasure for more than the passing moment!

Frere was sobered at once; and, having fixed one long last look at the house wherein so many strange things had happened to him, he turned away, and made the rest of his journey like any other rational traveller.

Metaphorically speaking, our journey is likewise drawing to its end. It may be that I have already loitered too long and too often by the wayside, overstaying my time at various stations that might have been passed at a quicker rate. Henceforth, therefore, it will be advisable to leave the Parliamentary train, and proceed by the Express.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

At an early hour of the morning after his arrival in London, Mr. Frere was seated in cousin Sally's snug though inelegant parlour, listening in profound attention to what she had to tell him relative to Miss Girdlestone's mysterious visit to the manor-house. For being assured, from George Barclay's history of the late proceedings at Etheridge, that she incurred no risk of further mischief-making by revealing the whole truth, Mrs. Sarah talked on to her own heart's content, as well as that of her auditor; acknowledging with no small contrition the share she had originally taken in deceiving the deaf guest, and frustrating the hopes of his gentle love; and accounting for the removal of her prejudices against that young lady, by repeating the substance of their conversations together, and the confession in which Barbara had so pathetically and ingenuously described her feelings towards Frere, her deep repentance, and unceasing regret.

Any one acquainted with cousin Sally's peculiar style

of diction, may conceive that this part of her communication, anxious though she might be to retail it verbatim, did not in point of language preserve much resemblance to that of the original speaker; and that, travestied into the queer rough jargon in which Mrs. Sarah was used to pour forth the sentiments of her own soul, those of Miss Girdlestone were in danger of losing much of their delicate effect. And yet, judging by the countenance of her companion, this hardly appeared to be the case.

Sensitive as Manley Frere was, on ordinary occasions, to the ridiculous in character and manners, the absurdity of what he was now listening to scarcely seemed to strike him. Of course he never attributed Mrs. Sarah's phrases and flowers of rhetoric to the person she professed to be quoting: he translated from them, as out of some barbarous and hottentot-ical tongue, the pure thoughts and sweet utterance of her who was fast becoming dearer to him than ever; and smiled not once during a narrative which, but for his deep concernment in it, would have tempted him to many a hearty laugh. He hardly spoke indeed as the old woman rambled on, so fearful was he of losing the remotest hint that might serve to indicate the present state of Miss Girdlestone's feelings; till cousin Sally, arriving at the climax of her story, handed over to him the little note which Barbara had confided to her, and which the prophetic care of George Barclay had rescued from the flames. Then indeed Frere could not forbear reproaching the old lady: "Oh, Mrs.

Sarah! is it possible you can have kept this from me so long?"

She hastened to justify herself, by relating the stratagem of old Divet, which had prevented her from communicating with Frere before his hurried departure from the mansion; and, on her side, cousin Sally rebuked her visiter in no measured terms for the fatal haste in which he had despatched his offer to Phebe Divet.

"If you had only waited another day or two, Mr. Manley, that job would never have been jobbed. But when I found you'd been goose enough to pop the question downright to that artful little hussey, what could I think but that you'd pitched your old sweetheart overboard, and taken to t'other thing in good earnest?"

"Don't talk of it!" he interrupted her shuddering. "I was wild when I did it: mad with folly, conceit—a hundred bad motives that had nothing to do with love; in short, Mrs. Sally, I was under a delusion: it was a mistake, upon my honour, from beginning to end."

"A mistake, was it?" said the old lady contemptuously. "Ah! that's just the old cry with you all—you he-fellows! Whenever you find that you've flirted and gallivanted a little too long, it's easy enough then to see that you've made mistakes, as you call them!"

But she held forth in vain. Frere's senses were riveted on that soiled and crumpled bit of paper, scribbled over with such a nervous eager hand, that no

perception save that of true love could have deciphered its contents, much less have traced in its characters any resemblance to Barbara's well-known writing.

"I am not surprised" (it was thus she addressed him) "that you refuse to see me; and from any one but you I might fear some misinterpretation of my conduct, in coming hither and haunting you with my unwelcome presence. But, changed as you are towards me, in this respect I am confident you will not do me wrong: five minutes' conversation is all I ask. Your reluctance to meet me may be natural, but surely you will not refuse me a request which the meanest stranger would not demand of you in vain?"

"Again that word 'refuse.' What artifice—what wickedness must have been practised, before it could ever have been written in connection with him and his supposed sentiments!"

Frere started from his seat in an agony of remorseful tenderness. Yet there was something more to be endured —something still to make him shudder—lest the prize, which this time seemed so nearly in his possession, should be snatched from him before he could grasp it: he might be destined to draw yet another blank!

It was but a day or two ago that Mrs. Sarah, accidentally passing an hotel in a part of the town remote from her own Bloomsbury quarter, had caught sight of Miss Girdlestone and her father issuing from its door. She was leaning on his arm with the languid step and pallid

complexion of a confirmed invalid; and, interested as the old lady had been in the fortunes of the young one during their brief but most familiar intimacy, cousin Sally, under other circumstances, would undoubtedly have stepped forward and recalled herself to Barbara's recollection; but a troubled conscience, as she shamed not to confess, turned her "chicken-hearted," and she suffered her old acquaintance to pass unsaluted.

It might, of course, be no more than some ordinary malady that was causing the young creature's cheek to grow so thin and wan; but in her heart, Mrs. Sally traced these altered looks to nothing less than the success of the Etheridge conspiracy, and the information, which might subsequently have reached Miss Girdlestone, of Frere's engagement to Phebe Divet.

Anxious to satisfy herself as far as was possible on this point, she watched the father and daughter taking their slow course up the street, and then, repairing to the house they had just left, under the pretence of calling on Barbara, Mrs. Sarah obtained from the lady's-maid, who was summoned to speak to her, a confirmation of her worst apprehensions with regard to the young lady.

"For some weeks past," the woman said—"in fact, ever since an accident Miss Girdlestone had met with in the country—she had been declining in health; latterly so much so, that (her mother being too great an invalid herself to leave her home) Mr. Girdlestone had brought his daughter to London for advice; and as all the physi-

cians concurred in recommending change of scene, and even of climate, as the young lady's best restorative, he had resolved upon taking her abroad immediately. Passports were already obtained, and they were to leave England before the expiration of a week.

Cousin Sally listened to the tale with the sensations of a culprit; of some unintentional incendiary, let us say, who, smoking, what he looked upon as an innocent pipe, too near his neighbour's haystack, sees the said neighbour's farm and homestead shortly in a blaze; and while lamenting that he should have been the means of spreading such wide destruction, and reducing his honest friend to beggary or the workhouse, is not unconscious of certain personal apprehensions that he may himself be prosecuted for his culpable thoughtlessness.

Most truly had the old lady suspected the actual state of Miss Girdlestone's feelings. The originally fine constitution, which had enabled her to resist the effects of hopeless grief and self-reproach, succumbed to the shock she had sustained at Etheridge; and still more decidedly to the news, which had latterly reached her, of Frere's betrothal to Phebe Divet. For a while she loftily repelled the idea as a thing too unworthy of him to be lightly credited; but the time came when she could no longer even affect to doubt. He was not only lost to her for ever, but had fallen a prey to a designing person, his inferior in every possible quality. Then, horror-struck—disgusted, yet ever regarding herself as the

immediate cause of Frere's degradation—her strength began to fail her, and her spirits to sink as they had never done before. Until this period, it had been a consolation to know that she was breathing the same air with him—speaking the same tongue as her ill-fated lover; but henceforth Barbara even courted the sentence of banishment: she believed it would kill her to be in England when his marriage with Divet's daughter was announced.

It was evident to both Manley Frere and his queer old sympathizer, that no moment of time should be wasted in useless lamentation or conjecture. Grudging even the half-hour it would have cost him to return home, he seated himself at once at cousin Sally's ungainly desk, and commenced upon a sheet of coarse paper, and with a villanous pen, to pour forth the dictate of his feelings in a letter to Barbara; for, remembering that she was as yet wholly ignorant of his proceedings, and especially the adventures of the previous day, and must be still holding him in due abomination as the betrothed of Phebe Divet, Frere dared not follow the impulse of his frank and natural character, and fly to his beloved without further hesitation or prelude. In fact, so strong was the distaste with which he looked back upon his late enthralment, that, with all his knowledge of the steps which had led to and accounted for it, it seemed to him now a deed so monstrous and inexcusable, that how it must be appearing in the sight of such a being as Barbara Girdlestone he literally trem-

bled to imagine. The day might come when she should be made cognizant of certain circumstances serving in some measure to palliate his conduct; but the sad secret of poor Maria Palliser was not to be lightly and hastily divulged, even to Frere's first love. In the mean time, the malady which had caused his strange association with the Divets, must bear the reproach of all the follies and extravagances he had committed whilst under their hospitable roof.

Frere's letter was not perhaps the less eloquent and effective for being dashed off in such a hurry, and perhaps he might safely have trusted to the intrinsic merit of the composition; but there never yet was real love without a touch in it of the romantic, and a thought striking Mr. Frere as he had nearly finished his despatch, he enclosed the locket received from Maria, bidding Barbara, "if she still cherished those kindly feelings towards him which her sweet note seemed to indicate, to admit him at once to her presence when he should call: he would leave the letter himself, and return in an hour to know his fate. But if, since visiting Etheridge, her heart had hardened—as well it might—against one who had seemed to have forgotten her, then it was his woeful request that she would return the love-token; the sight of which would be enough, without any further explanation, to convince him that their intercourse was to be closed for ever. From that moment she need fear no more persecution from him."

Having perpetrated this little piece of sentiment, and secured his epistle with a morsel of blackened sealing-wax stuck upon the point of a large pin, Frere bade a kind though hasty adieu to cousin Sally; promising, in answer to her earnest request, that, whatever reception he was destined to encounter at the —— Hotel, she should be the first to hear of it.

Considerable apprehension was entertained by both of them, that as some days had elapsed since the old lady's recognition of the Girdlestones, they might already have left London; but in this, the outset of his adventure, Frere was at least fortunate. To his inquiries after them at the hotel, he received the grateful assurance that the family were still resident there, though intending to leave almost immediately. He directed that his letter should be delivered without fail into Miss Girdlestone's own hands; and then, dizzy with suppressed emotion, turned from the place that held his dearest treasure, and went to wander up and down the streets of that dull aristocratic vicinity, wearying for the minutes to pass more quickly, yet sickening at the possibility of what might be awaiting him at the end of the hour appointed.

How different were Mr. Frere's sensations during his progress along the London pavement, from the calm and easy security in which he had travelled into sweet Surrey to claim the hand of his second love! Thirty-nine times did he look at his watch, and lo! at the fortieth

the hour was up all to a fraction; he had so nearly calculated time and space, that now he had but to cross the way and he was again at the door of the hotel. Once more he rang the bell, setting his teeth together and assuming a fixed and stony look; though the almost immediate appearance of the porter sent the blood rushing convulsively through his veins. The man stood back to let him enter. "So far, so well!" But another came forward—who, though he had the aspect of a decent serving-man, might be but a fiend in a white cravat—with a letter—or, worse still, a parcel—ready to deliver to him. Even the respectful demand of his name might be only the prelude to his final dismissal.

Frere could hardly breathe as he answered him; still jealously watching every movement, but with a courteous inclination, and a—"This way, if you please, sir," the man tripped up-stairs before him as if executing some previous order.

Again the surrounding walls and passages seemed whirling before the eyes of the fond and foolish lover; growing bolder indeed at every succeeding step, yet hardly venturing to flatter himself that an adventure which had seemed at its commencement so critical and all but desperate, could be carried out with such infinite ease and celerity.

One may conceive that the time which had struck Frere as the most tedious hour of his life, had not been half long enough to quiet the emotion of Barbara:

her surprise at the sight of the locket, and the overpowering tumult of her joy on reading the letter in which it was folded; for it is needless to say that Frere's explanation, lame as it appeared to himself, was more than sufficient to exonerate him from every shadow of blame in the esteem of his beloved, and she was ready at a word—weak woman that she was!—to shift the whole weight of her previous displeasure against the causes and persons unknown, which a less partial advocate might have thought those hasty blotted lines of his did but vaguely intimate.

And then, as the character of her beloved Manley Frere shone out clearly and brightly as ever before her, how did her own sins start up to humble and daunt her! Could her base and ungrateful desertion of him be ever forgotten? He might—she felt assured that he did—and would love her better than all other women; but could she ever hope to be blest with the respect he had once entertained for her?

For her own sake, Barbara could have wished Frere to be still suffering—helpless, forlorn even, as when they first parted, so that she might have had it in her power to show forth the reality of her repentance, and the boundless love that had never, in her weakest moments, ceased to animate her.

But this was all idle dreaming: the hour was nearly up, and she must nerve herself to meet him as she best might; no longer as his equal in disinterested affection,

but content—yea, thankful—for any portion of regard he should deem meet to vouchsafe the renegade.

Her heart failed her as the door was thrown open to admit him, and she sank upon her father's bosom, shame-faced and all subdued.

Then Barbara became conscious that another arm besides her father's was stealing round her waist, and a low voice whispering her name—a voice that one short hour ago she had utterly despaired of ever hearing again.

In the season of Frere's adversity, when he had called back the image of his false love, he had sometimes accused himself of painting her beauty with too lavish a hand; but now, when encouraged by his gentleness, Barbara raised her head, and ventured to look upon him, he saw that he had hardly done justice to the exceeding loveliness—the purity and expression—of his beloved.

"Can you forgive me?" she whispered—"can you ever trust me again?" though, even as the words of humility fell from her lips, her confidence in his truth and attachment returned in all their former strength. He answered her only by drawing her from her father's arms, and clasping her closer and closer in his own.

How happy must be those authors who, ignoring the world before their eyes, and the experience which their senses should be daily teaching them, write steadily on with one fixed purpose, not suggested by the realities of life, but from some inward notion or theory of their own; the product of good but mistaken intentions, or the error—less honourable to themselves—of conforming, at any sacrifice of truth, to the popular taste!

That taste leans strongly to the working out of what is commonly called poetic justice—that is to say, by rewarding with a happy lot on earth, or a saint-like death, the virtuous character that has figured in their story, and punishing in due gradation all the sinners which an imagination more or less vivid, on the writer's part, may have conjured up.

Poetic indeed may this unfailing retribution be nicknamed; for in the plain prose of life we look for it in vain. According to its requirements, however, I should scarcely be held to have done enough for the few well-conducted persons who have fretted their hour on my mimic theatre. It is true that I have restored to Mr. Frere his hearing and his mistress, and never was man better contented with his lot; but I can promise him that, had his history been undertaken by some of my

contemporaries, the easy respectable career to which he is looking forward, and which fills the measure of his moderate ambition, would by no means have satisfied theirs.

Just at this very epoch—or at farthest a year later—there would be notice of a serious mortality amongst Mr. Frere's relations. More than one uncle would probably have died, and all the cousins that stood between him and the heirship to a certain earldom, which had already been hinted at as existing in a remote branch of his family. Nay, lucky might he, the now contented commoner, esteem himself, if he had to be made *only* an Earl; for when once the modesty of truth or the claims of probability are discarded, it is quite as easy to trim our shadowy coronets with strawberry-leaves as with a few pitiful gilded balls.

Then, touching the disreputable gentry I have striven to depict, I cannot say that any of them met with the chastisement they would seem to have deserved. Disappointment sore, and no small measure of mortification, did undoubtedly accrue to them on the overthrow of their interested schemes; but the wounds inflicted on their conceit and covetousness were pretty well skinned over before the twelvemonth was at an end. It is some years since the period of the story, and I am not aware that any misfortunes more than ordinary have overtaken the Divets: neither disease, nor poverty. Old Jones has not been called in at the manor-house oftener than

usual, and David and his father were much too knowing and experienced hands to trust their money in the British Bank, or any other bank except the Bank of England. In a word, no judgment has yet fallen to punish them "poetically," or (still better for the purpose of the professed moralist) heavy and marked enough to bring them to a serious sense of their unworthiness.

The truth is, that the sudden conversion of those who have pursued a life-long course of pernicious but successful cunning, is not the common event in real life which it is described to be in tracts and novels of a certain stamp. And so in this instance, it came to pass that even the old grey sinner—the arch conspirator of all, old Jesse Divet—was gathered to his money-making fathers without displaying any demonstration which could suffice to point a palpable moral, or adorn either book or pamphlet. What of a serious sort might have been passing in the mind of the worldly yet acute old man as he lay on the bed from which he was never to arise again in mortal life, can only be subject of conjecture to the curious in human character. Whether his many and grievous transgressions, his schemes to overreach his neighbour, and his selfish hardness against whomsoever stood in the way of his own or his children's advancement —whether these things came in review before him in their true light, the spirit growing purer and more wisely discerning ere it was ready to depart—or whether the old lawyer, living, as many of us do, two nearly separate

lives, continued still to regard his sins as deeds of necessity, and done solely in the way of business—therefore needing no repentance—is a point that can never be made clearer to mortal vision. We can but take the evidence of his family and attendants, which rather tends to prove that his compunction could not have been very heavy, as the old gentleman's last moments were always described as a shining example for old and young—tranquil, cheerful, even gay, and with his wonderful faculties in full play till the last gentle sleep fell upon his shrunken eyelids—his wise and religious reflections still, as they delighted to remember, bearing the stamp of his cheerful temper. To this we may add, that after the fashion of the house, though giving due precedence to his parish priest, and specially gratified by the visits of the Archdeacon, yet keeping in to the last so dexterously with all parties in religion, that, besides the regular funeral sermon in the church from whence he was buried, no less than three separate congregations, all detesting each other openly and heartily, were edified on the following Sunday by their respective ministers, with a discourse on the merits of their venerated elder brother, and a minute account of his dying moments; each of the preachers having profited in his turn by the hospitality of the defunct, and the impartial liberality of his religious sentiments.

With regard to Richard Cranston—whose failings of presumption and officiousness should not be passed over

entirely—I can make out a much fairer case of judicial punishment: nay, I am even disposed to think the retribution with which he was visited was almost too severe for the extent of his peccadilloes; for the much-desired living of Micklesham-Basset did not become vacant for full three years after the date of the rector's connection with the Etheridge conspiracy, during the whole of which time his mother and sisters continued to be his constant companions!

Colonel Hussey is still abroad; but though Mr. Frere—convinced from his own experience, that there can be no happiness in this world complete without matrimony—is hoping that every letter he receives from him—(and, with the Colonel's usual punctuality, they come regularly once a quarter)—may contain notice of some fresh engagement likely to prove more fortunate than the old one; yet this happy consummation has not thus far come to pass. On the contrary—with a tenderness and constancy of regret which Manley Frere, for reasons best known to himself, can never read without wincing—he still reverts to his departed saint; and, in reference to all his friend's persuasive pictures of the charms of wedded life, still answers that it is from no depreciation of the state that he remains single; but that, having known himself once the object of such a devoted and exalted affection to his dear Maria, he fears that he can never condescend to the lukewarm love of ordinary women.

As I have alluded to the married felicity of Mr. Frere,

it is superfluous to say that the rapid decline which appeared to threaten his beloved Barbara, when cousin Sally so luckily encountered her, occasioned very little more alarm to even her fondest friends—and, in fact, disappeared entirely with the cause that had produced it. And, speaking of Mrs. Sarah Barclay, there was one point on which the conduct of the Freres of Old Court (otherwise considered as exemplary) occasioned some rather severe animadversion amongst their neighbours. It was the circumstance that, for a week or ten days in every year, they had a female visiter at their country-seat, whose appearance excited universal remark; for a more singularly attired and uncouth specimen of woman-kind it would have been difficult to meet with in much less polished society. The Freres had tact enough and sufficient knowledge of the world to abstain from asking many other guests to the house on these occasions; but further than this mark of attention to the feelings of the world around them they refused to go: for they were independent as well as warm-hearted, and they persisted year after year in having cousin Sally to see them; indulging and making much of her, and, if the truth must be told, enjoying her absurdities with the keenest relish. And indeed, though I mentioned the displeasure of the neighbourhood, that soon subsided, as the very excess of cousin Sally's eccentricities began ere long to tell in her favour, by establishing for her a reputation which is calculated in almost any society to

redeem faults of style, and even of character, far heavier than hers. As the peculiar bond which connected our vulgar old friend with such a family as the Freres remained unexplained, it was most satisfactorily accounted for by supposing she was rich as well as odd, "rolling in wealth!" And this idea received the most undoubted confirmation, when, on the birth of one of Mr. and Mrs. Frere's little boys, cousin Sally was solicited by them to stand godmother to the infant, and was even on that occasion associated at the font with no less distinguished coadjutors than a bishop and an earl—both relations of the family, and the latter probably that same old nobleman who is some day or other to die, and make way for Mr. Frere to take his seat in the Upper House.

Nor is the occasional vision of cousin Sally, in her short petticoats and coal-skuttle bonnet, the only relic of the past which serves to keep the Etheridge adventures in the memory of Frere and his young wife. More frequently, and for a longer period, might be seen an uncomfortable-looking man moving about the place with stooping shoulders and listless gait; his idle hands invariably in his pockets, and (when out of reach of the house) a cigar as constantly between his unhealthy-looking lips. He passes, however, with comparatively less remark than the female curiosity; for Kezia's husband can behave like a gentleman when he chooses it, and, whenever he is in contact with the Freres, takes

more trouble on that score than in any other possible position. A little surprise has, nevertheless, been manifested—a slight curiosity to know "what there can be in that supercilious man, to make the people at Old Court so particularly kind to him, and so indulgent of his queer humours." But once, when an intimate acquaintance took upon him to express the sentiments of the public upon this subject, he was at once put down and silenced, by the assurance of both the Freres that they looked upon Mr. Barclay as one of the very best friends they had ever had, "and one for whose welfare and comfort they never could be too solicitous." And if the Freres believed there was any debt of gratitude due from them to poor George, it was more than repaid by the humanizing influence which their fine minds and polished manners acquired over a nature which, but for them, would have sunk into a deeper despondency, and a more sullen hatred of all mankind.

In the course of the foregoing narrative, it has fallen to the lot of Mr. Frere's faithful chronicler to dwell chiefly on the mortifying circumstances which, in common with countless fellow-sufferers, he has had to combat. We find little amongst the private memoranda of this gentleman to vindicate the opposite side of the question, or to justify the remark with which he closed his last letter to his friend, Mr. Cranston. Yet it appears to me that the weight of his evidence is scarcely required to demonstrate the nature of those alleviations

at which he hints, as springing up in conjunction with the sterner characteristics of his malady.

The disadvantages peculiar to deafness lie open to the shallowest observer; but, while these demand universal sympathy, it is amongst the vulgar and unreflecting that we shall find them the most pitifully bemoaned. Such persons are impressed by the anxious and perplexed expression with which the deaf man strives to gather an idea of what is passing in his presence; they esteem it hard that he should be perhaps the only grave one in a company of laughers—the last to comprehend the cause of that profound interest, or keen enjoyment, which his practised eye detects in the faces around him.

Nor can we doubt that the most resigned and heaven-directed spirit is liable to be often clouded and oppressed by its estrangement from common conversation; occasions must be frequently recurring when the patient feels himself excluded from something he especially longs to hear and answer. But such instances are rarer in fact than he presumes; and in most cases he may take it for granted that those whose discourse would be valuable to him for either profit or pleasure, will seldom fail to appreciate the worth that is in him, and will gladly adopt the readiest methods for a free intercourse of mind.

If, indeed, all that the deaf pine to comprehend were really worth their hearing—if all the jokes were as laughable as they seem to be, and the anecdotes new or

true—if the course of sentiment ran ever pure and bright, and the wordy arguments which they see men holding together, were always fair, and sound, and logical—then it would be impossible to lament too forcibly the lot of those who are deprived of hearing. But we know this is not the case; the very stoutest assertor of what is called the pleasures of society, must admit that a free and unrestricted commerce with our fellow-creatures includes much that is tedious and tiresome, offensive to the taste, dangerous to the morals, wearisome to the mind of a wise man, and irritating to his temper. For see what an old complaint it is amongst the intelligent of both sexes, that to business and works of necessity, demanding attention during the chief portion of the day, are superadded certain social requirements, held scarcely less urgent, through which the remaining time has to be unprofitably idled away. I suppose there has never existed a single being, prizing at its due value the reason with which he was endowed, who has not often sighed in vain for the leisure that is denied him—free opportunity for pursuing some favourite study, important it may be to others beside his selfish self; or the cultivation of some less exalted attainment, which he covets not merely for present amusement, but as a sweet and innocent resource for his declining years. Too often such an one sees his best hours engrossed by frivolous company, and the few that may be left at his disposal spoilt utterly for the uses to which he would

fain put them; for when at length he finds himself at liberty to think or work, his ideas have become so dissipated—the higher faculties of his mind so jaded—oppressed by spiritless ennui, or unstrung by unprofitable excitement, that he is scarcely adequate to any thing better than the gossip from which he has just escaped. Why, then—allowing this statement to be correct, and the great mass of society to be compounded of such coarse material—why do we persist in mourning the condition of the only class that is lawfully exempt from the necessity of humouring it—the only description of persons who may, without fear of being called to account for infringing the rules of good breeding, turn their back upon whatever company displeases them?

To the deaf alone are accorded the immunities of the invalid, devoid of the pains of sickness which so often neutralize the blessing of mental liberty. Though every voice around the deaf man be united to swell the chorus of frivolity and egotism, his privilege it is to look on unvexed and uninjured. Supposing his pursuits to be purely intellectual, he may, himself the centre of the idlest circle, be still busily and well engaged, working out some abstruse problem, or revelling in the still nobler flights of creative genius.

We might rest here contented with touching on the intellectual privileges assigned to this numerous section of our fellow-sufferers on earth; but there remains another important feature of the malady to be noticed—a

peculiarity attending it which should tend to purifying the heart, and keeping it unspotted from the world. For while the deaf are duly enlightened as to what passes around them, or in the world at large, and books and journals are at hand to inform as well as amuse them, it can scarcely happen but that the views of the human nature with which they are daily consorting, must be pleasanter and more hopeful than if their ear was saluted by every idle and wicked word that is spoken in their presence. In hearing correctly, a good man will often be suffering just offence, or risking contamination by listening too lightly to the voice of the scorner; but such discourse will not often reach the deaf in the full force of its impropriety; for one can hardly be in their company without observing the respect which is generally shown them: most people, from the mere instinct of decency, being led to elevate the low tone of their morality, and soften the coarseness of their language when addressing themselves deliberately, word by word, to the comprehension of another. Many a sinful thought may thus have been hidden out of sight—many a base insinuation checked in the moment of utterance. And if wholesome for him who hears but half—or less than half—the evil actually conceived, let us go further still, and trust that some portion of the benefit may rest with the speaker himself, who is induced, from whatever impulse, to pause upon the evil word till he is inwardly ashamed to pronounce it. The boldest and most reckless

of us all will hesitate to write in plain characters, or distinctly enunciate, those very same falsehoods and slanderous stories which we blush not to publish when we can do so with a glib tongue and a careless delivery.

And therefore it is that, as I glance over these sources of consolation, it seems to me that those deprived of hearing, if not so earthly-happy as other men, ought to be wiser and better, more purely-minded, and exalted above worldly cares; and if we find them spurning their opportunities of improvement and self-discipline, and perpetually pining for the possession of a sense which Heaven has thought fit to deny them—growing in their impatience more discontented, fretful, and suspicious—we shall decide that it is the patient's natural disposition, and not the disease afflicting him, which entails his sorest vexation: for, assuredly, he who discovers a mind so rebellious and unreflecting, would not have been happier or more estimable, even if he had been garnished with the longest and sharpest of ears—yea, those of King Midas himself.

THE END.

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