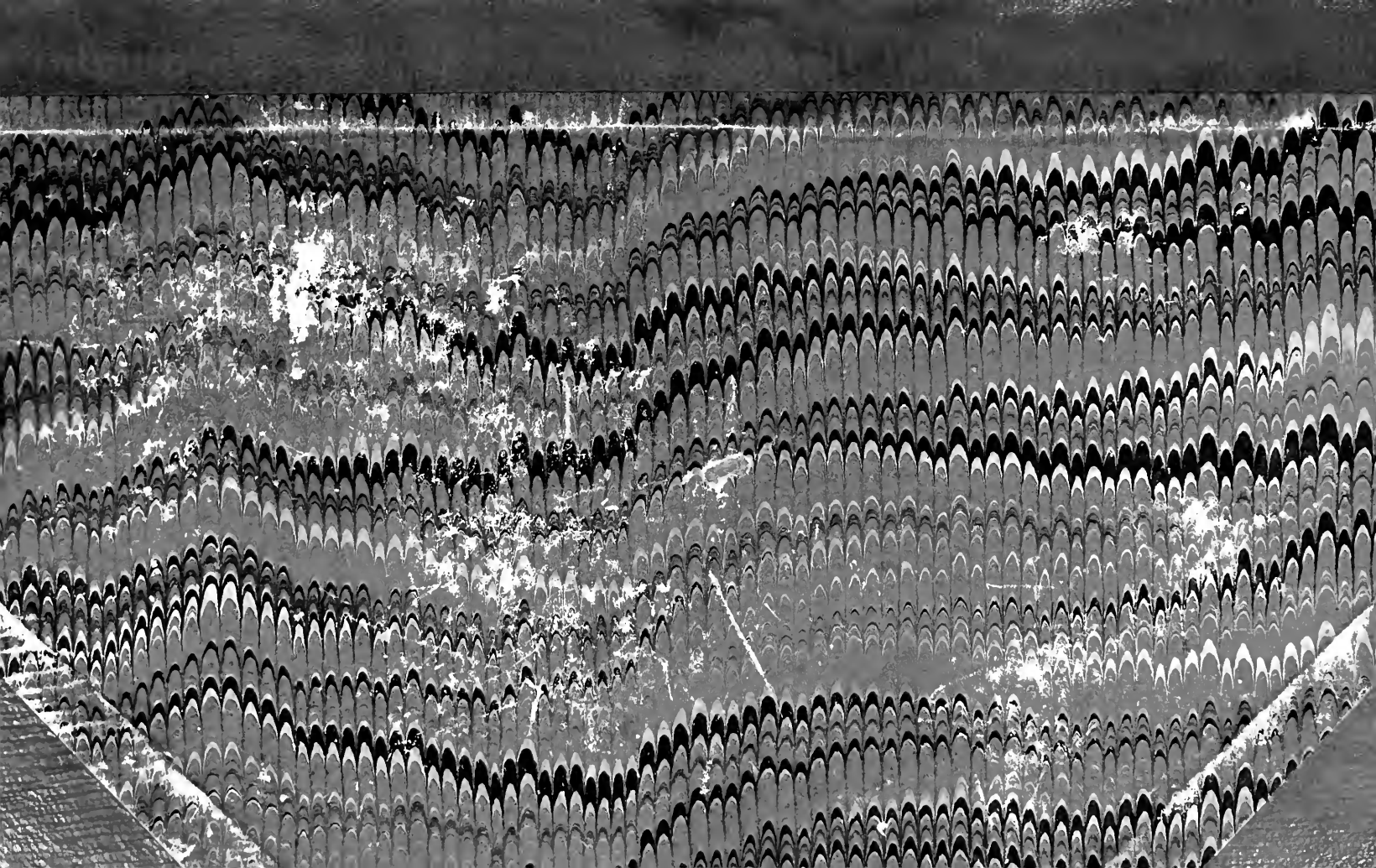

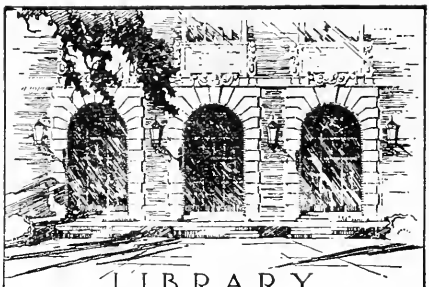

M. H. Boyer

1502.—

COUSINS

BY

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AUTHOR OF 'MR SMITH: A PART OF HIS LIFE'
AND 'PAULINE'

IN THREE VOLUMES

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COUSINS.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"MY LITTLE ONE HAS LEARNT HER LESSON."

> "If wisdom is our lesson, (and what else
> Ennobles man? What else have angels learned?)
> Grief! more proficients in thy school are made
> Than genius or proud learning e'er could boast."
>
> —YOUNG.

THERE was one person on whom the news fell like a thunder-clap, and that was Constance.

True, she had maintained from the first that if her brother-in-law were to marry at all, he would find a mate at Wancote, and that that mate would be Agatha; but everything being dependent on an "if," and nothing of the kind having taken place during the first three or four months after his return home, she had, from the

time of Jane's marriage or thereabouts, exulted in fancied security. She was satisfied, during the early period of his intimacy with the family, that he had not fallen a victim to attractions in that quarter before which all her forces of observation were stationed. That period was the test, and it passed by harmlessly.

It may be thought strange that she should have thought so—that, being a person of some penetration, she should not have seen the drama which was enacted under her very eyes; but she was blinded by her own prophecy. She had said it would be Agatha; and as it was not Agatha, and certainly was not Jane, she gave not a thought to Hester.

In her subsequent astonishment she was almost ready to accuse the lovers of dissimulation, of having taken advantage of her absence to compass their own ends. She burned with indignation. Thus to lose Lutteridge, to lose Simon, to lose at once all her present comforts and her future honours, was, in her eyes, almost unendurable. Had the blow fallen when expected, it would have been lighter; had the engagement taken place when she was at the Manor, while she could at least have seen and

prepared herself for what was coming, she could not have shown a bolder spirit. But there was something in being out of the way when the thing was done—a sense of being defeated by strategy, which galled her as it does most of us. We like to be beaten, if beaten we must be, in fair fight, and hate to hear the shouts of victory when our backs are turned.

And Constance had invited her own guests down to Lutteridge for the shooting-season, and had looked forward with especial pleasure to a stay there, unburdened by the fears and cares, the espionage and worry of the previous autumn. She would not now have plagued her brother-in-law with questions. She thought of him with satisfaction; dwelt on the improvement it really was at the Manor to have him there. He was a man who brought about him other men: he had only refrained from doing so on the previous year, since he had been unable to rout up his old friends, and unwilling to make new acquaintances all at once. With pleasure she had learned that he was now having party after party at Lutteridge; and although she had been unwilling to curtail some visits which promised amusement, she was not sorry to fix the day of

her arrival, and to look forward to being a hostess instead of a guest. She would bring, she wrote, her equivalent of ladies for all the men she heard he had got down.

If he would furnish arms to take them in to dinner, she would provide fingers to play the piano in the evening. She supposed he had been unable, so far, to have anything but bachelor, smoking-room, billiard-room evenings; she did not opine that his worthy uncle and aunt would permit either of their daughters to grace his festal board. But she hoped they were all well, and that she would soon have the felicity of seeing them again.

The day she thus wrote, the blow fell. Her letter had gone by the early post, and the one in the afternoon brought the tidings. Simon would willingly have left them to be imparted by Agatha, but he was now in all points guiding himself by imaginary feelings in an imaginary situation, perfunctorily performing such duties as would, under other circumstances, have sprung straight from the heart. Had real happiness been his lot, he would have allowed no pen but his own to have told the tale; and it was due to Agatha that he should accordingly now do so,

since no difference, no known, distinct, ostensible difference must be made. Nor dared he provoke inquiry. While everything went on at Wancote according to strict rule and precedence—while no evasions, no lukewarmness was visible, his task was comparatively easy. As he said, Agatha was not exacting; she was satisfied with little; she would, had she been called upon, have scouted the idea of his being anything but the most perfect of betrothed husbands. She would have resented the imputation, even had her own feelings prompted it, of his falling short in any degree of what was required of him. Was he not constantly there? Did he not bring her presents? Did he not entreat her to name the day? And could the man do more?

He escaped wondrous well. He never had a pensive complaint to listen to, a fond uneasiness to smooth away. He was shown letters of congratulation and wedding gifts; consulted as to projects; and chatted to lightly, agreeably, and safely. She never went below the surface; he found, with infinite relief, that *tête-à-têtes* with her would be productive of no danger, and at length he actually grew to find in them his chief

safeguards. Sometimes even he felt that his abruptness, his reserve, his cold gravity, must strike beholders.

Suppose—only suppose that some one among them did take occasion to notice it, and whisper to others. Once roused, he trembled to think how he should allay the suspicion.

And then the hue, the cry! The worthlessness of all he had done, the utter inefficacy of the sacrifice! He could not think of it.

As time went on, however, to Simon's astonishment he found that, instead of his burden growing heavier, it became absolutely less insupportable. He grew so used to his position, turned aside so resolutely from every temptation to escape from it, that the act, the very act of self-renouncing, brought, as it ever does, a measure of Divine peace. All, he thought, were happy save himself; and who was he that that should make him sorrow? His lot was not hard, he would declare. He liked Agatha; she was not jealous, nor snappish, nor overbearing now. Under the circumstances her behaviour exactly suited him. He saw little of Hester, who was endeavouring to practise her sister's home perfections—labouring hard, she said, to cut down Agatha's shoes

to fit her feet. They were too large, too grand for her; she feared, do what she would, she could never step into them; she could never point her toes, and tread discreetly along; at the best, she was sure she would only be able to hop, skip, and shuffle. They must not mind if now and then she "cast a shoe."

"You would dance on your bare toes much more prettily," said Jem. "Wouldn't she, Simon?"

But Simon, as was his wont, was stolidly gazing on the floor. "There is no joke left in him," muttered Jem. "He never laughs—he never takes the least notice of Het and her nonsense, as he used to do. Hanged if I don't believe yet there was something once in that quarter!"

The next thing was that Hester began to suspect something amiss herself. Not for a long time; and this for the simple reason that she, like he, was too much engaged in keeping the traitor within her own bosom in check, to dream of another. But when, by dint of much toil and courage, that demon was scotched and pretty well rendered harmless for the time, she had leisure to remark sundry curiosities which had passed unnoticed in the heat of the warfare.

She found, first of all, that she and Simon never spoke to each other, and that this was not altogether at her instance. She found also, that when, in sheer bravado, she ventured little sallies at Agatha's expense like to the above, he never took up the jest. She found that he was at no time visible, divested of that cumbrous dignity, which had awed them all at the outset, but which had gradually up to the time of his engagement been slipping more and more out of sight; that he seemed like a man overborne by some continual pressure, which he was either unable or unwilling to struggle with.

Very slowly came these awakenings. She thought them out step by step, unwillingly, reluctantly, terrified at the extent of her discoveries.

As to the truth she learned nothing, but this at length she concluded to be the substance of it. That he was not happy; that he had been mistaken as to his own inclinations; and that he was afraid lest she who knew him so well, and whom he had often rallied on the quickness of her perceptions, should discover as much. Hence he avoided her. It was indisputable to her that she was avoided; she was seldom

spoken to—never looked at. If she were announced to be one of a party being formed, he was certain to find a pretext for not joining it; if she moved to a part of the room where he was, ere long he was in another. She pitied him, but he sank a little in her esteem. Why had he been so precipitate? Why had he so hastily spoken? Why had he, while still uncertain of his own mind, made a rush at her sister, and demanded a hand which had never been held out to him?

Since he had, however, done so, he should at least have been above the weakness of retracting such a step, even in his own mind. The only thing to be said was, that since it appeared he was liable to such vacillations, it might be hoped that the weathercock would veer round Agatha-wards again.

She would not waste too much pity upon him, but neither would she add to any pain he might now be undergoing, by letting him feel that it had been detected.

With her, too, the steady repression of all warmer feeling had become habitual. She went about her daily tasks, perhaps a shade more soberly than she had been wont to do, but

otherwise there was no change. She seldom now needed the mother's or sisters' "O Hetty, Hetty!" the lordly rebuke of Bertie, or the "I say!" of Jem. And it struck Lady Manners once with a sudden pain, that she had been used to know when her darling ran past her door or up the great staircase, by the snatch of a song which came floating down behind her. She never heard a note now.

"As busy as ever, but scarcely as bright. My little one has learnt her lesson," was the parent's conclusion. "Time will heal the wound, and instead of a heedless girl we shall have the true woman."

"It will be a relief, however," pondered Lady Manners, subsequently, "to have the wedding over."

Every one seemed to share the feeling—every one, I mean, of those most nearly concerned—since Mrs Robert Lutteridge ought not, perhaps, to be included in that category. By the time of her arrival at Lutteridge, she had become so far reconciled to the marriage that her chief manœuvres were directed towards the prevention of its immediate accomplishment. Since it was to be, it must be; but could she not have her win-

ter, her early winter at least, in peace? Surely some alterations must be made at Lutteridge before dear Agatha could come there as its mistress? It was all very well for *her*—for any one who had inhabited the dear old place for years; but for a gay young bride! "Surely, Simon," she accosted him, one day, "you will not let your wife have to begin with painters and glaziers immediately on her coming home! and as to her coming to rooms like these, the thing is unheard of! Have them all done properly at Christmas, and have the wedding in February or March."

If he had been any other man, she thought he would have sworn. As it was, he answered with a sternness that was as unusual as it seemed uncalled for.

"That is sheer nonsense, Constance. I have no intention of touching the house. We shall be married in six weeks."

Six weeks! Bless the man! He was worse than Herbert Cotterill. Herbert had consented to wait the orthodox two months, and he had been supposed to be as impatient as a lover could be.

"And how am I to find other quarters in six

weeks?" considered she, lugubriously. "He never thinks of me. He has not said one word about my prospects or hardships. He is infatuated with his Agatha, I suppose. Six weeks! Well, of course it is permissible, but it is desperately short notice to quit. I must set about making my book for the winter if I am to be turned off so speedily. Let me see. I can go to the Delawares for Christmas, I daresay; and there are the Woods, and the White-Griffiths, and the Archers, who have all asked me. I daresay none of them expected me to come! However, I shall do well enough for this winter; but, oh dear me, there is not much to look to in the future! Jack, too—he is done for by this. Well, the only comfort is that I always said it would be so."

"Yes, of course it will make a change," she allowed, at Wancote. "But I could not expect anything else; I could not look to keeping a fine young fellow like Simon always at my apron-strings. Of course I knew he would marry some time or other. Now mind, Agatha," continued she, archly, "you are to ask me to Lutteridge, and be very good to me when I come, or I won't promise not to haunt my own

wee room at nights, and play tricks that would make your flesh creep to think of."

The invitation was of course forthcoming, prettily couched as it had to be in all sorts of indirect phrases, to suit Agatha's notions of propriety; but it was enough for Constance, who meant to come whether she was wanted or not.

"And the day is fixed, I hear," said she. "We shall have to rub up our recollections of Jane's proceedings. Jane, we must hear your report on the *trousseau:* what has been the right thing and what has not; what has seen good service, and what failed you at a pinch. Now tell me about that black silk that I fought for, and that my aunt objected to as preposterous for a bride—has it not been a comfort? What would you have done without it now?"

Jane owned she was her debtor for the suggestion—no black silk had ever been more useful, more indispensable.

"It is well worn, I see," continued Constance. "You will want another soon; and by the way, I must have a word with you about another style of *trousseau,* I suppose? Can I do anything for you? Not that I am a great hand—indeed I know little about it. Old Mrs Lutte-

ridge got everything for me when Jack was born, and Ellen just had his things. But now, my dears, have any of you reflected on the—the—what is the word, Hester?—the dispensation it is that these two weddings are both taking place about the same time of year? Jane's experience will hold good for every single thing we want to know about Agatha. Do you hear that, aunt? Had any of you remembered that?"

She was resolved to take the position of participator in the rejoicings. As no one could fail to think of her loss, and to comprehend something of the nature of her real feelings, she meant to astonish them all by her unselfish sympathy.

Even Lady Manners allowed that Constance was behaving well; and she was so good-humoured, bright, and interested in all that was going forward, that she got on with the Wancote folks better than she had ever done in her life.

Naturally this was shown to Simon, and did her no harm with him. His proposed settlements both on her and on his nephew were so liberal that she was herself surprised. She could now indeed contemplate a change of resi-

dence with more complacency, since she would be able to live elsewhere as became her. And then, to be sure, she was still young, handsome, and unfettered. Who could tell what might come to pass? Deprived of Lutteridge, she would certainly have more inducement than formerly to change her name afresh, should a suitable opportunity occur. Among her better points was Constance's faculty for making the best of what could not be helped; and this faculty aiding her resolution, she had, within a few hours of receiving the news, been able to write a cordial reply to Simon, and an affectionate note to Agatha.

She had a horror of being ridiculous, and took swift measures to avoid such a contingency. She hastened her arrival at Lutteridge, drove to Wancote the day after she came, persuaded Agatha to seat herself by her side in her open carriage, and paraded her all over the place the same afternoon.

In the weeks that followed she was unremitting in her attentions and exertions. Dinner-parties, such as Agatha's soul loved, were given at the Manor in honour of the forthcoming alliance. A ball was announced to take place

on the wedding eve, and all the usual paraphernalia of rejoicing was duly heralded. It may be questioned whether for the moment Constance did not really enjoy herself; Simon's consent to everything she proposed was obtained with such marvellous ease—she had but to suggest and it was agreed to—that her boldest schemes, including the ball, gave her no trouble. She supposed he was in the soft state of a love-sick swain, from whom anything can be extorted which he supposes will enhance the honour of his lady—she little knew that he was only intent on keeping her attention to such trifles, that he was seizing every opportunity of averting suspicion, by his ready compliance with whatever she demanded.

His being self-engrossed was nothing; she merely wondered how it was that men were always disagreeable when in love. Women were not. Agatha, for instance, now really showed to advantage. So far from being increasedly didactic and superior, she permitted herself little laxities of speech and conduct, which at one time would have made her hair stand on end. She was once seen in the gun-room, and again in the smoking-room; she tried in various

trifling matters to please the boys; she did not devote nearly so many hours to practising—an old grievance with them — and actually gave some of the time thus saved, not to thoughtful considerate actions,—these Agatha had always been famed for,— but to that genial idleness which ofttimes knits together the loose ends of brotherly love. That inevitable call which had been wont to hurry her out of the room the moment a meal was ended, appeared to be no longer felt; she had even an eye to note Jem's ever-recurring misery, the button which was sure, somewhere or other on his coat, to be hanging by a thread, and needles and cotton at hand wherewith to sew it on. She remembered to gather a flower for Hester's hair, as well as a bouquet for Jane; and more than once forbore to observe a most palpable "I told you so" to those unpunctual people.

In a word, Agatha's engagement had brought out all the best points in her character, and had vanquished, or, at all events, had put out of sight, many of those petty failings which had been prominent before.

Had one iota of her lover's attention been bestowed on any one but herself, it may be

questioned whether all would have gone so smoothly. Jealousy was the lady's besetting sin, and though, as we have said, she exacted but little, that little must be directed to her, and to her alone. She was with Simon, satisfied. Day by day he came to see her, making it apparent that she and she only was the aim and object of his visit. What though, when with her, he was silent and unimpassioned? That was nothing; it was his way. He had come, he had taken the trouble to come, he never omitted seeing her at stated intervals, except when furnished with a solid excuse; surely that was, and ought to be, enough. She felt that cause for complaint, doubt, or uneasiness, she had none.

"Only," said Jane one day, to Hester, "he is so absent. He does not hear one word in ten she says, Hetty."

"Then she must say ten words for every one she wants him to hear, that's all, Jane."

"You goosey! I should not like to have to repeat my words to Herbert as often as Agatha has to Simon, I know."

"My dear Jane, the wonder is that Herbert should listen to you at all, he has so much to say himself!" This to take off her attention.

"Nonsense," said Jane, reddening. "Herbert is nothing much of a talker; I have heard men talk a great deal more than he does."

"But you have never heard men talk more in the time. Set Herbert a given time, and he will put more into it than any one else I know, unless it is Chatty. Anne has an odd little clutter too; and as for Mr Cotterill, he is the best of any. He has a sort of chirrup—something between a whistle and a squeak; where did they all get their curious intonations from, Jane?"

"By the way," said Jane, "Mr Cotterill was so much taken with papa. I suppose he and papa must have got on famously together."

"Ye—es; they were a great deal together."

"He said papa walked him off his legs, showing him otter's lairs, pheasant-coverts, and partridge-runs."

"Papa said he was half killed by hunting up Roman camps, Druidical temples, and Saxon remains."

Both laughed, and no more was said about Simon.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WEDDING PREPARATIONS.

"Behind every scale in music, the gayest, the grandest, the most triumphant, lies its dark relative minor; our brightest hours are tunes that have a modulation into these dreary keys ever possible."—H. B. STOWE.

THE wedding, however, was put off for a month. No one quite understood how it came about, but from the 15th of November it was altered to the 15th of December.

It was not Simon's doing; he would have chafed at the proposal had it come from any other quarter, but he submitted himself lamb-like to Agatha's decrees on all points. She told him that it would be more convenient, that they had been talking the matter over at home, and if he would not object, she and her mother proposed accompanying Captain and Mrs Cotterill to London, at the expiry of their

visit to Wancote, since if on the spot, they would find the task of choosing wedding-clothes lighter than when the selection had to be made at a distance. Herbert and Jane, she said, intended going up about the 1st of November, from which date they had taken a house in Chesham Place; and it was their idea that Lady Manners and Agatha should be with them during the first fortnight of their stay, or as much longer as could be conceded.

Under the circumstances, and provided her cousin did not dislike the plan, Agatha thought it was a good one; and by changing the marriage day, everything could be comfortably made to fit in.

It was plain that she wished to go, and trusted that he would not pine in her absence. She liked the prospect of a jaunt—of a gay, busy time among milliners and dressmakers—of all the change, variety, and amusement which a visit to London would afford at the dullest time of the year. Such a visit was more to Agatha's taste than wanderings by wood and river, than rides by her lover's side over grass-grown lanes and breezy commons.

To be sure he did not insist on those excur-

sions—he did not even propose them; but as he left all arrangements to her, she might command his attendance at any time.

Hester rode and walked daily—walked more than rode—walked by herself more frequently than with others. Agatha preferred the stately seat in the landau at this time, or as a variety, driving Jane in the pony-cart. Jem's gig, the only vehicle really tolerated by the youngest sister, the eldest could not endure; and it was a proof of her newly-acquired powers of accommodation, that she consented to accept a seat in it once when it was going to Lutteridge, and she was eager to see Simon about the London visit.

"Agatha must have a barouche," said Constance to her brother-in-law, one day. "You cannot allow her to go about in the old carriage. She ought to have a good-sized barouche and a pony-phaeton like mine." Her own phaeton and ponies, he must be given to understand, went with their mistress, and were no part of the Lutteridge stables, long as they had harboured there.

"She can have what she wants," answered he, drearily.

"But the order will have to come from you; you must attend to it; you cannot expect your bride to decide on such a point."

"Can you not see that the thing is done, Constance?"

"Certainly." Her eyes sparkled. "I should enjoy choosing them myself of all things; I should have offered to do it before, only I was afraid it might be interfering. I saw such a love of a barouche, Simon——"

"Don't let me hear any more about it. I beg your pardon, but I have no fancy for details. If you will be good enough to get what you think proper, I will pay the bill."

"So nice, so pleasant he always is to deal with!" cried she, afterwards. "Simon never plagues you with wretched economies — with 'don't get this' and 'don't get that,' and 'something else will do.' He just gives leave, in his lordly way, at once and for altogether, and there is an end of it. It makes one easy; and one has some credit in turning a thing out properly. I know you will be pleased, Agatha." The eulogium was for Agatha's benefit. "I have got free permission to exercise my own taste; he thinks I have had more experience than

he has, and so the whole business is made over to me."

Agatha expressed properly her sense of its being in good hands.

"Well, yes," said Constance, "I do know a little about a carriage, if I have to take the horses on trust. I detest a country-built, lumbering concern, and you will see that I know the right sort of thing to have. As to the horses, luckily ours at Lutteridge are all that any one can wish—Simon has taken care of that—so there will be no additions needed to them. Only a pair of ponies, and those are easily got. But tell me, Agatha, is it true that you and my aunt are going to town with Jane? I hear a rumour to that effect."

Agatha explained.

"A very good plan," said Constance, glad of her month's respite. "And who knows, if all goes on well, but what Jane may be able to be down for the wedding herself?"

"That is what we hope, but we do not let her set her heart upon it. She is charmed about our going, and we think it so kind of Simon not to mind——"

"Oh, he does not care a straw. I beg your

pardon, of course he does—how foolish of me!—but what I mean is, that I believe he is secretly yearning after the splendid snipe-shooting in Ireland; for no sooner did he give me the somewhat vague information that you were going away, than he followed it up by another to the effect that he was. Did he tell you?"

He had; and Agatha smiled proudly.

"You are quite vain of that, I suppose," said Constance. "You think that he will not remain here a day behind you! No doubt you are right. Now, Agatha," emphatically, "listen to me: it is going to be a hard winter; all weather-prophets say so; get *fur*. Whatever else you don't get, get fur. A cloak, and a jacket with good deep trimming, and a hat to match; and oh, Agatha, I saw such a charming driving pelisse the other day! I thought of you immediately."

"Did you, indeed?" said Agatha, gratefully. "Thank you, Constance; you must tell me some good places to go to for such things. You are a great shopper, and we know so little about it."

"I will post you up. I will think it over before you go, now that I know you are actually

going, and then write down the addresses. When do you mean to come home again?"

Simon had asked the same question, and had been told at first that a fortnight was the proposed duration of their visit, but by-and-by it began to extend itself. It might be a day or two more. A fortnight would hardly suffice for all that had to be done. It might even be three weeks.

"We will not stay longer than we can help," said Agatha; "and when we return, Hester is to go up."

"Is she?" said he. "That is a good thought."

"Yes; but I am afraid poor Hetty will have a dull time first. Jane wanted her to come with us, but we could not all leave papa. Jem and Hetty are to be kept in charge, and Jem is to go with her to town afterwards."

Jem and Hetty to be left in charge! What a vision! He was shocked at the wild throb of his pulse, the sudden leap of his heart. Woodland strolls, chance meetings, rows on the river, twilight talks in the drawing-room, might all have been meant once by Jem and Hetty left in charge. For one bright moment the fair mirage floated before his eyes, and then he meekly looked aside.

Agatha was still talking. "I will write to you," she said, "as often as I can conveniently. You will not be exorbitant in your demands, I am sure, for you know there will be so much to do."

"Certainly. Do not think of troubling yourself about me. I shall be quite content with hearing only now and then."

"You will be here?" This was before she had heard of his departure.

"No; that I will not!" She looked at him, puzzled by his tone. "I will on no account stay here," he added, abruptly; then seeing her surprise, attempted a hasty explanation. "I have some friends in Ireland, who have often asked me over; indeed I heard from them only the other day, inviting me to come for the snipe season; it will be an excellent opportunity for trying my hand at it. I shall go to them at once—on the day you leave, and will stay until your return. Don't hurry; you will have a pleasant trip, and Jane deserves some of your company now, for," with a faint smile, "she will not have much of it by-and-by."

"He was so good," said Agatha, when she announced her success at home. "He seemed

quite pleased that Jane should have us. And he will go away himself while we are absent; it is a good opportunity, he says, for him to pay a visit to some friends." She was charmed with his accommodation—his readiness to oblige.

At the station she again warned him not to expect a vehement correspondence. She was in high spirits, full of lively anticipations, and more occupied in attending to Jane's comfort than in bidding Simon farewell. He had come, as in duty bound, to see them off.

"By the way," said Agatha, at the last moment, "where am I to write to? You have given me no address."

He wrote it down for her. "It is a wild, out-of-the-way region, Agatha, and I shall often be away for days on shooting excursions. Don't be—don't trouble yourself to write above once or twice. Probably there is not a post above once a-week or so. I shall know you are all well, unless I hear to the contrary."

"Very thoughtful," said Lady Manners to herself, overhearing the words. "But all the same, at such a moment, I would rather have had him thoughtless."

"That will suit me exactly," Agatha was say-

ing aloud. "Then I shall not feel tied down to a *regular* letter. I don't mean, of course, Simon, that I shall not like to write sometimes, only that I know how busy we shall be—we shall be running about from morning till night, and there will be the home letters to be attended to as well. So I shall just send you a line when I can, and you must do the same to me. Mind I am not going to be a tax on you, either. I shall only expect a word now and again."

"Certainly," thought Lady Manners again, "this thoughtfulness is bewildering!"

Herbert was hovering over his Jane as if he could not do, say, bustle enough for her. None but he should arrange her shawl, his own portmanteau should be her footstool; and he had her bag on his knee, and her hand in his, as he sat by her side. A family saloon had been engaged for them by him beforehand, and he had arranged it comfortably for all before they came, having insisted on walking down, lest he should overcrowd the carriage.

Looking from him to her nephew, who stood taciturn and grimly courteous on the platform, the contrast struck Lady Manners, and sent a chill to her heart. There was no mistake about

it, the set look on Simon's face bespoke rather endurance than contentment; and though any small services which fell to his lot were instantly and carefully attended to, he certainly did not look about in search of them. Had he seemed engrossed by the separation about to take place, taken up in making his farewells, all would have been forgiven; but he kept his stiff attitude—"cold as a stone," she muttered to herself—to the last, and it seemed a relief when the guard's "Take your seats, please," drove him to close the scene abruptly.

He and Hester fell back from the carriage-door simultaneously.

It was the thought of this moment which had in fact occupied Simon's attention to the exclusion of what was passing around him. He had not expected that she would be there; he had meant to have concerned himself entirely with the comfort of the travellers, and to have seen them off, and looked his reprieve in the face with a clear conscience—but Hester's presence threw him out. She had come down, for her part, without much minding whether he were there or not—too much accustomed now to seeing him at all times and places to make much

account of any particular meeting. She certainly did wish to see the last of Jane, and to her mother's "Come with us," she had returned a ready assent; for such a trifle, her father and brother could not, of course, have been expected to break into a good pheasant day. Accordingly, with the exception of those who were going, Simon and Hester were the only people at the station. As he raised his hat, and she waved her hand, and the train moved off, they stood side by side, and even when their own particular window was merged in the general window-line, they remained for a few seconds as they were.

For the first time she realised that she had never till now been alone with him since his engagement. He had thought of this, but she had not. It had filled his mind at a time when other cares should have engrossed him, but he reaped the benefit now; he could turn to her, after that momentary pause, and say, steadily, "They are off in good time. Now how do you go back?"

"In the carriage. It is waiting."

"Go to Lutteridge, and see Constance. She is being left behind too, for I am off by the next train."

"Very well," said Hester. "I shall be glad to go, for I am to be alone this whole day long. Papa and Jem are not to be in till dinner-time."

"Ah! Good-bye."

No word of sympathy, no condolence nor look of commiseration. But then this was what he thought: to have gone home with her himself, to have stayed with her for a brief hour, basked in the sunshine of her presence, for once—just for once,—to have been alone with that dear face, with that sweet voice, none by to watch, or interfere—the moment all his own,—and then to have returned to his duty with a braver heart,—might it not have been possible, permissible? Conscience said "No," and chained his faltering tongue.

He durst not now linger in his adieu, and the indifference of his rejoinder to her unconscious plaint sent her off more quickly than she might otherwise have gone. This was satisfactory. He walked by her side to the carriage, helped her in, closed the door, and stood back without a word; he forgot that he ought to have taken her hand. She nodded; he bowed ceremoniously, turned on his heel, and had re-

entered the station ere her horses had done prancing at the start. Little did either think under what circumstances they were next to meet!

Jane's baby was born on the eighth of the month, and all were made happy by hearing of the welldoing of the mother and child.

Who now so joyful and important as the newly-made grandmother? Daily her pleasant duties recommenced: there was baby to see washed and dressed; nurse to be confidential with; Jane to be admonished, cosseted, amused, fed with dainties, and guarded with rigour; Agatha to be driven with, shopped with, visited with. Every day brought its fresh stores of millinery and wedding toys, and every evening its despatches from Wancote. "We take our evenings quietly," wrote Lady Manners back. "We do not go out at all, and really we are glad to rest, and have an hour or two for our correspondence. Both mornings and afternoons are fully taken up, for we find it to be as much as we can manage, to compress all we have to do into the next ten days. Agatha is most helpful and considerate; she would go about by herself, only that she thinks that I ought to have the

drive. Hot rooms, you know, I cannot stand; and dear Janie's room is obliged to be kept rather hot, as we must keep out the fog and the raw November air, and have a fire burning night and day. The heavy fogs have once or twice obliged us to stay in the house a whole day, which, as every day is of importance, forces us to work the harder now. Herbert is always at home in the morning, and chats to Jane while we are out, and in the afternoon she has her nap. She is to be allowed to move on to the sofa to-day — a great advance. How thankful we should be to see the dear child brought safely through, and daily gaining strength, — baby such a fine healthy creature—and Herbert all that a husband and father ought to be! He is really beyond praise—so unselfish and cheerful, extremely proud of his son, and attentive to us all, but always making Jane his first thought."

Then followed hopes that all were well at Wancote, and directions on sundry points.

The home news was not quite in the same style. They appeared to live more in the lives of their absentees than in their own daily round. It was very wet, Hester wrote, and her father and Jem did not know what to do with them-

selves, and really there was nothing of any sort to write about. The post was the main event of their day, especially the afternoon post, which brought the London letters. She generally went for them herself, and her father liked them to be read to him again and again during the evening. They had been wondering and guessing what the baby's name would be. No one had said whether it had fair hair or dark. As Agatha—the godmother—would be unable to stay for the christening, would Jane allow her, Hester, to hold the child? Jem wanted to know if his strap was safe, and papa was anxious to hear when they were coming back.

Letters being so highly appreciated, Lady Manners was restless if a day passed and the recipients did not hear; the good-natured Herbert was even pressed into the service, and Agatha wrote thrice to Wancote for every letter she sent Simon.

But the best scribe was Lady Manners herself; she was an excellent correspondent, and enjoyed making her own graphic statements. She kept the three left behind posted up in all that went on from day to day, wanting no thanks but such as were implied in the eager

demand for more, and in the reiterated avowal that no interests could compete with theirs.

At length the time, so closely filled up and packed to overflowing on the one hand, and so emptily and wearily dragged through on the other, drew to a close.

The waggonette and the cart were to go to the station, and perhaps it would be as well if no one came down in them, Agatha wrote, as their luggage would be extensive. "We are bringing all that we can with us," she said, "besides such heaps of presents of all sorts and weights, that we shall want all the room. Mamma will not mind coming in the waggonette, for once."

Jem shouted when he saw the carriages arrive, brimming and toppling over with the number of packages. He was as glad as any one to see them come, for now, he said, that it rained day after day, there was no getting out at all, and he had been driven to write to Bertie from sheer want of something to do. "I should not have minded if he had been here," he confided, "though he is so disagreeable sometimes. It has been perfectly beastly since you went away, mamma; Hester is no good at all: I don't know

what has come over her; she is not the same creature that she used to be."

"She looks well," said his mother, evasively.

He was not thinking of her looks; he meant that she had no spirit—no fun in her. "And papa, too," continued Jem; "he has slept from morning to night! He goes to sleep over his paper directly breakfast is over, and we can't get him stirred up to go out, even when the day clears. Old Gregg is the only thing about the place with any warmth in him, and that is only from the amount of beer the old barrel takes in."

"Have you seen much of Constance?"

"Constance has hardly ever been near us; papa says that is the only mercy we have had. She has had a cold that has kept her to the house ever since you have been away, and she has had people with her nearly all the time. Poor fun they must have had! Did Hester not tell you?"

"Yes; but I forgot."

It had been so little to them in the midst of their whirl and tumult, that it had not so much slipped from her memory, as it had never entered her mind.

"You have not seen her at all, then?" said she.

"Hester went over once or twice, but she had nothing to say when she came back. Papa and I asked how she was one day, when we knew she could not see us."

"Oh, Jem!"

"Well, mamma, I tried to get him up to the scratch another time; we were quite close to the house, and I said if he would only wait till I ran up, that I would not ask him even to come to the door! And he declared we should be late for dinner, and made me come on."

"You know, Jem, he does not like to be late for dinner."

"Mamma, it was not five o'clock! But I only meant to show that it was not my fault. I daresay she has thought it shabby of us, and I was rather ashamed; but somehow, every day I hated the thought of going more and more."

It was not in mother's heart to chide so honest a narrator; she could only hope that Constance had not felt the neglect as much as some would, and resolve on driving thither herself as soon as possible.

"And when are Hetty and I to go up?" inquired Jem, next.

"Herbert and Jane wished you to go this week; but I thought that Monday would be soon enough. We shall thus have a few days together, and get settled down before you leave. We shall miss you, of course; but considering your doleful accounts, we ought not to grudge you the little holiday. You will not stay beyond a fortnight, dear; remember the wedding time is drawing on, and we shall want you both to help. I do not think that Jane will be able to come back with you, but we quite hope that she and Herbert will follow on the twelfth. Then she will have a day or two to rest before the fifteenth."

"The fifteenth is the day, then?"

"Yes."

PART VIII.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE HOMEWARD JOURNEY.

"Life's little stage is a small eminence
Inch high the grave above."
—YOUNG.

THE fifteenth was to be the day, and Jem and Hester were to return home the week before, in order to be there before the assembling of the wedding-party. They were to have a full fortnight in town, first; and set off well pleased with the prospect, one cold dark November morning, when even Wancote and its neighbourhood could not afford matter for regret in being left behind.

Herbert was at the station to meet them, running alongside their carriage ere the train stopped, and even more unintelligible than usual in the excitement of welcome, and in the necessity for saying all that was in his

heart at once. In all other respects, however, he proved a tower of strength to the helpless and bewildered pair; with the swiftness of a hawk he pounced upon their luggage, impressed a porter into their service, and whirled them into a cab, ere they had half realised what he was about.

They had somehow blundered along so far in safety, although harassed by uncertainty as to the number of their packages and the whereabouts of their carriage; but, above all, the ever-recurring demand for tickets, with its contingent doubt as to whose possession they were in, made it an infinite relief when they were at last given up—though even then, had Captain Cotterill not taken the kindly precaution of being at the station, it is doubtful when he would have seen them in Chesham Place.

Once there, however, and all anxieties thrown aside, the country mice abandoned themselves to enjoyment. Hester, more cheerful than she had been for weeks, in the occupation of tending her sister and caressing her nephew, spent most of her time between the cradle and Jane's sofa. Jane was now in the drawing-room of an afternoon; and the pretty room, with its bright fire,

and the nosegay always fresh, which it was Herbert's care to supply from time to time, no matter how far he had to seek it, seemed, in Hester's eyes, a very haven of rest and peace. Her mother had rightly divined that she would find a healing medicine for a wound that still at times woke up and smarted, in the gentle ministrations of that peaceful chamber. It had been Lady Manners's own idea—and it had not been carried out, she had not abandoned herself to another fortnight without the two most congenial to her, without some measure of self-sacrifice.

But she felt that the visit was doing its work. The time, Hetty wrote, went by as rapidly with her and Jem, as it had done with the others before them. Herbert was taking them to see the sights; and as they had no tiresome calls to make, and only her bridesmaid's dress to try on, they had plenty of time for going to all sorts of nice places. The weather was the only drawback.

At the close of their visit, indeed, it became so bad, so cold and wintry, and the light grew so short, that one day longer had to be granted, since the crowning expedition on which the hearts of both were set, had been obliged to be deferred in consequence of a snowstorm.

Snow so early in the season was not likely to last, and all were surprised as well as disappointed when the next day—the extra day which had been permitted at their request—still saw its continuance. Even on the afternoon of their departure—for they were not to leave till two o'clock—there was no sign of a break in the clouds; nay, the storm seemed to have gathered more power—to have set in more fixedly than before. It did not matter now, they thought; hot-water pans, rugs, and fur would make the travellers all right when once off, and they had only a single change to make; having got to the station without wetting their feet, they had nothing further to fear.

It would not have done for Jane, however; and they congratulated themselves and each other on her being safe within doors, Herbert meanwhile, as he stood shuddering, stamping, and smiling at the carriage-door, hoping volubly that the snow would have run itself out, that the air would be warmer, and that it would be pleasanter every way, before the twelfth. Otherwise he really could not answer for their coming.

Jane would not give up the idea, however; Agatha's wedding was all in her thoughts now.

The new gown and bonnet, too, were ready, as no doubt Hester knew; but if it should turn out to be a day like this! He was still expatiating upon the subject when he was ordered off the step.

"He is really a husband to be proud of," cried Hester, laughing. "It is Jane, Jane, Jane, with him from morning till night. She is the beginning, middle, and end of his thoughts — no, I ought not to say end, for that is the best of Herbert; though he begins with Jane, he does not end with her. His thoughts extend to other objects in the background. He only makes his wife first, his baby second, and the rest of the world third. Good little man, he himself is nowhere. Who would have believed that when we all laughed at him at Lutteridge, and held up our hands on hearing that he was to be our brother-in-law, that Herbert would have turned out so well? Why, we are all quite fond of him now! I know there are very few people I like so much. I know he is the very man for Jane, —and yet how vexed I was with her for accepting him! Were you not too, Jem?"

"Oh, I don't know," said he. "I don't think I was. Of course she knew what she was about, and I never disliked him."

"You never dislike anybody. I never saw the person yet, you had not some good word to say for."

"Oh, bosh!"

"It is not 'bosh' at all. Every one remembers that you were the only one who did stick up for Herbert. You were his friend from the first. Well, at least I can say no more than that I was wrong, and you were right."

"How awfully good he was to us!"

"And did you see my pin? He has given me such a pin for fastening my shawl. The same as the one he gave Jane. I was admiring it the other day—of course I should never have said a word, if I had dreamed of his doing such a thing—I did not even know that he had given it!—and he went straight to the jeweller's and ordered one for me! It came this afternoon, just as we were starting; he kept running backwards and forwards at every door-bell, and I was thinking him so tiresome, and wishing that he would sit still and let us have our last words in peace, when in he came with his kind face beaming all over, and the pin in his hand! It ought to have arrived last night; and think of his going off all the way to Bond Street this

morning, in that horrible sleety drizzle, to see after it! Do you remember our wondering why he could not stay for once at home, and your saying that he must be always 'on the go?'"

"Was that it, really?"

"Yes. Jane told me, when I went to her room afterwards; we should never have heard a word of it from *him*. I think she guessed what we had been thinking."

"It was a beastly shame of us."

"We could not tell, but still I suppose it was. I shall never, never call Herbert a fidget again; a man who fidgets for other people deserves a better name."

"I don't know about a name," said matter-of-fact Jem. "I don't see that a name matters, but he is as good a fellow as ever lived, and I am going to show him the way to cast conical bullets at the wedding."

"At the wedding!"

"Yes. When he comes to the wedding; we can do it after the people go. Do you remember that afternoon you were sitting with me in the gun-room when Simon came in? I was casting conical bullets then."

"Yes," said Hester, with a sudden collapse of life.

"By the way," said Jem, "I wonder if Simon is come back yet?"

"No, he is not."

"How do you know?"

"Agatha says so."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know; she did not say. He is coming back this week."

"Perhaps he is in our train—who knows? I shall look out for him when we stop next."

"Jem!" Hester laughed. "He is not even coming our way," she added. "At least if he comes straight from Ireland he would only join us——"

"At that place where we change."

"No, he does not, Jem. I know perfectly well. His train meets the London one there—at Fixall; but it is the early London train—the one that mamma wanted us to catch—the one that left at ten."

"How can I understand all that?"

"And what does it matter?"

"But, look here, why did we not come by that

train? It would have been better. We should have got in before dark."

"We did not know it was going to be like this, and I wished to wait, and you said you did not mind."

"Neither I did; but I say, Hester, we are in for it! How it does snow! The guard says there has been a heavy fall in the north."

Every wayside station now showed its complement of snow-flecked shivering passengers, red-faced, watery-eyed porters, luggage bespattered with flakes ere it could be wheeled under cover. Every opening door let in a raw gust of the outer air, which made those within, fevered in the sickly atmosphere, shudder at the contact.

"This is horrible," muttered Jem, at last.

"You had better get out and go in a smoking-carriage," suggested his sister.

"Mamma said I was not to leave you."

"Unless we knew there were nice, quiet-looking people going the whole way," she bent forward, and spoke in his ear. "This clergyman and his wife are going to Fixall; they showed their tickets just now."

"Are they? Then I can go, can I?"

"If you get in again at Fixall."

"Oh, of course; but you are sure it is all right,—that mamma would not mind?"

"No, not in the least. But don't stay away after Fixall, Jem, and do look well at the carriage to know it again, for it is getting dark, and you might miss it."

"Not in Fixall Station. It will be all lit up; but any way I shall know, because it is the last carriage. I found that out before. I'll tell you what I'll do, Hetty," he subjoined, eagerly, "I'll go on the engine. It is dark enough for that now, and I can get on at the next station, and get off at Fixall. I won't be away above an hour, and I have such a headache. It is these hot-water things that give it me; they always make me feel sick. If I could just have a good breath of air, and a roast at the engine fire, I should be all right again."

He was now all excitement to know when he could get out; and when, after an interval of ten or fifteen minutes, the stoppage came, he had thrown his plaid across her knees, and was down the step, ere the train had fairly pulled up.

Hester threw back the extra covering impatiently. She was hot enough—too hot as it was.

Her head ached as well as his, and she had been forced to take off her hat, and rest it on her hands.

More than her head was aching—her heart was beginning to beat sorrowfully likewise. To what was she now returning? To another week of restraint, repression, struggle for a fair appearance; to constant company, mirth, and festivity,—all uncongenial at such a moment. Jane's gala, little as she had been in the mood for it then, would now in its repetition be soul-sickening.

Then, true, there had been a cloud between her and Simon, but she did not realise at the time how many little rifts in the cloud had shown the blue sky beyond, how often she had allowed hope to illumine its edge, nor how many times she had told herself that a word from him might scatter it to the winds.

She had thought herself unhappy then; and now, looking back, she could but wonder what had made her so. It seemed all strange, incomprehensible. It had certainly at that time been difficult to know how to meet him, been harassing—or she had fancied she thought it so—to have him cross her path; but still she had not

been utterly cast down. Now, when it cost her no throes to be in his presence, no revulsion of feeling to escape from it, she was crushed; she had overcome, and life was infinitely less alluring than when she had been engaged in the warfare. She had escaped from the rugged path beset with pitfalls, to the smooth, monotonous, dreary level of the desert; and its arid wastes were more intolerable than the roughest mountain-track.

She had nothing to gain and nothing to lose by a meeting with her cousin now. She had accustomed herself to the daily sight of him, until it had ceased to affect her. She was, she thus concluded, whole of her disease, cured of her distemper.

Except when some sudden mention of his name sent a stab to her heart, she did not suspect that so much as a plague-spot still lingered; but she owned in the secret recesses of her heart that with the sense of safety had come a tameness, a barrenness, a void, which took its charm from every prospect.

Jem's remark about the afternoon in the gun-room had made her veins tingle. How vividly it rose before her as he spoke! It had been

the last happy half-hour she had ever spent in Simon's presence, and during it she had almost learned to believe that all happiness was in store. Now again she saw the scene, as Jem's departure left her undisturbed to muse and meditate. Gazing out upon the snowy landscapes as they came and went, she beheld once more her cousin's smile, his look bent on her, the glow of tenderness, which at the moment she had almost mistaken for passion. It was that look which Jem had likewise caught, and which had stirred even his obtuse wits to wonder.

Again she felt the silence which had followed so earnest and prolonged a gaze; recollected the interpretation she had put thereon; remembered how his hand had rested on the arm of her chair; how softly, how kindly he had spoken; how disinclined he had been to obey the summons which called them from the room.

"Jem saw it too," she had said to herself, during the few hours which intervened between his departure and the next tidings. "Jem noticed it," she had felt, in her trembling wonder. "He was startled; I know he was. Can we both be deceived?"

But when it was found that they could, she

had only felt that Jem, like herself, must drive the recollection from his memory. She had striven to do so, even when it was hardest, even when his coldness to Agatha, and his too apparent loss of spirits might have been matter for fancy and remembrance to prey upon. It was not that she would not, but that she actually did not, believe herself to be the cause; with watching, prayer, and steadfast resolution she had blotted out the past.

It had not been quickly done. The past—that past to which we refer—had not been a brief episode, unconnected either with life to come or life gone. It had not belonged, as some such passing experiences do, to a fortnight or a month, spent away from home, among strangers, having nothing in common with what now lay before her. Nor had it even been a feature of a certain year—a special season fraught with events foreign to all ordinary thoughts and habits. No; it was into the daily, hourly life that this sorrow had entered. It was into their ordinary, tranquil round of duties and pleasures, that this stranger, who was yet a near kinsman, had been admitted. Liberty to come and go as he pleased, close contiguity of residence, hospitality on the one

side and solitude on the other, had all conspired to draw him more and more into the bosom of the family. He had become entwined with every idea; he was included in every project; in any of the rooms he might be met; at any turn of the paths his figure might be seen. He sat opposite to them in the village church—the two great pews facing each other in the chancel—and though he might come in by his own entrance-gate, he never failed to follow them out through theirs. So entirely was he one of themselves that he might walk with them to their door, and pass on to his own, though a meal were on the table, if he chose.

All this was still going on—would go on in all probability to the end of his days.

Instead of any event occurring gently to estrange the families, any interests arising which would gradually have stolen in to draw each from each, the marriage which was to take place the next week would not only bind them more firmly than ever to each other, but would make such separate interests impossible.

"It seems years since we heard that Simon was coming home, and wondered what we were to call him," mused Hester; "and it is not

eighteen months since Constance came to tell the news, and railed at us for being so indifferent! I can hardly remember how we felt before he came, and how we got through the days. It must have been very stupid, and yet I don't recollect that it was stupid. I suppose we were happy enough. We used to be sent for to Lutteridge—I especially—because Agatha and Jane would not go. How lucky I thought that was for me, when I was fetched *that* time! Will Simon tell Agatha about my crying in the schoolroom, and the rest of it? I don't think he will, even if he has not forgotten, which I daresay he has by this time. How could I have been so vain, so foolish afterwards, when even Constance saw from the first that he meant nothing? Jem thought he did, but Jem counts for nobody. I wonder, by the way, if Jem has not seen something in me lately that makes him catch himself up whenever he mentions Simon's name; I am half afraid he has. To-day I am sure he was only talking on about the trains, because he fancied he had said something that he ought not. Why, the Irish mail must have passed hours ago!"

By this time the snow had ceased, but the

country they traversed became whiter and whiter as the train wended its way northward. Lamps were put into the carriages as the light waned; and Hester's fellow-passengers, gladly hailing these, reproduced crumpled newspapers and books, which had been laid down for the last half-hour, during which it had been too dark to read. Herbert's care for his travellers had extended even to 'Punch,' 'Fun,' and 'Judy,' all of which were now at Hester's disposal, since Jem had abandoned them; and a meek-faced spinster opposite, not having been equally well provided for, was timidly proffered one, whilst the others Hester set herself resolutely to laugh through; she would think no longer.

Soon she became amused, then hungry, then cold, then unutterably wearied and indignant with Jem for enjoying himself, as she knew he was doing, on the engine. Why should he have the nice, fresh, roaring fire and the comfortable quarters there, while she had to pine in this close and yet chilly atmosphere? Why should he enjoy the genial society of a pleasant engine-driver and stoker — he had assured her these were invariably the best of

company—while she had such unapproachable, uninteresting fellow-passengers? She laughed at herself, and heartily wished she was with him.

It was now half-past six, and they were due at Fixall at seven. They had been four hours on the way, and four such hours had seldom been endured. Even the impervious motionless traveller on the middle seat grunted a remark to the clergyman's wife on its being unpleasant for travelling.

She thought it not so cold as it had been the day before.

Hot-water pans and railway wrappers kept her warm, he imagined; it was cold enough outside.

The train was a rough one, and he had to repeat his words; while her answer was lost altogether.

"Shocking line this," Hester caught next. "On one I was travelling along the other day, you could read, ay, and write comfortably. A little girl was working the whole way!"

"Was what?"

"Working."

"Walking?" said the lady.

It was plain that the dialogue had better be

suspended, since they could neither hear each other nor make themselves heard. Such a jolting, thumping, and shaking, they had never before experienced.

"We shall be shaken to bits," cried the gentleman, next.

"I suspect," observed the clergyman, looking up from the paper he could no longer read with comfort, "that we are not properly coupled up. We must speak to the guard at the next station."

The word "station" rang with a shout and a roar through Hester's ears, the carriage gave a bound forward, and all in a second of time the dark cushioned wall at her side turned and struck her.

Insensible, but free from hurt, she fell backwards, and knew no more. The train had run off the rails in the snow.

CHAPTER XXX.

A GREAT TEMPTATION.

"For this passion, Love, hath his floods in the very times of weakness, which are great prosperity, and great adversity."—BACON.

THE cold air blowing keenly on her face brought Hester to herself.

She was being carried, or lifted from one arm to another, and as consciousness returned, she heard the words, "She's not gone, anyhow," uttered in a gruff, unknown voice, close to her ear.

She tried to speak, think where she was, and recollect what had happened. All seemed marvellously still, or else she was deafened by a hissing noise in her head, by a whirling in her brain, which rendered outer sounds inaudible. Something cold and wet touched her; she had been laid on the snowy bank.

"Be you hurt, Miss?" The same person who

had before spoken was apparently still by her side, and the "Where?" which followed ere she could reply, appeared to take it for granted that her silence meant she had. It was uttered with genuine anxiety and alertness, showing that it was no idle nor merely friendly inquiry, but one to which an immediate answer was imperative.

Hester sat up and tried to think. Was she hurt? She could not feel sure.

"Try to stand, Miss," suggested the official, promptly. He held out his hand, assisting her as he spoke, and she found herself able to do so. "Now then, do you feel any hurt anywhere?"

"No—o. I don't think I do."

"No bones broken? Nothing wrong in your back, or your shoulder, or your arms?" touching each as he spoke. But she did not wince. "We are sending off the wounded as soon as may be; if there's nothing the matter with you, Miss, I must go forward again. The passengers is all up there," he added—"those as is unhurt, at least."

"What has happened?" cried Hester, finding voice at last. "I don't understand. What has taken place?"

"Accident. Ran off the line some half an hour ago," replied the man, succinctly.

"How? How long ago? Did you say half an hour?"

"Half an hour? Well, nearly that. Being in the last compartment we have only got to you now, Miss; and I can't stay longer. Well, Joe, any chance there? Eh, poor chap!"

It was Hester's fellow-traveller who was being carried past—the one who had sat in the middle seat opposite her, and had discoursed with the clergyman's wife on the roughness of the line. She followed him with her eyes, wondering in a dim way why he was not set down on the snow as she had been—why he was taken away into the darkness, the lanterns of those about him only showing the way they had gone. "That's the last of them, is it?" she heard her companion's voice inquire, as he too followed, and the *cortège* tramped heavily forward.

The last of them? She looked round for the mild elderly woman, and the married pair who had occupied the other seats.

All had gone—vanished into the night. No one remained near; even the voices which sounded to and fro, and the movement of groups

passing up and down among the masses of black shadow by the side of the line, were at a distance. The moon was rising, veiled in mist, and she could, as she grew accustomed to the faint and partial light, just perceive that they were in a cutting, with a high embankment on either side. Evidently the snow had accumulated here until it became an actual drift: the amount which had fallen during the past two days, the partial thaw, and the renewal of frost that morning, had worked the mischief.

Bit by bit Hester thought it out. The first idea that occurred to her confused brain, was a triumphant sense of satisfaction in having such a catastrophe to tell Herbert of; Herbert having gone into fits that morning over his sister-in-law's suggestion that travelling under such conditions might be attended with danger. "I shall have the laugh against him now," thought she, well pleased. "Both he and Jem—— *Jem*—where is Jem? Why has he never come to look for me? All this time I have forgotten Jem!"

"All this time" was comprehended in the few brief minutes which had elapsed since the men left her. It seemed an age. She sprang

forward, herself again, and with all her wits about her. Poor Jem would be in a great state of mind if he could not find his sister; and since she was so far back, at the very end of the train —she remembered his saying what a long train it was too—he might have to examine, question, scrutinise every person he came across, till she appeared. Difficult as it was to make her way along the steep, snow-laden bank, now piled up with *débris*, her path became more and more blocked as she went further forward. Smouldering pieces of wood and iron, still fizzing and sputtering in the snow, warned her of their presence here and there, but for the most part the light and heat of both had been quenched, and she had not that danger to avoid.

Only once she passed a figure like herself, unbefriended and forsaken, stumbling to the front. All the rest—all who could go, were already there, where the great crash had taken place; the end of the train having been by no means so much broken and shattered as the first carriages were. Round them, as Hester's eyes became accustomed to the feeble light, she could discern a concourse of people gathered, moving hither and thither amidst the vast heaps of shapeless rubbish.

Just as she reached the spot, she overtook a group of three, the centre one being supported by his companions. She heard suppressed groans as she hurried past to find Jem.

Of course she knew that he was looking for her, and she could tell with what a troubled anxious face the search would be made. It was grievous to think he should have been left to look in vain for so long, but she could not help it—she could not find him. "Jem," she called aloud, whenever a figure resembling his, in any way, came near; she was resolved not to heed whether it turned out to be a stranger or not; she must do something more than just walk about—must make an effort for her brother's sake. Yet after a while, when one and another went by, none answering, and she found herself unattended to and uncared for in this terrible place, night coming on, and no brother found, her courage scarcely sufficed for the trembling word.

Sighs and screams rose now and again from sources unseen; the dead, she gathered, were being parted from the wounded up above the bank, and the latter were being sent on as quickly as possible to where surgical aid could

be procured. It was a casual observation to which she was indebted for such information, and to Hester it seemed as if it could have nothing to do with her; but when the speaker went on to remark that it was just as well the thing had not taken place a week later, when the train would have been twice as full for the Christmas holidays, she turned to listen to him, and in the same instant recognised a stout, elderly man, whom she had seen speaking to her brother at one of the stations.

With a cry she flew to his side, stammering forth inquiries ere he could see who put them.

"Have I seen your brother, Miss?" he echoed, somewhat taken aback, for the question was an awkward one. "Well, no; I can't say I have, if you mean a young, fair-haired gentleman with a moustache, and a slouch-cap on his head——"

"Yes!" cried Hester — "yes; that is he! That is Jem! Oh!" she exclaimed, feeling as if her anxieties were ended, "you will know where he is. He is looking for me, and we have missed each other. I can't tell where to go, or how to find him; can you help me?"

"Certainly." But he spoke with a reluctance that would have been plain to any one but a petitioner who took compliance for granted.

"But," he added immediately, relieved, "here comes the guard; he is your man; he is the person to apply to. Guard,"—with a light touch of warning on his arm; he could not wink, it was too dark,—"here is a young lady who is trying to find her brother—a tall, fair young gentleman with a moustache. Can you give her any idea of his whereabouts? Do you think"—with another pressure—"that he can have gone up with the wounded? To look after them, eh?"

"Likely enough, Miss." The guard glanced down on the imploring face upturned to his. "Was he—ah—in one of the front carriages, Miss?"

"He was on the engine," said Hetty, simply.

"Oh, Lord!"

"What did you say, please?"

"I'll go and look," ran on the man, hastily. "You see all of those as was on the engine have —um—*gone on.* You may not find him yet, for a bit. Are you looking after this young lady, sir?—Better take her up to the cottages," making off as he spoke.

"I—I am afraid I must really wait to see after some things here," asserted the passenger, with equal promptitude. "But he is quite right. The best thing you can do now is to follow those

people," pointing to some ascending the bank; "they are going across the fields to some farm, or cottage, where we are to wait till we can be sent on by the road. The line is fairly blocked for the present."

"But my brother is searching for me," answered Hester, possessed but of the one idea; "he will be terribly anxious if he cannot find me—if he comes here, and I am away."

"He may—he *may* have gone up yonder himself."

"He would never do that. He would never go without me—without even looking for me. I must go back along the line again."

"Ay, do," said he, glad to be rid of her. "But when you have been, take my advice and make for the cottages. As soon as you are up the bank, you can see the way as plain as a pikestaff. I was up myself a few minutes ago, and you can't go wrong. Some white houses at the end of the field."

She turned away. The line, except at the point where she had been standing, was now all but deserted, since nothing could be done towards clearing it till the workmen who had been telegraphed for arrived. The carriages at the hinder part of the train appeared to have

escaped with comparatively slight damage, and it struck Hester for the first time, how great was her cause for thankfulness that she had been in one of them. They lay on their sides but little injured, while the front ones were smashed to atoms. The next moment a great horror and trembling seized the forlorn creature, for she had seen what this comparison also led to. Those foremost carriages? What of their occupants? What of the engine, the bursting of whose boiler had shivered it to pieces? What of the men on it? What of Jem?

With a cry that rang far and wide through the silent night, she rushed onwards. Feeble, bewildered, agonised, and helpless, blinded and tottering she strove to reach the front again, but strength failed, her limbs gave way, and she sank down upon the snow.

A man approached; would he be selfish and cruel as her fellow-passenger had been? Or was it the guard coming to announce that her brother had been found?

"Here!" she cried, choking down her sobs. "Here! Guard, I am here!"

The figure stopped.

"Have you found him?" said the girl, hoarsely.

"Whom? Found whom?" said the man, coming nearer. He did not know her voice, it was so changed.

"Jem. My brother. I told you about him; do you not remember? Have you seen him? He—O Jem, Jem!——"

"My little Hester!"

She was lifted and carried along the line. "Is she hurt?" inquired several, whom they passed. "Is it some one who has been overlooked?"

"The wounded have been taken up long ago," announced an official, bustling up. "How comes the lady to have been left so long?"

"She is not hurt, I think," replied Colonel Lutteridge, for it was he who held the inanimate form in his arms. "A lantern here, will you? I think it is only a faint."

"A faint, eh?"

"Brandy—quick! She is cold all over. It is in my pocket."

"The young lady who was looking for her brother," observed the burly passenger, who had put her aside previously. "Fainting is the best thing she could do, I should say. Don't bring her round too quickly; he was on the engine."

"Hush!"

"Is she coming to?" inquired the guard, holding the brandy, and peering kindly into the unconscious face. "Poor thing!"

"How in the world did I not find her before?" said Simon. "I have been searching everywhere for her, but I was told that all the passengers, whether wounded or not, had left the line long ago. I knew she was not killed," he added, hastily.

"She has been running up and down quite wild-like, calling on her brother, and asking all of us after him," said a porter who had joined the party; they, and a few others who were inspecting and superintending some arrangements, being all who were now left on the scene. "I heard she was in the last compartment, and there was one dead, and two badly hurt, taken from it. When they found Miss was all right, they left her to find her own way up."

"Is there anything else you would like me to get, sir?" The guard, whose conscience now pricked him for the deaf ear he had turned before, could not be deferential enough to Colonel Lutteridge.

"She will want nothing more at present, thank you."

"I should take her up to the cottages, if I were you," suggested the stout bystander, still harping on the one theme. "It is growing stupid here; I shall go up soon myself. Can I give you any assistance?"

"Thanks. No."

"You must take care not to get left behind, sir."

"No fear. I understand they will not be able to find means of conveyance for us under two hours at least. We are in the heart of the country, and the lanes are deep in snow."

"By George! But we shall get on to-night, I suppose?"

"I hope so. They are doing all they can."

"I say, porter, how far are we from the nearest station?" The speaker turned away just as Simon, bending over his unconscious burden, saw that she had opened her eyes. Whether that moment were most bitter or most sweet, he scarcely knew; lost in thought for her, he did not realise the danger of his own position—remembered only that he was now her sole protector, and that it was his privilege alone to soothe the anguish he must awaken.

He met her wandering gaze unflinchingly;

and when the quivering lips parted into the one word they had learnt, as it were, by rote, the brain scarcely following the sound, he answered, quietly, "He is at peace."

"Jem? Have you seen Jem? Have you met my brother? He is looking for me," began Hester, wildly. "He has been so long in coming, and he will not know where I am. Tell me where he is? Have you seen him?"

"Yes."

She sprang up, more collected now. "Where is he? Oh, I knew that he would come at last. Let me go to him; he will wonder where I am —he will be miserable——"

"No, he is not miserable; he is quite happy." Still the clouded brain passed by the words, but Hester, trembling, turned her head and looked into the speaker's face.

"How are you here?" she exclaimed; without surprise, however,—accepting her cousin's unexpected presence as if in a dream, when all things are natural. "When did you come? I was with Jem——"

"Dear Hester," he said, slowly, "try to understand. I have found you, and will take care of you now. I will not leave you till I have

seen you safe in your home. Are you listening? Do you take in what I am saying?"

"Yes, now; I think I do. But it was so awful! so horrible!" She shuddered.

"There was nothing awful or horrible about dear Jem," said Simon, going on in a steady, unmoved voice. "He lay in my arms as you do now, Hetty. He was not touched outwardly, but he knew that his release had come. I would have brought you to him if I could, but he had only a few minutes, and I could not find you."

"How? Where?" she moaned.

"Almost immediately after the crash came, I got out uninjured, and ran to the front, for I knew you were here, having kept out of your—ah"—he bit his lip. "Where was I? Oh, I ran forward, for I thought you two were in one of the first carriages. I don't know how I came to mistake; but it was a good thing I did, for I found him at once. He knew me, but he could not speak."

"Yes. Well?"

"He was quite conscious to the last. I am sure of that. I think he wanted to say something, and was not able; but I believe

he understood who I was, he looked at me so earnestly."

"And then?" sobbed Hester. She was weeping now.

"Then he just sank back and died. It was not more than a few minutes in all, before he was gone. I should have been too late if I had not found him, as I did, at once. His spirit passed away without pain or fear. Hester, we know he had no cause to fear; we should be thankful he was spared the pain."

"Yes—yes."

"You are glad that I was there?"

"Oh, so glad! So very, very glad!"

"He was not alone, you see, and he knew that I would take care of you—if you were still living. I think," said Simon, with a look of awe, "that he had scarcely realised what was passing, ere he was summoned to the presence of his God."

"I could not be absolutely sure that it was the end," he continued, presently. "So I carried him, with the help of another man, up the bank, and we had him attended to immediately, but there was nothing to be done. He had breathed his last at the time I thought. Down here,

Hester, where we are now. . . . Then," pursued the narrator, after a while, "I came off in search of you. Dear, it was terrible to be so long—even with him—without knowing how or where I might find his sister. As to what had really befallen you, I was in doubt till I found you on the bank. When I came down first, all was hubbub and confusion: one told me one thing, one another; at last I made out that it was no use attempting to search on my own account, for that all the carriages had been emptied, and that the wounded had been carried up to the cottages above, and the passengers had followed. I ran up, and could find you nowhere! Then"—she felt his arms tighten around her—"I went again among the dead——"

"Was he there?"

"Yes. I kissed his forehead. He was not cold; he hardly seemed as if the breath had left him; he lay with his head upon his arm as though he were asleep—no feature touched, no distortion anywhere."

"Dear, dear Jem!" It was well that she was weeping—that the tears had found their way, even though in floods; it eased the poor over-

wrought brain — saved her from what might have maddened.

"When you were still missing, Hester," continued her cousin, purposely going on with a narration that must have some interest for one so deeply concerned, "I began to fear you might have been overlooked, and might, in spite of all they told me, have been struck, and unable to make yourself heard. I came down again, and just in time. My poor Hester! To find you all alone and friendless in the midst of such a scene! When I heard your voice—your dear voice——" He stopped, mastering his emotion.

"I did not know yours," she said.

"You would hardly have known any one's; you could not have borne much more."

"Was I here?"

"No, not here. You were half-way up the bank, near the end of the train. You were crouching down in the snow. I thought — I can't tell what I thought!"

"I remember nothing. Only I think I was looking for the engine. Did you bring me here?"

"I carried you. And now I am going to carry you up to the cottages, unless you think you can walk, leaning on me. Will you try?"

CHAPTER XXXI.

BY THE SMITHY FIRE.

"Feeling is deep and still; and the word that floats on the surface,
Is as the tossing buoy, that betrays where the anchor lies hidden."
—*Evangeline.*

SUPPORTED by him she staggered to her feet, and with her hand in his, toiled up the ascent.

"You have neither hat nor gloves," he said, suddenly. "Poor child! Out on this bitter night."

"Never mind," she answered; "never mind that."

"But you are wet and chilled through; your hand is as cold as ice. At all events you can be warmed, and have your things dried before we start."

"Start! Where are we to start for? I mean, how are we going on?"

"I believe we are to be sent forward in carts

—for no other means of transit can be had—as far as Fixall, where we shall catch the night mail."

"Must we go in a train again?"

"Yes; we must."

"Is Fixall far from here?"

"About ten miles. It will take us two hours to reach it; but we have abundance of time, for it is not eight o'clock yet, and the mail passes about twelve."

"Not eight o'clock yet!" cried Hester. "Is all the night before us? Oh, what a long night it will be! Is that the cottage? What is that glare of light from?"

"The fire within, I suppose. They must have got a good one."

It was more than a fire — it was a furnace which shed its broad gleam across the snow. It proved to be a blacksmith's forge which was so opportunely near the scene of the disaster, and the smithy fire had been blown up to warm and dry the shivering applicants for shelter. Most of those who had at first come up had now retired to wait in one or other of the annexed dwelling-houses, whose occupants — country people full of excited sympathy—pressed them

to take refuge in. Only a few lingered by the forge, cheered by its glow, and perhaps unwilling to face curiosity and questioning after the scene they had just gone through. They sat about in different parts of the shed, silent, except when addressing a chance remark in subdued tones to a neighbour, and as the two new-comers entered, barely lifted their heads to look round; while in the weird shadows of the background, here and there a form was dimly outlined, motionless and shrinking from observation, the attitude telling its own tale of woe.

Close by the roaring blaze, an empty box, which had been turned upside-down, afforded a seat for Hester; and with the sense of returning warmth and comfort so sorely needed, her tears flowed anew. She had not loosened her hold of Simon's hand; her loneliness, until found, had been so terrible—her helplessness so pitiable, that the fear of being once more abandoned, predominated at the moment over every other feeling.

What if he too should forsake her, as innocently as Jem had done, but with the same dread result? Once lost, she would never be found again. She sickened at the thought; it

prompted a restless anxiety, a breathless tremor at every movement he made, and at length some involuntary gesture led to the disclosure of her apprehensions. "Don't go; don't leave me; oh, don't leave me," she sobbed, no longer able to contain herself, and laying her other hand on the one she held, as though to detain him by force. "If you go, I shall never see you again —you will die—you will die——"

"I was only going to close the door of the shed, Hester."

"Don't go—don't go."

"I won't go." He tried to speak calmly. How hard it was to do so with that weeping form beside him, he only knew.

"Say you won't leave me. Promise."

"I will not leave you. I will not quit your side till I put you into your mother's arms. Could you think that I would let you out of my sight for a moment now?"

"I was so afraid—I did not know—oh, I cannot help it! I cannot help it! Don't be angry with me—don't think me troublesome——"

"Troublesome!"

"I will be quiet—I will be good," gasped Hester, writhing in the effort to control herself.

"I never meant to—be like this. I will be good and quiet," she repeated, scarcely knowing what she said.

"Be neither. Make no effort; no attempt to appear otherwise than as you feel. We suffer together. I would not for worlds that you should find my presence a restraint."

"And you will keep me with you? Only with you? With nobody else? Don't give me up to any one else. Promise, promise."

"I promise," he said, deeply moved. "Do you hear me? I promise."

"You won't let them take me away, and put me with the other people?"

"No one shall take you away. For this once you are mine. Mine!" he added, with a sudden thrill of exultation; "and no one has the right to come between us. Look at me—lean on me; I will be at your side, Hester, whatever we do, and wherever we go. Do you understand? Can you trust me?"

"Yes—yes. How good you are!"

"You are growing warm now, are you not?"

"Quite warm."

"You will not want to change your things—to borrow some dry——"

"No—oh no!" She clutched him suddenly, —so soon alarmed that he had again the task, the dangerous privilege, of allaying her fears.

"What! You don't believe me yet?" he said. "You shall not stir from this spot unless you desire to go yourself. This furnace will suffice for all we want. See, put your feet on that bar—that will rest you, will it not? You are weary, as well as wet. My dear Hester, I hope you will not be ill after this!"

"I don't know." Her tone added, "I don't care."

"Will you have some more brandy? I have not to go for it; it is in my pocket. You have drunk out of the flask already. Jem," he added, softly, "had the first of it."

She shook her head; she did not need brandy, —the glowing forge, the shelter of his presence, and his indulgence to her tears, were all she wanted; Jem's name, so spoken, could not pain.

For nearly an hour they sat thus, conversing at intervals. The rest of the travellers began to grow impatient, no sounds of any kind being as yet audible in the distance; and watches were pulled out and interrogations passed. It

appeared that all the available horses, gigs, and carts in the vicinity had been used to send forward the wounded; and that the waggons, which were to take on the unhurt passengers, had had to be sent some distance for. They might arrive at any moment; but it might still be some time before they came—no one could say.

The night, however, had cleared, and as no more snow was apprehended for the present, it was certain that, unless any unforeseen hindrance occurred, they would reach Fixall in time for the mail. They would even be in good time, since the mail, it was now ascertained, did not pass until a quarter past twelve; two hours would enable them to traverse the distance to the junction, and it was just nine o'clock.

With this assurance from the voluble blacksmith, all had, perforce, to be content. The discussion, however, had roused the groups to interest; they began to look about them, to grow alive to the presence of each other, to be less self-engrossed, as time wore on. Even to Hester retrospect became possible. She began to wonder by what chance her cousin had come to be travelling along their line at this time, when, as they all believed, he was on his way

home from Ireland. Jem's remark had come true, after all. Then it darted through her mind how she had communed with herself as to her brother's surmises upon that other matter, and reflected, with an inward sob, that she would never know now. Next, she fell to idly wondering what he had thought when he had seen their cousin; more tears fell, and a calm succeeded.

"How were you here at all?" at last she whispered, the silence having been unbroken for some time.

"How was I in the train?"

"Yes."

"I was coming from London, as you were."

"But I thought that you had been in Ireland. I did not know you had been in London."

"I went there a few days ago. I had"—he sighed—"to make some necessary arrangements. Did Agatha not tell you?"

"She said you were coming home to-day; she did not say from where."

He sighed again, and did not renew the subject. It was evident that with him, too, the past and future were beginning to reassert their rights, — till now, both had lived only in the present.

"Hester," he said, suddenly rousing himself, "one word now, my dear sister. You are to be my sister so very soon, you know, that you must let me call you so to-night. These people about us have, up to this time, been so much taken up with themselves, that they have not had eyes and ears for others, but now I see that they are beginning to look about them. They will notice that you are in my charge, and will conclude that I am your brother, or—your husband. Some of them may perhaps recollect that you were seen alone down at the line, and that you were seeking a brother. It will be better that you should call me by my name sometimes —that you should speak to me as though I were one. Call me 'Simon' once or twice to-night, for form's sake. I have never heard you say it yet," he muttered, under his breath.

"I will try."

"You will not mind? You will not dislike it?"

"I won't mind."

"Say it now."

"Simon." He could just catch the word.

"Say," said he, breathing quickly, "just for once in your life, Hester, say 'dear Simon.'"

"Oh no, no."

"No?"

"Not that—not that; anything but that. I cannot—I will not—I dare not. Oh, how could you ask me—how could you?" sobbed she, unwitting what she thus betrayed, and indeed scarcely conscious of the words themselves. "I will not do it—I will never do it! Never, never, never!" Her hand was voluntary withdrawn from his, and with the other wrung in agony; while he could feel that she vibrated from head to foot as with a new emotion.

He saw it all now.

Oh, to break away, dash out in the cold night air, and wrestle with his heart unseen! Oh, to fly from her while yet his lips were sealed, and no word had fallen from them to betray him! To have but one half-hour of solitude ere he faced so desperate a temptation!

But he had promised, and that promise riveted him to her side. The word he had pledged he could not now withdraw, even though she might at such a moment have acquiesced; he was bound.

She had turned away from him, it was true; but it was in such a manner, and from so plain

a motive, that it would have been cruel to act upon an involuntary gesture—nay, more than all which had before passed, it had, in thus betraying her, told her greatest need. By her side he must remain.

But how to do it?

All the time the man was praying. Was ever any one in sorer want of aid than he? A word, a whisper, even a look, would have brought his darling to his arms. No adverse eye was there to see—no voice could interfere. It needed but a touch—a sign.

And what hindered him?

He had not wronged her; she herself had done no wrong;—why, in her extremity, and with such an opportunity, must he deny himself and her that word? It was not doing an injury to Agatha; it was but clearing himself with Hester. That she should have this also to suffer, and his be the hand to wound her! He knew now what had been hidden so long—that cry, those hands wrung in despairing bitterness of soul, had taught him the truth at last. She was all his. And while his pulses throbbed at the discovery, must he deny her a corresponding knowledge that would pour new life into hers?

Then came the tempter's "It is too much to expect; it is more than mortal man can bear. The strain may affect her mind, unhinged as it is already by all she has gone through. It was perhaps unfortunate that you were here; but still as you were, and that by no means of your own, you have nothing to reproach yourself with. Or rather, who can say that you have not been sent to this place by a Higher Power, on purpose to give you the chance? The matter is completely taken out of your own hands, and it will be through no fault of yours if the disclosure takes place in this way. She has as good as confessed her feelings, and it would be cowardly to let her do so while you keep back yours. This is an opportunity which is never likely to happen again. It is owing entirely to a piece of good luck — unless it is Providence, which really it looks more like of the two. In another week you will be married to Agatha, and once that union has taken place, it will undoubtedly be a crime to love her sister as you do, but now it is none. You have been saved by this lucky— no, this providential meeting. You were on the brink of committing a foolish and an irrevocable mistake, and you have been mercifully prevented.

Be thankful; accept the good offered to you; turn to Hester, and confess all."

All this and more, vehemently poured down into Simon's heart, afflicted him beyond measure.

"A lying devil," he groaned within himself, "is tearing me in pieces; but I will rather be torn, ay, and rent soul from body, than disgrace my calling. If she knows—once knows—in the state she is now in, all that I could tell her, it might indeed soothe her for the moment, but it would add to her agony hereafter. She shall not have the opium. She shall have all that I can honestly bestow: care, tenderness, so much affection as would have been shown were I in truth her brother, but no more. No—not an atom more. Oh my Hester! my little Hester! I cannot give you what your voice cries aloud for, what your tears almost wring out of my lips! My secret must remain my own. And it shall,"—he shut his lips resolutely—"it shall. No sobs, nor sighs, not even her tears shall draw it from me. God help her, my darling! God help her and me! I must seem to do her wrong, and I am innocent; I must appear false, and I am true. Oh, it is hard—it is hard! . . ."

Then he began again, hard and fast. "Lord help me! Lord save me! the worst is not yet

past, and at any time — at any moment — it may be too much for me. I have no power, no strength. I am so weak, I dare not look at her, and she has none to comfort. I cannot listen to her—Lord, let me hear Thy voice! I am not master of myself—master me. Give me strength—endurance—resolution——" He grew more calm.

"And this Thy child," continued the suppliant, presently, "Lord, support and comfort her. She must not know of my love,—grant her Thy love. My hands may not hold her,—let her feel the everlasting arms. Be pitiful, O Lord! she cannot bear much more. She is so young, so tender. She hardly knows what sorrow is. What I *may* do to lessen it, show me, and the rest help me—to forego."

With downcast eyes and folded arms he sat the while the fight went on within, seeing nothing but the red-hot embers of the now smouldering fire, hearing nothing but the outpourings of his bursting heart. At length the fever in his blood began to abate, his breathing came more gently, and he could watch the motionless form by his side in silence, fearful of again rousing her from the trance into which she had apparently fallen.

To such a post of danger relief seemed long in coming, but at length the lumbering sound of wheels reached the ears of all within and without the cottages, and there was a general movement of expectation.

"They're come. They are here at last," passed from lip to lip, as soon as it was discovered that the vehicles which now drew up in front of the smithy were the means of conveyance provided by the railway company for taking on the passengers. "Now then!" cried one and another, roused to energy again by the hope of something to do. "How are we all to pack in? Where are we to sit?"

"Come and see, Hester," said her cousin, glad also to rise, and not surprised to find her hand again feeling its way to his as she got up, bewildered by the sudden stir where all had lately been so torpid. "You are quite dry now, are you not?"

"Quite. I am hot."

"Let me put this round you."

It was a large, soft plaid which had been handed him to wrap her in, down at the line, and which she had been glad to unwind and slip aside, during the last half-hour. "We shall

find this useful now," said Simon, lifting it again.

"But you have nothing."

"I will take my share of this by-and-by; we must go to secure seats now. We have nothing else to bring with us, have we?"

They had nothing; nor had any others; the luggage, and all odds and ends that could be collected, were to be forwarded by rail as soon as the line was cleared; for the present there were no encumbrances attached to the travellers. A pile of rugs and wrappers had, however, been sent up, and were thankfully appropriated; for the night, though clear, was no less cold than it had been.

"I wonder what they have got for us to go in," said Simon, as he and his cousin emerged from the shed. "Ah, these will do; but still——" glancing down on her uncovered head.

Two rough, open, country wains of huge dimensions, stood at the door; straw had been thickly strewn at the bottom of each, but cushions, or seats, there were none.

Rude, however, as was the accommodation, most of those present were too deeply under the influence of the scene they had so lately

escaped from, and too thankful to put an end to the weary time of waiting which had followed, to utter a complaint. Some, like Hester, were, besides, absorbed in grief; others were suffering the tortures of anxiety; whilst several were beginning to feel the smart of trivial wounds, which at another time would have been thought more of, and attended to more carefully. All in decent order filed out of the cottages, and one-half were stowed away in the first waggon, which, filled to the brim, moved heavily off. As the second drew up, Colonel Lutteridge stepped forward to secure for his charge the corner seat at the upper end, where, he judged, she would be less shaken, and also more exempt from vulgar curiosity and interrogation than elsewhere. He could place himself so as to barricade her effectually.

She was accordingly handed in; but as she moved feebly forward, directed by those below, a new anxiety arose in Simon's breast. Spent as she was already with fatigue and protracted suffering, how would she endure further hardships? Could nothing be procured to shield her, in any way, from the roughness of the journey? He hesitated, rapidly running over

in his mind the propriety of making such a request, and the likelihood of its meeting with attention. Other women were there, — some older, some as fragile, and some, perchance, even less able to stand rough usage,—to single one out for attention might seem to them to be making a distinction, cruelly out of place at such a time. He thought it best to say nothing, and take his seat by her side.

When there, her bare head with its loosened hair—those soft curls of which her mother was so proud—again drew his attention. "That, at least, I can remedy," he said. "Hester, let me put on the shawl before the rest get in."

She held it out. "Please take some yourself."

"You will want it all."

"You said you would."

"Did I? Well, it is a long one; give me one end; now, is the other well drawn over your shoulder?"

The cart filled rapidly, and at length no more could be taken in. "We shall be stiff before we are out of this," muttered Simon, and again a pang shot through him as he thought of the young and tender girl, who had already borne so much. They were, nevertheless, adjured to

sit still closer. Two more got in, and still there was room wanted—there yet remained a passenger, and a place must be found for him. He could not be squeezed into the front row; it was full already,—he must go inside.

"Can we manage to make a little more room, sir?" said a rustic voice, addressing Colonel Lutteridge. "I think we are packed pretty tight already, but still——"

"Come up," said his companion, quietly gathering into his arms the little figure at his side, and moving into her place. Then into her ear, "Do not mind, my little Hester. The cart is rough and hard, you would have been bruised and shaken to pieces where you were, but in my arms you may rest securely. To-morrow you will thank me for this; and to-night," he added, between his teeth, "you must trust me."

So speaking, he drew her head down upon his shoulder, and covered it with the plaid which enveloped them both. "Lie there," he said, half aloud, "little head. Lie there at peace, and fear nothing. I am your kinsman, bound to protect, guard, and shelter you in this extremity, and come what may, I will not be unfaithful to my trust."

CHAPTER XXXII.

A MOONLIGHT DRIVE.

"We must not stint our necessary actions,
In the fear to cope malicious censures."
—*Henry VIII.*

STUPEFIED betwixt grief and weariness, the involuntary action was scarcely noticed by Hester; and, determined to allow himself no opportunity for reflections which might again prove hazardous to his resolution, Simon turned to address his companion, remarking on the amount of snow which had fallen, and on the brilliant, starlit firmament above.

"Yes, sir," replied the young man, cheerfully. "We may be thankful, sir, indeed. We did not expect it to clear like this. And a full moon, too."

"There is scarcely a cloud from one end of the sky to another."

"And not a breath stirring. To my thinking, sir, it is not nearly as cold as it was. The air is sharp, but it is not disagreeable."

"Tolerably keen, I think." Colonel Lutteridge raised his hand as he spoke, to adjust the covering over the fair head beneath. "We shall have a severe winter, I suppose, if it begins thus early."

"I don't know, sir," dubiously. "They do say," continued the young man, "that when the snow falls so soon, it never lasts,—but no doubt you know best, sir. For my part, I don't hold with prophecies of one sort or another."

"Neither do I."

"Can you see the time, sir?"

"Well, no," said Simon; "I can't."

"The light is good; I have looked my watch many a time by moonlight—to be sure it has a white face. That is to say it *had*, for it is all in bits now!"

"Indeed? That is a loss."

"It is that. I have had it ever since I was a lad, and it was my father's before me. But how it came to be smashed, seeing that I got off scot-free, I can't imagine. Was not yours broken, sir?"

"It may be; I have not looked at it." Nor

was he going to look at it; for all the watches in Christendom he would not move the precious burden that he held: he was willing to talk, but not to do anything else.

Another passenger was more obliging, and amid general satisfaction the hour was proclaimed. It was twenty minutes to ten o'clock, and as the mail did not pass Fixall till past twelve, there was no doubt about their catching it easily. They had two hours and a half good, before them. Some opined, however, that they would be cramped and numb long before the journey was over; and one observed that a few old stools or hassocks would have made the jolting easier to bear. There was certainly cause for the complaint, in the deep, rutty lane they were now traversing. The way was not often used except in hay-time, as the driver turned round to explain, and the season had been wet, and the mud had gathered. Over the mud a coat of snow had frozen, and again after this had followed the partial thaw, which in its turn had given place to the severer frost of that morning.

The upshot was, that the lane was in about as desperate a condition as could well be imagined.

"A good thing, after all, that we are in this monstrous concern," observed a voice from the centre of the waggon, "or we should have been pitched out head-foremost at least a score of times. Never saw such roads in my life! 'Pon my soul, I never did!"

"That was a bad one, Hester," exclaimed Simon, as the side they were on, bumped down with a lurch that threw all forward. "Suppose we are left in the lane, next?"

"Yes," said she, looking up dreamily. "What?"

"Did you not feel that?"

"That what? I felt nothing."

"Are you grateful to me for receiving the brunt of all your bumps and thumps? *I* felt it, I can tell you."

She smiled.

"That will do," thought he. "That is what I must try for. A word now and then, when I am fit for it, when I am sure of myself. If she can but keep from tears—but that is too much to expect."

All, however, went well for a while.

"Good heavens!" puffed and blew the burly passenger in the middle,—he was the same

whom Hester had vainly applied to in her trouble,—"this — this is dreadful! How are we to sit it out? Pooh—hoo—hoo—hoo! It is positive cruelty! Driver! Hey! When shall we get out of this?"

"Oh, soon, sir; soon."

"Soon? What do you call 'soon'? I don't believe you know yourself! Is there no other road? Is this the only passage you have through this — this infernal country? Ah!—bah!—there you are at it again! I believe," muttering, "that the fellow does it on purpose!"

He was the sole talker. The rest were listening with a mixture of interest and contempt. They were scarcely amused, but it was something to have even such a makeshift for amusement; and the grumbler, finding himself attended to, proceeded with increased verbosity. Why had not a few little comforts been sent up along with the rugs? It would have been no trouble to have sent up a pillow or two. A pillow, or a cushion—why, the railway cushions were there by the dozen—would have made all the difference. Only the greatest idiots would not have thought of them, when they were to

be had for the picking up! "Pooh—hoo—hoo—hoo!" For his part he thought they had a very good right to complain, as well as to the action for damages which would of course be open to each one. For instance, where was their luggage? When were they to see it again? Where was it being forwarded to? There had they all been hanging about for two mortal hours, with nothing in the world to do,—why could they not have been employed in identifying their baggage, instead of having that nuisance still to undergo, in addition to all the rest, afterwards? They would be sure to be called on to look to that, at the very most inconvenient moment, just when the time could least be spared! Upon his soul, he considered that there was no need for all the fuss that had been made; it was his opinion that the railway company had been scandalously remiss in not having the line cleared sooner. Why, in many countries the line would have been available within half an hour after the accident had happened! But it was always the same in England—such dilatoriness, such mismanagement, such red-tapeism! He should really not be surprised if it were weeks before the thing was looked properly into, sup-

posing, indeed, that it was properly looked into at all. So on, and so on.

"He don't know much what he is talking about, sir, does he?" observed Colonel Lutteridge's new acquaintance, in an undertone.

"Eh?" said Simon, starting.

"That one there—I say he is uncommon fond of talking about what he knows precious little of. He just wants to be saying something—it don't matter what."

"Ah! I daresay not."

"Did you hear what he was saying, sir?"

"No; I can't say I did."

"A pack of rubbishy nonsense it was, as I know. But some people like the music of their own tongues better than anything else they can get."

"Very true. I was not listening."

"I daresay not, sir; you did not lose much."

"No?"

"It was about the company and the directors," proceeded the young man, who was himself not averse to hearing a little of the music alluded to, for the moment. "And I ought to know about them. I am a clerk at one of the offices. We'll have the affair looked into in no

time. It riled me a bit to hear him, but I don't care to put myself in his way—it don't signify, after all."

"No, it does not. People of that sort are not worth powder. No doubt your company will do all they can."

"We are getting along better now, are we not, sir? I think we are through the worst of it."

"So we are. I had not noticed."

"You will find that we don't get nearly such hard knocks as we did. Are you pretty comfortable, sir? Is the young lady comfortable? I was down at the bank when you brought her——"

"Sh!" said Simon, with an involuntary tightening of his arms.

"Poor thing!" murmured the fellow, kindly. "But wasn't it curious that she should have lost you for so long, sir? There were not so many about, but one would have thought you might have been seen sooner—a tall gentleman like you. She had run up and down for never so long, they said, and had begun to get off her head like. Was she hurt at all, sir?"

"Not at all, thank you."

He was relieved to find the light in which he

was looked upon, to be considered the brother whom Hester had been in search of. The burly passenger, to be sure, knew otherwise; but as he and the officials were the only people acquainted with the truth, he hoped to evade further observation. He could not recollect seeing the young clerk anywhere, and said so.

"I was only down a minute," replied his companion. "I just ran down to see if I could be of any more use, and to make sure none were left behind. 'Twas I asked you, sir, if the lady was struck, and you answered that she had only swooned. I heard them say how long she had been seeking you. 'Twas me you asked for brandy, too, and there was none in my flask. I had drained it, every drop, among them; and some," he added softly, "could not swallow it."

"You? I remember you now!" exclaimed Simon. "I saw you here, there, and everywhere. If all the rest had behaved as well—had done as good a night's work—it would be something to boast of." Unconsciously his tone was that of a superior bestowing commendation, and while it afforded evident pleasure, it checked further loquacity. His companion's manner changed. From being merely civil it became

deferential; and from that time he ceased to address his fellow-traveller, modestly waiting to be taken notice of, and not speaking unless spoken to.

"How are you getting on, Hester?" inquired her cousin, presently. "Pretty well?"

"Very well."

"I wish I saw those great eyes closed."

"I can't close them—Simon." How could she? They were gazing steadfastly into the heavens where Jem had gone; they were ranging over fields of golden light, while the mind, only half following, wove its own pictures. With hands locked together on her lap, she lay motionless, and he might have thought she slumbered, but for the long-drawn heavy sob, which, from time to time, shuddered through her frame. The folds of the plaid edged her tear-stained face, and once as they fell aside, there escaped a loose end of hair, which gently floated across his lips. He turned his head away; he did not touch it; no tender word nor sign escaped him. She was satisfied that he had seen nothing—that he had been blind to her emotion, deaf to the terrible truth which her agony had unveiled. At least, she thought,

that was unsuspected; and he, so good, so noble, and so true, would never know the pitifulness of her he was so tender to. Not for worlds would she have had it come to light; and confused and suffering as she was, she could, in a dim way, feel thankful to have had that additional misery spared her. But what would bring back her brother? Jem taken, Simon not hers—what was left in life? Only a few hours ago the prospect had seemed dreary, but now!—— Never again to see his face, to hear his call, to watch for his home-coming! Never to follow in his steps with tales ready for his willing ear, to hang upon his arm, to defend him in his absence, interpret what he wished to say when present!

Wancote without Jem! She tried to recall him in each familiar room; to remember every little habit, every occupation. His foibles, his very whims and tricks, from henceforth would be sacred; his little phrases, so well known to all, must never be used by another.

And then his kindness, his goodness—dear, beloved brother! "The only one of us," sobbed she, with swelling bosom—"the only one who was ready for such a change! So right—so

well for Jem that it was he to be taken,—every one knows about Jem—every one—every one——"

And one envied him.

The new light thrown on his own affairs almost wrought Simon to distraction. He could not, now that time was given him to turn over the matter in his mind, understand how the mischief had in the first instance been done; how he could only now, when so much too late, have made the discovery which formerly had been altogether beyond his reach. The child had outwitted not only him but them all; he had had the positive assurance that she would be pleased to hear of his marriage to her sister, and every succeeding day, what he had seen with his own eyes had confirmed the asseveration. She had contrived to keep from all, the pain, the slight, that had been put upon her. "It was bravely done, Hester," he thought, "but it was not worth the cost. Now these dreary nuptials must go on, and you and I must act our parts. The farce must be played out to the end, let the victims feel what they may."

But to be such a victim! Not to any superfine sense of duty, but to a gross, stupid blun-

der! That," reflected Simon, "is where the sting lies. To be entrapped by a mere careless omission of a name! I am to rue, throughout my life, the haste of a moment! I have been"—he stopped,—his face changed. "I have been," he said, "in the hands of the Almighty." . . .

"'Tis a longer ride than a thowt."

They were passing the sixth milestone, and it drew forth the above from a countryman on the opposite side of the waggon.

"An' it hadna been for the drifts, a might ha' walked, and been theer sooner," added he.

"Or not been there at all," suggested one.

"A said, an' it hadna been for the drifts."

"No more drifts now, gentlemen," observed the clerk. "I know the country; we have come to a good highroad now: there is not a better road anywhere than that between Thripp and Fixall."

"Not a more devilish one, I should say," muttered the stout passenger, angrily. "Call this a good road! It is only one degree better than that infernal——"

"Noa, noa; noan moor o' that," interposed the countryman. "'Twere an oogly lane as we coom fra, that's trew; but we're oot o' thot,

an' oot o' worse than thot—the Lord be praised! We'll ha' noan moor groomlin' the noight, a say."

"Certainly the shaking is much less violent," said Colonel Lutteridge, rousing himself to address his neighbour. "We keep to this road, then, all the way to Fixall?"

"All the way, sir; it is a scrimp four miles from here."

"Hester, we shall soon be there; how do you feel?"

"Very well; a little—stiff."

"May I put you on my other shoulder? You have been lying so still that I did not like to disturb you before; but the change will benefit us both."

"I am afraid I must make you very tired."

He laid her comfortably down again, and she sighed with the relief afforded. "Thank you, Simon."

The next moment she exclaimed, starting up, "What is it? What is the matter?"

He had frightened her; a low sound, almost a groan, had burst from him at her gentle mention of his name. "What was that?" demanded Hester, her nerves still quivering, and ready to take alarm at any occurrence.

"A trifle," he said, quietly; "a spasm—a pain of some sort that made me wince. I am sorry it startled you. I have it sometimes."

"Can't you do something for it?"

"Nothing, little Hester," he said, drearily—"nothing."

"Is it quite gone?"

"Quite—yes—for the moment; but it will come again, I fear. Do not take any notice if you fancy I look out of sorts sometimes; it is not dangerous."

"I never heard it——"

"Let me draw this over your arm, child; you must not throw it off like that. I say," said Colonel Lutteridge, to the young fellow beside him, "have you ever studied astronomy?"

"No, sir." The young man stared a little; on which, greatly to his edification, the Colonel proceeded to roll forth millions, billions, and trillions—to make announcements of such magnitude as took his breath away—to track the comets on their never-ending journeys—to split up asteroids—and finally, to electrify all around by insisting on the vast swarms of aerolites which just do *not* fall, and cover the earth. All who knew Lutteridge would have seen he had an

object in thus putting forth the scanty stock of learning he possessed: he was seeking to divert both Hester's mind and his own from dangerous ruminations; and although it may be doubted whether, throughout the harangue, with its astounding peroration, he did not feel every motion of the form he held, he certainly succeeded in subduing both her and himself to a calmer state of feeling ere their journey was ended, than might have been the case had silence thrown them back upon their own musings.

"Here is the junction at last!" exclaimed the clerk, briskly. "There will be some life there, at any rate."

"What is it?" said Hester, raising her head.

"We are at our journey's end," replied her cousin; and despite all, perhaps he was not as glad as he could have wished to be.

All was now commotion. The weary passengers were handed out, refreshments were procured, and after a brief delay the mail came up. They were not too soon; they had taken fully longer on the way than had been anticipated, and they had now little more than a quarter of an hour's waiting time.

"Such confounded roads!" reached Hester's ear.

"Oh, don't let us go with *him*," she cried, drawing Simon away. "There is the poor woman who was with me in the carriage, before—before it happened. I did not see her till now. She looks quite neglected: let us go with her; we may be able to help her, for she has nobody."

She was glad of their company — glad to know that the young lady, at least, was safe, and expressed her fears as to the fate of their other fellow-travellers. Having said so much, however, she relapsed into silence; and, truth to tell, since she seemed to be both weary and stupid, neither of her companions was eager to draw her out. They could have responded, but they did not care to originate; and unless there was anything further suggested—any information to be gained—they had no desire again to recur to the events of the night.

The compartment was full, and nothing of note occurred during the short journey.

"We shall be met here," said Simon, as he took Hester out at their own station.

How unlike itself it looked! How it, and all around, seemed to wonder what she and he

could be doing there at that time of night! No station-master to bow obsequiously before them along the platform; only a shivering understrapper to be thrown into confusion by such an apparition. "But we have now to get home," said Hester to herself, not having caught her cousin's assurance. "How is that to be done? We must walk, I suppose?"

It surprised her more than anything else would have done, to see their own horses' heads at the well-known corner; where all besides was so unreal, a touch of ordinary life seemed most unnatural of all. "How did they know?" she asked, aloud.

"I telegraphed from Fixall."

"Did you? And to Lutteridge too? Burnett is there."

"Yes. I thought poor Constance ought to know. But I mean to go with you to Wancote. I will go over afterwards." He gave an order to his own coachman, and stepped into the Wancote carriage.

"What did you say when you telegraphed, Simon?" said Hester, as they moved off. She was trembling anew, at the meeting now to come. "Did you tell them anything?"

"I said I was bringing you."

"Nothing more?"

"I said you were unhurt."

"You did not say——"

"Yes, dear, I did."

"I wonder none of them came down."

"So do not I," reflected Simon, inwardly. "Lady Manners has too much feeling; Agatha too little: both have shirked."

It was but a short drive from the station to the Hall by one route, although it was the habit of the family to prefer the road which led past Lutteridge. On this night, however, when the nearest way was naturally taken, it seemed to Hester that they had barely started ere they were at the entrance gates. Snow lay thick on all the country round, and a ghostly landscape was spread to view on every side—trees, slopes, and dales sheeted in the moonlight.

"Hester!" said her cousin, suddenly; "after all, I fear I shall have to break one part of my promise." He called to the coachman from the window, and the carriage stood still.

He turned to her again. "I am not—quite well," he said, faintly. "I think I had better perhaps get down here—and walk home."

"You are ill!"

He shook his head.

"O Simon—don't go!"

"Not unless you give me leave. You have my word; but—but"—with evident reluctance—"I would *rather* go, Hester, if I may?"

"It is not for my sake; but if you wish it, of course I would not keep you. You have been so good—so——" Grief would have its way, and stop her speaking. He took both hands firmly in his, and stooped over her. He meant to say something encouraging, strengthening, bracing; but all at once his nerve gave way: with one kiss on her cheek, tender and solemn as might have been imprinted on the face of a dead woman, he parted from her, opened the door, and passed out into the night.

PART IX.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"THERE WAS ALSO ANOTHER ANXIETY."

"One sorrow never comes, but brings an heir,
That may succeed as his inheritor."

—*Pericles.*

It was well for Hester that she was too much worn out with the scenes she had just gone through to note all the ghastly concomitants of such a home-coming; that she did not perceive the eyes turned on her from every doorway and distant corner, did not hear the footsteps and whispering of the now roused and expectant household. They knew not what they anticipated; but, half from real anxiety and half from vulgar curiosity, all, even to the lowest scullery-maid, had collected in the background, invisibly to the newly-arrived traveller.

The half-fearful look in the carriage after she had left it, and the exclamation with which the

grey-headed attendant fell back from the door, were lost on her; she only beheld her mother, fell on her neck, and, for the second time that night, lost consciousness.

A faintness, which was the result of exhaustion rather than of any new stress of feeling, was not of long duration, however. She was soon able to weep again, to tell her story, and answer such questions as related to what she had herself experienced. What more there remained to be told, her cousin would come himself to communicate.

While she was present the fresh agony of the mother and sister could not have its full sway, since they durst not invite her to further participation in it; the wandering eye, the restless movements, and relaxed frame, testifying too plainly to all that she had already suffered; and in ministering to her, a momentary consolation was afforded even to their sorrow, so helpless and spent she lay before them. With trembling hands upon her child's brow, the mother sat, outwardly subduing her emotion, while Agatha, by her side, gently pressed wine and food from time to time, keeping out of view her tears.

Simon, in the bitterness of his spirit, had been

unjust to Agatha, when he accused her of being destitute of feeling. She was not acutely sensitive—not one to be swayed by passion or ardour—but she was by no means wanting in natural affection. That it found vent at this time in thoughtful consideration for her sister, that it was likely to be sufficiently under control to enable her afterwards to be the stay of her parents and counsellor of the household, ought surely not to be reckoned against her. A heart like Hester's had not been planted in her bosom,—was that her fault? But placid as was Agatha's nature, she loved her own family sincerely, with an honest attachment, which, if at present it did not extend beyond such limits, was tolerably certain to be reproduced towards a husband and children of her own.

For other relations, or for friends, she had but a minor supply of interest—even for a lover, as we have seen, she could not produce more; but let her once belong to him, whomsoever he might be, become the chief person in his home and the mother of his children, and it might be safely prophesied that Agatha would develop yearly more and more into the affectionate wife, and proud and devoted matron.

She had long filled, to the admiration of the neighbourhood, the post of eldest sister. The loss of *her* was bewailed to Lady Manners as that of Jane had never been, as Hester's would never be. With strangers—especially those of her own sex—she must ever be the first among the daughters, the peerless rose among the lilies. But she was not the first at home, though perhaps, as we have said already, from no fault of her own; and certainly what she missed in attachment, she gained in consideration; if there were anything to be done, any practical advice or support to be given, it was she who came to the front.

It was by her earnest desire that Hester was now committed to her charge, whilst their mother retired to seek such rest as she could obtain, or at least to weep unrestrained,—and she herself undressed and laid in bed the scarcely conscious girl. Never had Agatha seemed so gentle or so tender as on this night; and yet, would she but go—would she only leave the room to darkness and to silence!

At last the candle is taken away and the door shut; and then the pent-up sluice reopens, as strangely seen 'twixt waking and sleeping, amid

dreams and dim remembrances, the whole long, weird, and only half terrible night reappears.

Only half terrible? And how is that? Jem! her own Jem! her dearest, best-beloved brother snatched from her without a word or a farewell! Surely every thought, every reflection should have been all his. She sees him—he is before her now, as when last visible, looking gaily back to nod as he passes the carriage-window where she sits watching; she hears his cheery assurance of a speedy return, magnifies in the retrospect his conscientious scruples about leaving her, conjures up the scene with every trifling adjunct—and then, all at once, it is gone; and, behold! it is not his voice that she hears, but another voice; and it is not his face she sees, but another face.

For very shame she writhed in the dark, too weak to shed more tears, longing for forgetfulness—for an end to come somehow—anyhow. Her brain ran riot at last: faces came and mocked her, fingers pointed at her, whispers sounded in her ears. Her little room seemed alive with moving figures all harsh and angry. She cried aloud in her hideous nightmares, and Agatha was by her side in a moment. With

Agatha's arms around her neck she slept at last, —and dreamed of Agatha's lover.

The chill, the shock, and subsequent exposure and fatigue, had been more than Hester's youthful frame could bear, and a smart feverish attack kept her to bed for the next few days. Her nervous system also had been shaken, and all conversation of an exciting tendency, all participation in the grief which must at times return in all its first force to overwhelm, was strictly forbidden. The dear remains had been brought home, and carried thence to their final resting-place, and all who had gathered on the sad occasion had dispersed, ere she was well enough to be informed of what had taken place. Tears would flow, but nevertheless it was felt that by such an illness, she had been mercifully spared much that could not else but have caused fresh anguish.

Even for the others it was perhaps no bad thing to have care for her mingling with their sorrows, since there was also another anxiety, whereof we must now speak.

All through the day which followed the eventful night, Lady Manners and Agatha looked in vain for the expected visitor from

Lutteridge. Simon had said that he would come, and had especially enjoined on Hester to refer all inquiries to him, which she was unable herself to answer. He would tell them all, he had said repeatedly; and she had so well recollected, that it had been her one refrain, "Simon will tell you all." But hours passed, and he did not appear.

Twice, wheels were heard. Sir John and his eldest son had both been telegraphed for, and as neither was at any great distance, each arrived in the course of the afternoon.

It had been expected that long before they could reach Wancote, Colonel Lutteridge would have been there, acting the part of a son and brother to the forlorn women; and as the day wore on, and neither he himself nor any messenger appeared, even Agatha grew restless.

She wished to see her cousin; but she was still more impatient to know what he had to say, to learn what must now be done, what arrangements ought to be made. Should her father arrive, and find that they were still all in the dark, he would be unnerved afresh, with the fear of being called upon to act, and with no knowledge to act upon. Never before had

anything of the kind befallen him—no death had yet broken into their tranquil band, no sable procession had issued from the doors of Wancote, since it had been his home.

This jar in their quiet life was not only awful, it was unutterably strange; and to none more than to Agatha, who, we know, liked all things to be in all places, smooth, orderly, and decorous, and who had nothing in common with aught that was terrible and heart-stirring. She felt that the presence of her betrothed husband would be welcome at such a time, and wondered that he came not.

At length when four o'clock arrived, and still no communication had been received from the Manor, it was felt that something must be wrong there. They were in the act of despatching a messenger, when a man on horseback was seen in the avenue, and proved to be the groom from Lutteridge.

"He is ill," said Agatha to herself, the colour mounting to her cheek. "I knew he would have come, had he not been prevented; but what shall we do? Papa is leaning on him; Bertie is of no good; and I must do everything. Poor dear Simon! But how very unfortunate!

If he could but have come for an hour!—He knows the sort of use papa and Bertie are in any emergency—but I ought not to reproach him. No doubt he has written: that will at least give us some idea of what should be done,—of whom should be written to."

She hurried out herself, murmuring, "He might have sent over before, however; or Constance might—just like her——" But there was no letter in the man's hand.

It proved to be no fault of Constance's.

"My mistress is at Lord Westmacott's, Miss. I have just been there, or I should have been here sooner. My mistress was dining and sleeping there last night."

"But your master?" murmured Miss Manners.

"Master," said the man, slowly, "is going on tolerably now, Miss, Dr Blackburn says. He won't say nothing more just yet, Miss; but we're to be told more particularly to-morrow."

"What is the matter? I was sure he was ill!" exclaimed she. "You may speak out before me"—as she caught a side glance directed to her brother who had come to the door also.

"Don't you hear? Speak out, I say," added

Bertie, sharply. "What is it next? Don't you see you are frightening the lady?"

"The Colonel was found in the snow, sir."

"Found in the snow! By Jove!"

"Yes, sir. Found in the snow."

"When? at what hour? and where? What was he doing in the snow?"

"He was close by our own door, sir; we had only just taken the alarm when we came upon him—under the laurels at the shrubbery gate, sir."

"How came he there?"

"Don't know, sir; unless he walked, sir. We expected master had stopped here, Miss,"—to Agatha.

"What made you expect anything of the kind?" As it often did, Bertie's emotion found its vent in anger. "What business had you to expect at all? You must have been a parcel of great fools not to have looked for him before! And so you let him lie there till daybreak, I suppose?"

"No, sir."

"What did you do, then? Who did you get? None of you ever thought of going for a doctor, I daresay?"

"I took the gig myself, sir, within the quarter of an hour, and we had Dr Blackburn to him as fast as the mare would bring us back. We could not have done more, sir."

"And who attended to him in the meantime?"

"I don't know, sir;—Mrs Hubbly, I suppose."

"How did none of you come over before?" continued Mr Manners, savagely. "It is a pretty time of day to come here, when we ought to have known the first thing!"

"I was given no orders, sir."

"Given no orders! And you mean to say——"

"Oh, Bertie, stop this," implored Agatha, with her hand upon his arm. "Don't you see that there is something dreadfully amiss? What good can it do to rate at the man? Ask him —stop, I'll ask myself."

"Is your master conscious?" she inquired, stepping forward.

"No, Miss."

"Since when?"

"He has never been conscious, Miss."

Her face fell. "Never been conscious!" she whispered.

"Dr Blackburn says that if master had been left another half-hour out, there would have been no life in him," continued the groom, looking from one to the other, as not exactly sure of how much or how little he ought to say. "He must have been in the drift for a good long time, for it had snowed after he had fallen down, though not enough to cover him altogether. It had not snowed for some hours, sir."

"By Jove!" Even Bertie ejaculated under his breath at the significant observation.

"For some hours!" echoed his sister. "How was he alive at all?"

"Dr Blackburn says it was a wonder, Miss. I was to ask," added the messenger, with sudden recollection, "when he left here?"

"He was not here at all!"

"Lord!" escaped the man. The rest were silent.

"Burnett said Master was at the station, and drove up here with Miss Hester," said the groom, at last. "Mrs Hubbly wanted Burnett to come over with the carriage again, to fetch Master, as soon as she heard of it, seeing what a night it was, and Burnett being positive Master had said he was not going to stay, but would

walk across; but Master having given no orders to be fetched, you see, sir, we didn't none of us like to go contrary."

"And you knew he was walking, and yet none of you had the sense to guess what had happened?"

"Do be quiet, Bertie," Agatha again interposed, aside. "They were not to blame; they meant to do right. Do not waste time, and irritate the man as well. Let us think what is to be done now! Send him round, and say he is not to go till he gets a message. Stop," said she, suddenly, as the horse was being turned. "Mrs Lutteridge—when is she to be at home?"

"By this time, Miss. The carriage went to the Castle, as soon as I got back to give the order."

"Then you have not come straight here?"

"No, Miss," looking rather foolish. "The ice was wanted for Master, and medicines, and I had to fetch them from Seeley——"

"*You* had!" broke out Bertie, with an oath. "Confound the fellow's impudence! Agatha, it's insufferable! Do you mean to tell me that there was no one but *you* to do everything? that there was not so much as a stable-boy about the place to run on an errand?"

It turned out that there was little more, at least. One footman was in attendance on Constance at Westmacott Castle, the other was away on a holiday; the under coachman was in London looking after the new carriages, which were to come down the next day, and Burnett had caught a cold, and was in bed from rheumatism, engendered by being out during the night. Colonel Lutteridge's own man did not know the country, the butler liked to be in the way at home,—and so on. An excuse was found for every one: as usual, there were too many hands, and only one had been available. Since the groom and horse were already going about, it had been felt that he might do everything, that Wancote could wait. Probably they had reckoned on no minute inquiries from that sorrow-stricken mansion—had thought that the tidings he bore would be sufficient to engross all attention that could be spared.

"He, at least, had nothing to do with it," said Agatha, always just, and able to speak with composure. "It was not his fault. Come in and let us consider. Some one must go to Lutteridge; and, Bertie, what shall we do about—about the railway people?"

Since Dr Blackburn was with Simon, and he had every attention, shocked as she was and grieving for him, she still remembered other cares.

They were soon, however, at an end. Ere the shades of night again set in, a communication had been received from the railway company, who had been furnished by Colonel Lutteridge with Sir John's address, and the rest was soon accomplished.

Of all that went on, as we have said, Hester was ignorant. It took her many days to regain even so much strength and serenity as would enable her to leave the solitude of her room, and during those days all the work that was done in the house was done by Agatha. From morning to night she wrote letters, gave audiences, arranged for the postponement of her own bridal, and gave directions as to the sad ceremonial which must take its place. She was everybody's helper, everybody's listener. Jane was kept duly informed of what passed each day; Bertie was shown what duties devolved on him; her father was assisted, and her mother and sister affectionately tended. It was the very position for Agatha; and though it would be false and

malicious to say that she enjoyed it, she did undeniably find in it a source of consolation.

"All the same she is precious indifferent about her bridegroom that is to be," observed Bertie, one evening, to his youngest sister, as he found his way to her room for a chat: he was glad to seek her out now and then at this time. "I thought Agatha would have flown to him, or to Constance at least,—but she seems never to have thought of it."

"Tell me about him, Bertie."

"He has had rather a narrow sque—— escape."

"Is he getting better?"

"Well, I don't know; I suppose so. The doctor sticks pretty close to him, however."

"Was he much worse than I?"

"Than *you?* You've not been anything to speak of; though you do seem rather like a little white mouse, now I come to look at you. When are you to be allowed down?"

"How long can you stay?"

"Only a few days. Our exams. are coming on for the musketry instruction, and I must go up, you know. I can do no good here."

"No; I suppose not," said she, sadly.

"Oh, I say," broke out he after a pause, "to think that this was the very day that I was coming down for the wedding, Hester! I have my present with me, for it came in just as I was starting, so I'll leave it with you to take care of; I suppose the marriage will not be put off for long—that's to say if he comes round all right. It is the prettiest thing I have seen for a long time—a new kind of belt—she has just the right sort of waist for showing off a belt, and I thought Simon would approve. Dear me! Poor fellow! Well, I hope he will come round, anyhow."

"Do you think there is any fear?"

"I suppose there is always fear as long as a man is off his head."

"*What* did you say?" Hester sat upright and stared at him. "Did you—did you say 'off his head'?"

"Yes. Did you not know?"

"Oh, I say," continued Bertie, seeing his mistake, "I ought not to have let it out. I forgot you were not to be told things. But, you know, it was only what might have been expected,—those idiots of servants—it was all their doing! I say, Hetty, don't take it so to heart. Don't cry—there's a good girl—or there will be the

mischief to pay! There's Agatha, I'll be bound, has never shed a tear, though he is her own particular property; but you are such a soft-hearted little thing!"

"You see I was with him——"

"Ay, that's it; you were with him all through; and you have both had a shake. No wonder, poor souls! It must have been bad," added he, more softly. "What would you have done without him, Hetty? How would you ever have got home? Eh, what's that you say?"

She was murmuring to herself the beautiful lines of Scott—

> "In man's most dark extremity
> Oft succour dawns from heaven."

He listened in silence, and when next he spoke did not renew the subject. He recurred to her coming down-stairs. "I wish you would come down before I go, Hetty; it's desperately miserable all about the house with no one but Agatha, and she is as unsociable as she always was."

"You will not go away sooner than you can help, Bertie?"

"Oh no, I won't." Bertie was flattered. "I promise you I won't; but, you see, if I am to do anything, I must——"

"Yes, I know. But then, we want you so much; and besides,—Simon should have some one."

"I have been over every day, but the doctor won't let me in."

"Will he not?"

"Nor yet Constance."

"Will he not? Simon must be very ill."

"No doubt he is very ill."

"But you speak so quietly—so coldly——"

"What am I to do? You go off at a tangent whenever I tell you anything."

"I won't go off at a tangent; only tell me everything."

"But there is nothing more to tell."

"Will you go up to-morrow and see how he is?"

"Yes, of course; I always go. It is the only place I can go to."

He had been thankful for the outlet. It was something to take him from the sombre, silent house—from the desolate rooms. Agatha, as he said, had no time to attend to him; his mother was still upset; and with Jane absent, and Hester up-stairs, he and his father were pitiably wretched and aimless.

They wandered about the forsaken haunts, encountering each other only, wearying through one gloomy hour after another, and afraid even to steal a glance at a newspaper, lest Agatha should catch them at it.

Going across to Lutteridge to hear the last report of Simon, and have a chat with Constance, who, like himself, was thankful for any variety, was to Bertie the chief event of the day.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE DOCTOR'S LAST RESOURCE.

"Diseases desperate grown,
By desperate appliance are relieved."
—*Hamlet.*

CONSTANCE, like her visitor, was at a loss what to do with herself, and confided to him, strictly under the rose, that everything was so melancholy and miserable, and she was so rigidly prohibited from having anything to do with the sick man, that if it were not for the look of the thing, she would not remain at the Manor another hour.

"And as for the marriage, Bertie," she observed, one day, "I really don't see when it is to take place! Dr Blackburn will give no opinion, though I pressed him on the point. He is the most tiresome of men. Every day he seems to fence himself in with a new set of oracular answers, as if on purpose to keep us all in the

dark! Do you think Simon is as ill as he makes him out? I heard him going down-stairs a little while ago, muttering—so that he should be overheard, of course—'This will never do; this can't go on;' and shaking his solemn old head as he spoke, with the air of a Lord Chancellor. I declare I had a great mind to drop a billiard-ball upon it, for I was in the billiard-room at the time, as he knew very well. He must have seen me as he passed, and wanted to give me a fright."

Her levity was more than half assumed; she was more alarmed than she wished to allow, and would fain have been reassured by her companion. It was a relief to him to be in her company, to find his own shallow nature reciprocated, to be out of sight of Agatha's lugubrious face, and away from Hester's tears. He and Constance suited each other exactly at this crisis. Constance having no one else to charm, found even the cousin for whom she had always entertained a secret contempt, charming; and Bertie being thus honoured by her notice, found in it a novel fascination. Had she been half-a-dozen years younger, no one can say what the intimacy run up in this manner might not have developed into; but even the broad acres of

Wancote, joined to Bertie's handsome face, were insufficient to outweigh with her the fact that to convert him into the stepfather of a thirteen-years-old son would be to render both him and her ridiculous.

She could not afford to trifle with him, which at the moment would have been sufficient amusement: youths of his age, she knew, were inflammatory, and dangerous in after-life, when their vanity had been wounded, and she had no wish to make enemies at the Hall. She must not go too far with the poor boy. She might make herself pleasant to him when he came, put on some pretty trimmings to lighten up her black dress, and receive him in her own little sitting-room with its cosy fire and softly-cushioned chairs; but whilst metaphorically patting and purring over him, she took care to sheathe her claws, and he escaped unhurt.

She liked to have him come, however, and dared to say to him at such interviews much that it would not have done for the others to hear. Small, selfish complaints, and petty, sordid speculations, about which she held her tongue if they were by, were imparted to him without restraint; while he on his part had

confidences of a like nature with which to elicit her sympathy.

They were enjoying themselves thus, on the day when Constance had been tempted with the billiard-ball; and she had barely narrated the incident, ere the doctor's gig was seen again in the avenue, followed by the large close carriage from Wancote, which was used by no one but Lady Manners herself.

"What can mamma be coming here for?" exclaimed Bertie, who had been drawn to the window by the sound of wheels. "There is her own carriage, Constance."

"Where?" cried she, eagerly. "So it is," coming to stand beside him, and verify the astounding fact for herself. "Do you know," said she, suddenly wheeling round and fixing her eyes upon him—"do you know, Bertie, this is old Baldhead's doing! I am sure of it! He has been to fetch Agatha. Bertie, I am afraid that Simon must be worse than we thought."

"There is no Agatha there," said Bertie, stretching his neck as far as he could, to see the party alight. "There is mamma, and the doctor is handing her out,—but no one else is following. What can have brought her? I say, will

they come here?" added he, with a curious perception that he would prefer that they did not.

The tone amused his quick companion. "Perhaps they may," said she, readily. "I shall invite my aunt in, at all events," going towards the door. Then looking back, with a sudden frown, she broke out energetically, "Dr Blackburn had no *right* to go and bring any one here, without a word to me." He heard her sweetest accents the next moment outside. "Dear auntie, such a dreadful day for you to be out! Do come into my little room. Bertie is here before you. Is Agatha there?"

For the first time in her life Lady Manners looked confused beneath her niece's clamour; she was even at a loss for any reply whatever.

"I ought to beg your pardon, Mrs Lutteridge," interposed the doctor, stepping forward from behind, and speaking with bluff decision, "for taking it upon myself to fetch Colonel Lutteridge's aunt to see him. But I thought," added he, with a grim attempt at conciliation, "that an older head than yours would not be amiss, at a consultation I wish to have in my patient's room. Lady Manners and I will proceed there at once, if you will excuse us."

With an air of mortification, which she hoped might not be without its effect, Constance stood aside at once.

"You will not want me then," she said; "but, dear Dr Blackburn, you will not keep me long in suspense? Remember that we—that I cannot but be anxious——"

"No longer than we can help, ma'am." The latter part of her appeal he disregarded. "This way, Lady Manners."

"Very odd!" said Constance, returning to her cousin, who had remained quietly where he was. "He has never allowed any one but Mrs Hubbly to be in Simon's room before, and she is as close as he. What is all the mystery about? I suppose the poor dear fellow is light-headed, but what of that? Who pays any attention to nonsense talked by a man in a fever? It is perfectly absurd an old country doctor giving himself such airs! But they are all alike — anything in the world to give themselves importance!"

"I don't see what good my mother is to do," said Bertie. "I should have said she was the last person for a sick-room; she gets as nervous as possible if we do but cut our little fingers!"

"If it had been Agatha who had come, I should have seen some sense in it," mused Constance, with a variety of conflicting emotions. "If Simon is so ill as to make his recovery doubtful, Agatha ought of course to be with him. If he is in danger——" She paused; all Jack's chances and her own flashed for the moment on her view,—but better feelings prevailed. "Oh, I hope and trust he is not so bad as that!" she cried, sincerely. "Poor, poor Simon! Dear Simon! I could not bear to think of anything happening to good, kind Simon!"

It was one thing to contemplate the regency of Lutteridge and her son's prospects, whilst her brother-in-law was an almost unknown creature of the imagination; it was another to acquiesce in the untimely death of one who had shown her nothing but kindness, and that, under the roof which sheltered her, and belonged to him.

"I don't think it can be *that*," said Bertie, in a low voice. "I think you have overshot the mark, Constance. It is only a fad of the doctor's, I daresay. Of course if it had been really —really—really, you know, Agatha would have been the one, as you say, to have been sent for."

"But why has he sent for any one?" replied his cousin, more briskly, and reverting to her former speculations. "Why must he needs go off in that disagreeable way, frightening one till one hardly knows what to think? I wonder how long they will be?"

"The carriage has been sent round, did you know?"

"Has it? That means a long stay. It makes me quite nervous. Hark! here is some one!"

She sprang up. It was only the housekeeper, who had watched in the sick-room while the doctor was away, and had been now dismissed.

"Well, Hubbly?" said her mistress, impatiently. "Well?"

"Her ladyship will stop some hours, ma'am. Her ladyship desired me to let you know, and hoped you would be so kind as to excuse her remaining in Master's room, and would send back the carriage."

"When is it to return?" simultaneously inquired both the lady and gentleman, with a glance at each other.

"At six, ma'am."

"Is your master worse?"

The housekeeper pursed up her lips.

"My master is not worse, sir; but he is not better. The doctor thinks her ladyship should remain with him as long as she can."

"Does he know her?"

"Yes, sir—ma'am. Master knew her at once, and seemed"—she paused—"glad to see her. Dr Blackburn thinks that if he can say out all he has to say to her ladyship, he will be easier in his mind, and may get sleep."

"All he has to say!" cried Constance. "What has he to say? Why could he not say it to you, Hubbly? I suppose he is not coherent—that he does not know what he is speaking about?"

"No, ma'am, he does not; but for all that, he understands well enough whom he wants to say it to. He had set his heart—foolish like—on seeing her ladyship, and was always sending and sending for her; but of course, under the circumstances," with a sigh, "no one liked to trouble the family."

"So that's it, is it?" said Bertie, relieved. "Well, Hubbly, I am glad it is nothing more; we were rather alarmed, you see, not knowing what was going on. Of course my mother would have come in a moment," he added, with an air, "if she had had the smallest idea that

her being with him would do your master—my, ah—poor cousin, any good; of course she would have been here immediately."

"Yes, sir. Her ladyship being with him will do Master a great deal of good."

It was impossible to guess if the emphasis laid on the words meant anything beyond what met the ear: she curtseyed and withdrew, leaving the pair little the wiser for her explanation.

"Well," said Bertie, at last, "perhaps I had better go home, and tell them how it is. It is of no use staying longer here—at least for all the information I am likely to get."

"Will you have the dogcart?"

"No, thanks; I'll walk. It's the only way I can get a walk."

He departed, and she was left to her own conjectures for the rest of the afternoon.

Neither Lady Manners nor the doctor quitted the sick-room until after dusk; even a coaxing little message about tea, despatched through Hubbly, failed to draw forth either before.

At length, however, and not till the carriage was again at the door, steps approached.

By this time inquisitiveness and alarm on Constance's part had subsided into what was

nothing more nor less than a fit of the sulks. She who — at least for the time — was mistress of the house, and who was also the near relation of the patient, ought not, she told herself, to be in the position of a humble interrogator. She had been illused, treated contemptuously, and she was swelling with wounded *amour propre*, when at length she rose to receive her tardy visitors. Lady Manners's hasty and tremulous apologies were scarcely responded to, and she was too much hurt even to express the half-playful resentment which during the first hour of her solitude had trembled on her lips. She would not now ask a question—would not pass an observation. But it was all to no purpose : the elderly lady, who was shaking with nervous agitation and disquietude, only felt the relief of not being harassed by curiosity which she could ill have satisfied, and instead of experiencing any of the feeling which Constance had hoped to excite, she was mentally grateful for a reticence which she attributed to a delicacy not too often shown.

Most of the talking fell upon the doctor; but even he was abrupt in his remarks, and appeared to be more concerned for the welfare of

his fellow-watcher, than for any vexation either of them might have caused Mrs Robert Lutteridge.

"I do hope you won't be the worse for this," Constance heard him say as he escorted Lady Manners to her carriage. Then he added—but this not till they were out of hearing—"It has been most painful to me, I can assure you, my dear lady, but it appeared to me that there was no other course to take. You have done him all the good that I expected; we may hope for the best now."

"Am I to return to-morrow?"

"Not unless I send. I have great hopes that it may not be necessary. You will remember," he added, with his head well into the carriage—"remember, Lady Manners, that no one, with the exception of myself and Mrs Hubbly, who understands to hold her tongue, know a word of this. It is not our affair, and however it may be arranged between the families," deferentially, "our silence may be depended on."

She bowed in silence, holding out her hand, which was grasped in honest sympathy, and as he turned from the window the good man's eyes were wet. "I have lived among them," he mur-

mured, "all these years, and never knew before the stuff these proud aristocrats were made of."

The reader may guess, though Lady Manners did not, for what she had been sent for to Lutteridge. Some occasional misgivings, we have seen, had vexed her spirit with regard to the happiness of the betrothed pair, but these had been at the worst but passing chills, momentary qualms of uneasiness, which had never taken root, and which during the last month had ceased to intrude themselves entirely.

It was a full month since she had seen the cousins in each other's company; first had come their own stay in town, then Simon's prolonged absence—prolonged up to the night on which the accident took place—and finally his illness.

Agatha had not apparently missed his society, however sorry she might be for the present cause which kept him from her. Up to within the last week she had been engrossed with her numerous preparations, her notes, her presents, and her farewell visits.

She had even remarked composedly that it was as well perhaps that these could be got through without interruption; and since no doubts as to her lover's affection happened ever

to have entered her mind, her mother had allowed her own fears to slip out of sight.

The dreadful truth took her wholly by surprise.

Even more by surprise, if we may dare to affirm so, than if she had not suspected something of it at one time. It was now learnt with a flash of conviction, instantaneously stamped upon the brain, which, as it were, had been prepared for its reception.

Listening to her nephew, as with dilated eye and burning breath he explained to her the mistake he had made, with the utmost pains, clearness, and circumspection, she could hardly bring herself to believe that he was unconscious of what he was saying, that his mind was at least only partially following the revelations made by his lips. She knew it was all true—too true—every word of it; and in the face of the kind old friend by her side she read also his conviction of the same. "But I don't understand," she whispered, aside. "I thought he was—not himself. How can he speak like this?"

"He is at once perfectly sane and perfectly insane," pronounced Dr Blackburn, with profound discrimination. "He is saying what is

exactly—hum—the case, I doubt not, my dear lady; but he is quite irresponsible for saying it. He is aware that he is relieving his brain by telling you what has oppressed it during the—probably during the past month or two; but at the same time he does not know—that is to say, he has not the power to keep it back. If you understand what I mean—it is difficult to explain—but the *will* has nothing to do with this. It is the mere revolt of overburdened nature; until he got you here, and could make you listen to him, it was his constant outcry. As yet, you have heard him at his best; if you were to be present when an excited fit comes on, you would perceive that the mind is perfectly disordered. He calls upon your daughter's name for hours together——"

"Indeed! But surely he would not wish *her* to hear."

"Not Miss Agatha;" he shook his head. "See, Lady Manners, he is beginning now. Listen. You will hear the way he goes on all through the night sometimes. There! Hark to him! There now!"

"Oh, Hester, Hester!" moaned the sick man, "my little Hester, why won't you come? Are

they keeping you away? Are they cruel to you? They were cruel to me, once; they told me what was false—false. Don't mind them, Hester! come to me. I will be true to you; I will tell you all about it. Hester! Hester! why don't you come? What? They won't let you? Go to Jem; Jem is always kind and good. He will make them send you. Did they say I did not love you? It was wicked to tell you that. Don't believe it, Hester—it is a lie! Did they say you were not to listen to me? Oh, what a shame—what a shame! Hester, come here," rising on his pillow, and speaking softly and persuasively. "There's the doctor now, he is a good man; he will bring you if you ask him; won't you, doctor? You see she can't come all by herself in the snow; she might get lost. People do get lost sometimes, don't they? And it is dark, too, and cold—oh, so cold!" shivering. "She has not got a hat either: she must have something on her head, doctor; mind that, when you bring her. . . . What? She says she won't come? Not if I send for her? Hester! *Hester!* Oh no; she says she won't. Never—never!"

The doctor nodded intelligently, as the speaker

fell back, exhausted for the moment. "That is the way," he said.

"How long has this gone on?" asked Lady Manners, with pale lips.

"For the last three days. I thought—I may say I hoped—that it was but a phase of the delirium which would pass away, and I kept it to myself as long as I possibly could; but at length it became evident that something must be done to allay the mental irritation. Besides which, in his calmer moments, he was so extremely lucid in his statements, and so urgent about your hearing them, that I fancied bringing you here was the only course I could take. See, he is trying to attract your attention again."

"Tell them," said the sick man, hoarsely, and reaching out a hand towards his aunt, "that it was my fault. You know all about it—I am sure you do—it was you who told me she would be glad to hear the news, so of course" —he nodded—"you knew she wouldn't! You go and say that it was a mistake, will you? Never mind about me, but don't let *her* be unhappy; I can't bear that. They are all unkind to her, I think; that was why she cried so. She

would not tell me why, but I know it was that. Don't say it was *I*," he shuddered; "I never was unkind to Hester, because — how could I be? I love her. Tell her so, and send her here: Jem was going to bring her, but— but he died. He died, you know," he added, mysteriously: "it was a great pity; but he did. I don't think it was his fault. It was the snow came upon him, and threw him down. He said it did not hurt at all, but it must have been very cold. Hester was warm. I took her to the blacksmith's fire. She wanted to get into it—silly child—but she knew no better. I took care that the snow should not come near her; it would have hurt her very much. She was quite happy all the time she was with me; but now she is gone," he added, plaintively; "they have taken her away, and I shall never see her again."

"Tell your aunt all about it, Colonel," said the doctor, encouragingly. "Here she is, you see. Tell her how it came about, and she will put it right for you."

"Where is she?" said he, gazing vacantly before him. "Where has she gone? She was here just now, but she is gone away like all

the rest. Everybody goes away, and no one will believe what I tell them, and they won't let Hester come——"

"I am here, dear Simon," sobbed Lady Manners.

"Oh? Oh—h?" He paused. "You are come back? Oh—h? Another pause. "Well, you see, it was a mistake from the very first. I think it was the letter did it, but I don't know. I would have that letter killed, if I were you; it went to Agatha, when I told it to go to Hester! It shouldn't have done that, you know. I may have told it wrong, but I didn't mean what I said—I was always such a stupid fellow about letters—but everybody knew. They all knew it was Hester. Ask her, and she will tell you. Only she is gone——" He was beginning his old refrain.

"Well, and what then?" interposed the doctor's cheerful voice. "We understand all about that, you know; but here is your aunt, who is going to put everything to rights——"

"Aunt," said Simon, rising in his bed, with a strength and solemnity that startled both the watchers, "before God, it was not my fault. I don't know how it was"—putting his hand

to his forehead—"I can't remember. But it was all wrong; it was something in that letter that was wrong; it was not what I put into it. Won't you now"—quickly—"go and get the letter, and tear it to pieces, and then Hester will come back to me?"

"Come, come, Colonel," said the doctor, reprovingly, "that is not like you! Tear up the letter? No, no."

"But it would not say what I wanted," pleaded the patient. "It said the wrong words. *She* knows"—pointing to his aunt—"she said Hester would be glad: that was because she knew."

"But what about this letter? Would you like to have it read to you, and then you can pick out the wrong words?"

He sprang up again. "Bring it me at once. Show it me and I will kill it: yes, I will, because it made Hester unhappy. *I* did not mind being unhappy, but it should not have gone to *her*. Yes, I'll kill it!" fire lighting up his eyes.

"You shall have it—you shall have it," said the doctor, soothing him. "But I would not kill it if I were you; I would explain it to

your aunt, and she will understand it all. Then she can take it to Sir John, and he will kill it. Would not that be better?"

The letter was then spread before him, and he smiled, like a child, at the sight.

How simple seemed all at once the misinterpretation—how palpable the slip—now that the clue had been found! It was but the omission of a name, and another name soon after following, in conjunction with what was now seen to be merely a sisterly confidence. The mother, in giving her assurance of Hester's pleasure at the tidings, had been perhaps more to blame than any one. Bitterly did she now reproach herself. She had written it on the spur of the moment, without stopping to consider whether, in making the assertion, she was confining herself to what was strictly true or not, anxious only to say something which should assure him that sundry former foolish little passages in the child's life were now forgotten; and to what a depth her idle words had struck!

"See," said Simon, holding out the letter, "there it is—take it to Sir John. It was for his sake—for his sake and all of theirs, I did it. Tell him that; I would not tell him now, only

that Hester cried. I did not like to see her cry. I thought she had said she wouldn't."

"Is that all, now?" said the doctor. "You would like us to go at once and see about it, would you not? Then you must lie down and get a good sleep. Eh?"

"Yes—I'm tired. I'll go to sleep, doctor."

His voice dropped, and his eyes closed.

He had only once mentioned Agatha's name. She had been too little to him. He had done what he could to please her—had fulfilled to the utmost all that she had expected or desired, but she was now to him as though she had never existed.

With his aunt's presence, and her repeated assurance that the letter should never trouble him more, he appeared to be at length satisfied, and presently, to their unspeakable relief, sank into a sound slumber.

It was then that, consigning him to the care of the housekeeper, they took their departure.

CHAPTER XXXV.

BERTIE'S DECISION.

"Where men of judgment creep, and feel their way,
The positive pronounce without dismay:
Without the means of knowing right from wrong,
They always are decisive, clear, and strong;
Fling at your head conviction in a lump,
And gain remote conclusions at a jump."

—COWPER.

"BUT what on earth are we to do about it?" exclaimed poor Sir John, when the whole was made clear to him, and he had been brought at last to allow that Constance was not at the bottom of all the mischief. "What will people say? Upon my word I never was in such a position in my life! It's all very well to say the marriage can't go on—of course it can't go on—but that leaves us just where we were before! I suppose we must give out that it has fallen through about settlements," he added.

"My dear!"

"Well?"

"How can we say that?"

"I suppose it is the only thing to be said."

"But it is not true."

"True?" He paused; that idea not having occurred to him. "Well, I don't know; I thought it was what people always gave out on these occasions. What are we to say then? What reason are we to give for breaking it off at all?"

"I do not see," said Lady Manners, sadly, "that we need offer any. It will be known at last, I suppose."

"Known? How?"

"It must come out some time, my dear."

"Come out? Nonsense. There is no need for it ever to come out. Blackburn won't tell, and no one else knows."

"When he marries Hester——"

"Marries Hester!" echoed Sir John, in a high key. "Marries Hester! But I'll be hanged if he shall marry Hester! If he won't have one sister, he shan't have the other! Is *he* to pick and choose which he'll have? Let him take the one he wanted first, or none at all!"

"It is the one he wanted first that he wants still."

"Let him take her, then. Pooh! You mean Hester! That's sheer nonsense."

"You know he meant——"

"Meant! How should I know what he meant? I know what he *said*. I know that he has put us in a most horrible fix, and that I see no way out of it. And I know that I'll have no more marriages in that quarter."

"You do not think about him."

"*You* do not think about *me*; nor about the sorry figure I shall cut in the affair, when it comes to be known. It is nothing but Simon with every one of you women—Jane would have had him too, I believe, if he had asked her. Not one of you but must needs——"

"Nonsense, my dear!"

"It is all very well to say 'Nonsense, my dear,' but I can tell you, Emily, that I mean to manage this business in my own way; I will be master in my own house. If Simon comes to me for any more of my daughters, I shall just bow him out at the door, 'No, thank you, Colonel Lutteridge.' I have had quite enough of such doings. He has made his own bed, and he must lie on it."

"If you had seen him lying on his poor bed as I did!"

"Well, he is all right again now." This conversation took place about three weeks after the scene narrated in the last chapter, and there had been a second interview between Lady Manners and her nephew the day before, the result of which had been made known to all concerned. Until then — until it was certain that the whole was not a chimera of the sick man's brain—the parents had wisely held their peace. "He is all right again now," pursued Sir John, resentfully, "and he will be coming to me for Hester before I can say Jack Robinson! That's the way — that's the thing to do — as soon as your hero has got everything his own way——"

"How can you be so bitter—so unjust?"

"I'm not unjust, but I'm not going to be made a fool of. There is poor Agatha,—you don't think of her."

"Indeed I do; I have thought more of her than of any one, poor dear."

"It is perfectly insufferable," said Sir John, fuming up and down the room. "The Cotterill business was bad enough, but this is chastising us with scorpions! Why did he ever come near us? I am sure *we* did not want him!"

"I thought Simon had been the last man in

the world to have had anything underhand about him," continued he, more gently. "I thought he had been as straightforward as the day——"

"So he is. If you would only listen—only be quiet for a minute. You don't know——"

"I know well enough."

"He has behaved nobly—admirably. There is not a word to be said against him. He can only command our respect and affection for the rest of our lives for all that he has suffered for our sakes."

"He has made *us* suffer; I don't see that we owe him any great respect and affection for that!"

"Think what it must have been," cried she, "not only to have believed himself rejected by the one he had loved from the first, but to have found himself bound to another, and that other a *sister*. Think what he must have endured coming to the house day after day, and week after week, while it all went on, doing his part so bravely——"

"Playing the hypocrite!"

"If he did, such hypocrisy—God bless him for it!" cried Lady Manners, fairly breaking down. "I, at least, know how to prize such self-sacrifice."

"The man was an idiot," broke out Sir John. "Did he suppose we wanted any sacrifice of the kind? Did he imagine Agatha wished to marry him, whether he would or no? It was paying her a very poor compliment to fancy that she would have been so mightily disappointed if he had refused her. Agatha has more sense. She might marry far better men than he any day."

"You would have been terribly mortified if he had done anything but what he did."

"I should think I would—the fellow made an ass of himself from the beginning—but it would have been nothing to this! We could have kept it quiet then, no one need have known a thing about it beyond ourselves,—now, it will be all over the county."

Lady Manners sighed; in that, at least, he had spoken the truth.

The chief concern, the chief amount of the sympathy bestowed on them in their hour of sorrow, had been connected with Agatha.

"When you were all so happy in dear Agatha's prospects," had been the key-note of friends' lamentations; and it fell, if the truth were told, fully harder on her than on her more choleric and placable husband, to have to face

the crowd of inquiries, conjectures, and condolences which would rain on Wancote once the truth came out.

But, whatever happened, she would be true to Simon.

Her heart swelled with the resolution that, despite Sir John and circumstances, untoward as the past had been, and ominous as the future still lowered, she would have him yet take the place of her dead son.

Had he not pillowed her darling's dying head upon his breast, and spoken of Jem in his frenzy in accents which thrilled her very soul? That alone would have been sufficient; but besides that, she had, as we know, a secret infatuation about her nephew; even in this hour of grief and trouble, she would not renounce him.

"What does Agatha herself say to it all?" inquired Sir John, presently.

"She is very quiet, and says that no one has been to blame. I think that she has behaved as well as it was possible to expect that she should."

"If she can say *that*, she has indeed. It is more than I could. How does she make out that no one has been to blame?"

"There is no good in going over it all afresh,

my dear," rejoined the poor lady, wearily; the last being about the twentieth time that she had laboured through the explanation in vain. "There is really no use in our talking it over so often."

"Do you mean that Agatha actually does not think he has used her ill?"

"Indeed she does not. The very worst that can be said of him is that he fell into an error of judgment. Even that seems cruel, when it was entirely owing to the tenderness of his heart——"

"Tenderness of his fiddlestick! Simon is not a molly, whatever he may be."

"I should hope," said Lady Manners, with dignity, "that a man need not be a 'molly,' as you call it, to have feeling for others. A chivalrous generosity of nature——"

"Huts!"

"I shall not argue with you"—she was roused in her turn to indignation—"if you turn my words into ridicule."

She was leaving the room, but this could not be endured; he had not had his say out, and there was no one else whom he could say it to. He was obliged to conciliate his Emily.

"Well, well," he said; "you fire up at a word! Can't you stop a moment? You know that I

don't mean all I say, but I do think we are in a bad plight, and how to get out of it I for one don't see."

Neither did she, for that matter.

"And you will not allow that he has used us badly?" added Sir John, gloomily. Bertie entering at the moment, caught the words. He had passed his examination, and had run down to tell the news at Wancote, but was returning to his regiment that afternoon, glad, if the truth were told, to do so; and he now came in with his topcoat on, and a time-table in his hand, announcing that he was about to start. "Bertie," said his father, "here is mamma saying that in all this affair we have nothing to complain of."

She had not said so; but let it pass.

"Bertie," his mother summoned him to her side, "before you go, my dear, I should like to hear what you feel about it. You know all, I suppose?"

"Yes, mamma."

"Well?"

"You see," said Bertie, with the air of a sphinx, "it was an uncommonly awkward predicament for him to be placed in."

"Yes, yes — well?" interposed his father, impatiently,—"of course. Well?"

"He couldn't get out of it."

"Well?"

"I don't know what one would have done," said Bertie, thoughtfully, "but I suppose it was all right. Good-bye, papa: good-bye, mamma."

"They tell me that he is a clever fellow," said Sir John, looking round as the door closed; "but I am hanged if I don't think, sometimes, that Bertie is the greatest jackass I ever met in my life!"

No one was more thoroughly surprised at the turn events had now taken, than the lady at Lutteridge. Constance had been so uniformly accustomed to rely on her own penetration, and had been so convinced of its being superior to that of her neighbours, that to find it thus at fault was a shock compared to which Agatha's engagement had been a trifle. That had indeed shaken her for the moment, but she had rallied quickly, and had been able to take comfort, even at the first, in telling herself and all concerned, that she had prognosticated it from the beginning. "I knew how it would be," was her gay greeting to both Simon and Agatha.

But of this extraordinary and unforeseen complication, no suspicion had ever dawned upon her mind.

When first told, she was dumb. That suited her aunt very well. Then she murmured, "Poor Agatha!" which did still better. Finally, the tiniest trail of a tear was visible on her small, cool cheek, and Lady Manners caught the smothered "Poor, poor Simon!" which drew from her the first spontaneous kiss she had ever bestowed on Constance.

But left to herself after her aunt's departure, it was not possible that the old nature should not reassert its rights. The tear was quickly dried, and the shrewd little widow set herself to grasp the new situation, and see how and in what manner it was likely to affect her and hers. She was not long ere she contrived to extract sweet out of the bitter. It was, to be sure, outwardly a wretched state of things—it would make a great noise, and it was likely to expose both families to the contempt, if not to the censure of the world.

That was bad; but matters would, she knew well, not long last thus.

"It will blow over in a year or two," she said to herself. "It will pass into a legend of romance, so thrilling that we shall all be eager to have had some part to play in it. If Agatha marries, as of course she will, all the sooner for

having burnt her fingers now, no one will have had any lasting damage done. To think of its being Agatha of all people, to get into such a scrape! I am really sorry for Agatha; she will be alive to all the unfortunate details of the *esclandre*—will see it in its daylight aspect, not under the cloud of night, which might mercifully have veiled that view had she been a love-lorn damsel. Upon my word, I think it would have been better for her to have been one! And so it is little chubby-faced Hester who is to reign at the Manor after all, and I have got a reprieve I little dreamed of, at the last moment!"

It was decided that, for the present, Wancote must be abandoned.

Agatha's pride might enable her for the time to bear up with outward calm, and her even temperament might be trusted to reasserting itself for the future, but she must suffer, and it was felt that she had a better chance of regaining her tranquillity away from home, than amid its familiar surroundings. That very pride which forbade outward manifestation of her trouble had been brought low, and she had behaved, as her mother said, well. As for Hester, — but her feelings may easily be im-

agined. In a tumult of mingled emotions she had confessed all, and she could not now do enough for the sister who, she felt, had been, however innocently, wronged. That both were thus earnestly endeavouring to act according to the dictates of conscience and good feeling, was in itself a consolation and support, and gladly as their fond parent would have lightened their sorrows — the one a present, the other a past pain, — she knew the Hand which had dealt the several blows, and that they had not been causelessly administered. Upon her knees she meekly took the cup which had been sent, the greater and the lesser griefs mingling in one.

It was at her suggestion that Wancote was to be abandoned for some time to come; and ere Colonel Lutteridge was able to be moved, and ere prying eyes and tongues could discover what was truth and what was fiction in the mysterious rumours that were afloat, the Manners family had quitted England.

Let us, however, pause for a moment, and go back to the second interview between Colonel Lutteridge and his aunt, in order that the reader may understand that it was none of his

seeking, and that his purpose remained unchanged until he was compelled to abandon it.

One afternoon a messenger was sent to Lutteridge to know if the invalid could be permitted to have a short visit from his aunt; and as Dr Blackburn was tolerably well aware to what the short visit would relate, he took care to permit and also to prepare his patient for it.

"You are getting on famously now, my dear Colonel; we shall have you going about soon, as if nothing had happened. I wish now, if you feel in the humour, that you could give me some idea of how you came by such an adventure? What you were doing on such a night not to take advantage of your own comfortable carriage, which was actually waiting for you at the station? Walking is all very well, but after hard travelling, and a shocking accident,—altogether it was, if you will excuse my saying so, a foolhardy thing to do!"

"I don't see that," said Colonel Lutteridge, coldly.

"But what made you think of it, now? What, now, was the inducement? You did not go with Miss Hester as far as Wancote; we might have understood your doing that——"

"Excuse me, I can't explain," quickly. "That

is,—it was, ah—simple enough. I certainly intended to go on with her, but I felt ill—I recollect something of that sort, and thought I had better get home, to avoid the chance of a scene at the Hall."

"You got out of the carriage, and walked from the side lodge?"

"Yes."

"Can you recollect anything more about it?"

"Not much. I believe I set off at a good pace, and then, I think, about half-way I began to lag. I do remember, however, closing the shrubbery gate, and wondering if I should be able to reach the house. That is about all."

"Probably you have narrated exactly what happened. You were found just within the shrubbery gate, in a drift under the laurel bank; you may be deeply thankful, Colonel, that you were not there an hour longer."

"But," proceeded the doctor, who felt that he must get beyond this, "you were not out of danger, by any means, for some time after that. You were"—speaking slowly, and marking the effect of each word—"in a high state of fever, and delirium next."

"Eh?" said Simon, his attention evidently arrested. "What! Delirious, was I?"

"Yes. Just so. Delirious."

"Did I rave?"

"A great deal."

He was now all on the alert, listening for every rejoinder. "Well," he said, with a forced laugh, "if that is so, you are bound at least to inform me of what went on, doctor. You must have learnt all my secrets."

"I did."

The patient's brow lowered, and he set his lips with an expression which was meant to overawe, but for which the sturdy little doctor did not care a button.

"I did, Colonel Lutteridge," he proceeded, succinctly. "*All* your secrets, I should say."

"Then, Dr Blackburn, they are of course as safe with you as with a priest at confessional."

"Certainly, Colonel."

Both paused, waiting for the next move.

Simon was the first to speak; he leaned his head on his hand, and appeared for some minutes to meditate, then merely lifting his eyes, he said, "Without more fencing, I should be glad to know the substance of what passed. You can have no objection to telling me?"

"None whatever," said the doctor, kindly; "in fact, my dear sir, it is my particular wish to do

so, as it may help you to—to know what to say to a visitor who will look in upon you by-and-by."

He drew his chair closer, and related as much as he thought desirable of what had taken place.

"And my aunt heard it," said his auditor, thoughtfully. "I wish it had been between us two. I wish no one else had been there."

"Perhaps I ought to mention Mrs Hubbly. She kept watch over you during my absence; she also heard."

"I can manage her," said Simon. "But my aunt—what did she—what do you think—what impression did she seem to receive?"

"In what way?"

"Did it appear to strike her as being anything beyond the ravings of a sick man? Did she imagine it was—pshaw!" said Colonel Lutteridge, impatiently—"did she know it was the truth, or not?"

"She did."

"So did you?"

"So did I."

"Be so good, Dr Blackburn, if you can recollect—as no doubt you can—to inform me of what my aunt said. What made her bring the letter?"—he had been informed of its produc-

tion—"and what was the final result of the whole?"

He was told all. "And she is coming to-day?"

"Yes. I understand there is some talk of the family leaving Wancote, and going abroad for the rest of the winter."

"Leaving Wancote!"

He appeared to be much struck. He fixed such a look upon his companion as made even that stout heart quail.

"What does this mean?" he said, as though to himself. "Leaving Wancote! That looks like—— Tell me, doctor, do you think Lady Manners is the person to take what may have been the mere wanderings of a mind diseased, for *facts* to be *acted upon?*"

"It seems like it, Colonel. To be sure, as you appear to infer, it does seem a hasty move; but the remedy, you must remember, lies in your own hands. You have either to confirm or refute the statements then made, according as you think fit. Should you desire to put them on one side, I have not the least doubt you will find Lady Manners only too ready to agree."

Whether he did so desire or not, he did not

then make known; he sat in brooding silence until his aunt was announced, when the doctor rose, and left them together. Half an hour afterwards Lady Manners came out with a faltering step and trembling lip; she had gone in with head erect, and no small air of state, designed to maintain in her nephew's eyes the dignity of both her daughters; but the first sight of his bowed head had made her resolution quaver. What passed between them neither disclosed at the time, nor for years afterwards; but his name from that time henceforth became almost as sacred in her eyes as that of her lost son.

She would kiss her youngest daughter, and whisper now and again a vague word of hope; and she was especially tender and considerate towards Agatha; but in their presence she avoided all allusion to the cousin who had made so terrible a stir in their tranquil life. They wintered at Rome; and Colonel Lutteridge, as soon as he was able to travel, set off on a voyage which would take him three months to accomplish, as it was first projected, and which might be prolonged to any extent.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

PATIENCE NEEDED.

"Affliction may one day smile again,
And, till then, sit thee down, sorrow."
—*Love's Labour Lost.*

The two leading houses of the neighbourhood being thus left empty—for Constance also fled the scene, unable to endure the dulness which supervened—a dreary winter was passed by all left behind.

Night after night the setting sun shed his parting beams on the two deserted mansions, lighting up rows of windows that were rarely opened, and stacks of chimneys through which no genial fires within sent their wreaths of smoke.

Bertie, coming down to Wancote to attend a spring meeting not far off, found the place intolerable, despite the commotion his brief

residence at it made. He had to ask for the key of the garden, the key of the boat-house, the key of the great drawing-room. In whatever he had a fancy to do, he was thwarted by obstacles thrown across his path. He could not ride, for among all the horses not one could be found in the stables fit to mount him; he could not go on the river, for the boats were all housed for repairs. There were no spring flowers decking the beds which had been wont to make the terrace gay; these had been dug up, and made ready for the summer geraniums. The keeper had taken out the dogs when he paid his first visit to the kennels; and even the man who had charge of the pheasants' chickens had not waited for his young master's appearance to feed them. In short, the servants had got the upper hand, and did not care to be put out of their way.

At Lutteridge matters were much the same: Mrs Hubbly, indeed, gave him a welcome, and an excellent cup of tea in her own room; but he had a view of Kean, the usually sleek and obsequious butler, strolling in front of the house, with a cigar in his mouth, and a billycock hat on his head, and the sight was not pleasant.

True, no sooner did Kean learn who was inside—for, of course, he had never thought of attending to the door-bell, and had merely come to the front by accident—than the lounger disappeared, and ere Mr Manners came forth, was replaced by the duly respectful domestic, clothed and in his right mind; but all the time Bertie sat in Mrs Hubbly's arm-chair drinking tea, his eye was vexed by the apparition. Like Agatha, he had a strong sense of decorum, and never forgot, except when under the influence of passion, what was due from himself to his inferiors, or from them to him.

As he took the cup off Mrs Hubbly's deferential hand, and helped himself to her hot cakes and apricot-jam, he was as completely at his ease as, when in Constance's boudoir above, he had interrogated, and been baffled by her with regard to his cousin's illness.

"Ah, Mrs Hubbly," he said now, munching away with good appetite, "you knew more than you wished to tell Mrs Lutteridge and me, that afternoon when my mother was here!"

Mrs Hubbly smiled.

"Oh, you need not fear," said he. "I am not going into the subject. Of course it does

not do to speak about, eh? But I say, what news have you of the Colonel? Where is he now? When did you last hear?"

"Master was right away at the other end of the world, sir; I think it was New Zealand, Mr Lewis said. This is the first letter we have had, sir; and Mr Lewis brought it up the day before yesterday. If we had known you was to be at the Hall, Mr Lewis would have sent it, I'm sure, Mr Bertie. I beg pardon, sir, but the old name do slip out so handy."

"At New Zealand, is he? I did not know he had gone there. Oh! And where is Mrs Lutteridge?"

"Mrs Robert, sir? I really don't know just at this present; we have not heard for some weeks now. Mrs Robert was moving about, I believe."

It struck Bertie oddly to hear his cousin so designated, but it had, in fact, been a great point of late with the upper servants at the Manor, who had resolved, when anticipating the arrival of a mistress who should be all their own, to insist upon her rights in this respect. Every underling, down to the stable-boys and the scullery-maids, had been instructed to remember

that though their present mistress had been so long the only lady in the family that she had come to be generally known as Mrs Lutteridge, she was, in fact, only "Mrs Robert," and that it behoved them all to be careful about this, since a *bona fide* Mrs Lutteridge was so soon to supersede her. Although Constance was tolerated, she was not beloved; and there was always the feeling that she lived there on sufferance, and had no actual right to the place she held—a feeling which, in the vulgar mind, invariably creates ill-will.

Since Colonel Lutteridge had left, they were not sorry for the time to be rid of her too, and to have a season of unrestrained liberty. To further inquiries on the part of Mr Manners, the housekeeper conceded that some of Mrs Robert's movements, however, they had been interested enough to gather. Mrs Robert had been at Brighton, and they heard that Miss Ellen was to be put to school there: sea air, or something of the kind, had been recommended for her.

"A poor, puny, pale-faced little thing she always was," said Mrs Hubbly, compassionately, "and the Manor is not the place for children.

Not as we go on now, at least. Miss Ellen never had no companions of her own to play with, and her mamma does not frolic with her as some ladies does. Miss Hester was the only one who ever took a game of romps with the child, and it was quite pitiful to see how she would look for Miss Hester to come."

"Poor little thing," said Bertie, carelessly. "School is the best place for her; she will have plenty of companions there, at any rate."

"Master was always kind to her," continued the housekeeper, thoughtfully; "but he is a grave gentleman by nature. Still the little thing took to him wonderful, and I'm sure many a time I was astonished to see how patient he would be with her. If he was in good spirits he would amuse her by the hour in a quiet sort of way, and if he was low, or down like, he would just take her up in his arms and tell her to lie still, and she would lie there and say never a word, as long as he would keep her. She was a wonderful affectionate child," continued Mrs Hubbly, warming with her subject, "only nobody could get at her like, for Mrs Robert, not taking much notice of her herself, didn't care for her to be put forward by other people."

She had long desired to say out all that she felt on this head; and now, though it was only to a listener whom she knew by intuition had no interest either in the subject or in her opinion, it was something to have it reach the ear of one of the Manners family. "There's some mammas," she had been wont to say to Kean, "as takes no more heed of their children than if they was ostriches' eggs, which I hear is left in the sand to come out as they may; and 'tis my belief that our missus is one of that sort."

"So she was at Brighton," said Bertie, not having heard a word of the tirade. "Brighton was rather a good idea. Well, Hubbly, and what of Lord and Lady Westmacott, for I saw the flag was up as I came in here?"

"The Countess is in London, I fancy, sir; I don't know where the rest of the family is. It is Lord Thurston who is here, sir, but only for the day. Just like yourself, sir."

"Humph!" thought Bertie, "they must make it pleasanter for him than for me. Hauling up the flag for a single day!"

"I believe it is about some sale of horses, sir. I think Mr Lewis said so."

"Yes, I know. It comes off to-morrow. Are they to be here for Easter?"

"I fancy they are, sir. I fancy I heard so, at least."

"Old Mr Searle has been very ill, I hear."

"Very ill, sir. Mr Edward met me in the village yesterday, and he was good enough to stop and speak. He has not preached for six weeks, I think it is, Mr Edward said."

"Poor old gentleman! Tell Mr Edward I had not time to inquire. To-morrow I go to the Parkers, and I shall be off altogether on Saturday."

"Indeed, sir? I will tell him."

It was now her turn to interrogate. "And you say my lady is well, sir; and Sir John and the young ladies. We have not heard anything of them for a long time."

"Oh, they are going about everywhere. Let me see, where did they write from last? Ay, from Florence. Lady Manners had had a cold, but you know she always does have colds in the winter. I don't think there was anything else."

"Indeed, sir? I am sorry to hear of a cold. 'Tis that delicate chest that her ladyship always

had. I had hoped that a change would have benefited her ladyship."

"I daresay it will. They are not coming home for some time. I don't expect they will be at Wancote before the autumn, if they come then."

"Indeed, sir? Not before the autumn?"

"And perhaps not then."

"Indeed, sir?"

"I want my father to take a Scotch moor," said Bertie, confidentially.

"Yes, sir?"

"He has never had one, and now is the time. There are some splendid moors in the market this spring. I cut the advertisements of several out of the 'Field' the other day, and sent them to him; and if he will only agree, I can manage all the rest myself. I could go up at once, and run my eye over them, and see what the prospect of birds would be, and what dogs we should require, and all about it. Then I could go to Snowie, and settle it all, without my father's having the least trouble from beginning to end. Captain Cotterill would go with me, and we could pass on from one to another, just as we saw whether they would do or not. A few days

would be enough for the whole expedition. Do you see?"

It was his turn now to pursue a topic of interest to himself, and indifference to his companion; but as Mrs Hubbly may fairly be said to have had her innings before, she could not in justice grudge him his.

"I want to go to the north-west," pursued Mr Manners, oblivious of the fact that the north-west and the south-east were alike to a person who knew nothing of either. "I have set my heart on a Ross or Inverness moor, along the western coast. There was one near the mouth of the Caledonian Canal, which looked like us, but I am afraid it is beyond our mark. We do not want a deer-forest, and those millionaires and Yankees raise the rents wherever they go. If we could get a goodish bit of ground with a variety on it, that's what I should like. A low-lying hillside for black game, and one ptarmigan peak, I must say; that's about all I should bargain for. Beside the grouse range, of course."

Then he reflected that he had not yet written to Snowie about the very moor which contained these indispensables, and rose in order to get home before the post left.

Sir John was not ill-pleased with the idea thus presented by his son.

He had himself, undoubtedly, often wished for a shooting in the North; but old habits, which it required an effort to break through, had combined with other hindrances to prevent his taking steps in a new direction.

Both he and his sons had enjoyed "twelfths" on the moors, at the invitations of friends, to whom in their turn had been proffered the coverts of Wancote; so that he had never been sure whether it were worth his while to make a great family move to such a distance, and he was too much of a domestic man to care to go for the season in any other way.

But now, with their reduced numbers, a return to his English home still unadvisable, and a prolonged residence abroad distasteful, this notion of Bertie's was felt at once to be the very thing for them all.

Hester brightened up at the thoughts of mountain climbs, and wild excursions by flood and fell, and her sister and mother more soberly approved of the scheme. Foreign manners and customs were not to the taste of any one of the party; and though they had conscientiously en-

deavoured to enjoy what came in their way,—had frequented picture-galleries, museums, and cathedrals without end, seeing all that was to be seen, and learning all that they could after such a fashion learn,—none of them were fitted for the life.

The summer months certainly brought an improvement: they were in better spirits; a longer time had elapsed since the disastrous epoch which was at first never absent from their thoughts—and Italy was exchanged for Switzerland and the Tyrol.

Lady Manners, when she saw the admiring glances which followed her pretty, high-bred daughters, in their white frocks and shady hats, felt that she was still a mother who might be proud. In their dutiful ministrations towards herself, their forbearance towards each other, and the harmony and concord which both united in maintaining, she saw still more to fill her heart with gratitude towards the Divine Ruler of all things. She had been so crushed; so shaken and miserable; so agonised by her great sorrow, and so fretted by her lesser one, that she had almost come to feel, when she left England, as if she should never care to behold it again.

"Meantime Heaven bears the grievous wrong, and waits
In patient pity till the storm abates;
Applies with gentlest hand the healing balm,
Or speaks the ruffled mind into a calm;
Deigning, perhaps, to show the mourner soon,
'Twas special mercy that denied the boon."

Even so it happened; and in the deepened and strengthened characters of beloved ones left to her,—in the certainty that the trial sent to each had wrought its blessed work, under the Holy Spirit's guidance—that they had not wept and struggled in vain, but were already bringing forth fruits meet for repentance,—she learned to thank God, and take courage. The good seed sown in infancy had been stored away in the heart of each, but it had needed the water of affliction to make it take root, grow, bud, and blossom. The fragrant leaf had needed to be bruised to bring forth its sweet odours, the stone to be broken to reveal the diamond. Even Jane, the gentle Jane, had not before lifted her affections above this world,—Jem alone, as Hester in her grief acknowledged, was the only one fitted for the death which overtook him. Silent, unobtrusive as Jem was, they "all knew"—knew whence sprang his unselfishness, his charity, his hidden deeds of good; what it was which drew the affections of every one with whom he had to do, on the one whom they would

yet have acknowledged was the least noticeable, the least distinguished of the Manners family. Of no one of her other children could the mother have thought with such assurance of a glorious immortality, and this, while it might make the present parting more sorrowful, took from it all its bitterness.

When time, and the soothing effects of change from one beauteous scene to another, had begun to heal with gentle touch the heart which had been so lacerated, there was nothing to bring back the first anguish—no recollection, to make her start and thrill, with renewed sufferings. She could feel that it was right to be cheerful, wise and natural to smile again.

It was about this time that she took to giving little Hester once and again the secret kiss, and whisper of hope. Under such genial skies, invigorated by such an atmosphere, and supported by the inestimable consolations before alluded to, she could not continue to look upon life through such sad-coloured spectacles as she had done. When she had at first found that, in addition to all that had been gone through, more patience would be needed, more uncertainty must be endured about the future, she had seen no day-

light anywhere. Sir John, she had known by experience, might be managed,—the more he said about a matter, the less he was likely to abide by his asseverations; but Simon was different. It was only after his decision was arrived at that he spoke at all; and when he told his aunt of a resolution he had formed, at the close of their last interview, she felt that it was not to be shaken. It was a simple one, and may be guessed by any one, but it took Lady Manners by surprise; and as of course she could say nothing, and could indeed but feel that it raised him higher than ever in her estimation, she could only exclaim to herself that if he were to wait for *that*, he might wait all his life!

It was not till one day towards the latter end of the summer, when she beheld Agatha smiling quite coquettishly upon a handsome young Austrian who had joined their party, that she took heart of grace.

"Perhaps she may really by-and-by meet with some one," she said to herself. "At all events, Agatha is not heart-broken. I never was sure about that engagement after the first; but whatever uneasiness it gave me then, it is certainly a comfort now to find that Simon had

no deeper hold on her affections. She was never in better looks or spirits than she is at this moment."

Agatha was eating apples under the trees at Vevay, framing herself in a leafy bower, with the lake for a background. "Quite a picture," thought the mother; "I wish we had some nice people here, and that absurd Austrian out of the way! I should not wonder at all if she were to find some one in Scotland," concluded Lady Manners, conscious of quite a new feeling on the subject. Hitherto it had been, at least so Constance declared, one of her aunt's objects in life to keep suitors away from her daughters.

"But when so much depends upon it," murmured the excellent woman, in apology to herself—"when it is not the dear girl alone I have to think about, but both of *them*. I do trust that before long, some one may be put in Agatha's way."

She anticipated great results from the Highland sojourn, and was, if the truth were told, slightly downcast when she found that it merely brought a fresh glow of health and cheerfulness to each daughter, instead of a husband for the elder.

"Well," she reflected, with some chagrin, "Jane's invitation to Agatha had better perhaps be accepted; Devonshire is a good county for neighbours, and they will have the house full."

She was shocked to find herself thinking anything of the kind; her motives might be pure, but she hated herself for the result; it seemed degradation to her beautiful Agatha, that she should even have harboured for a moment so sinister a design, and only the unconsciousness of the fair maid herself prevented the mother's feeling that in permitting her to pay the visit, she was doing her a wrong.

Jane wrote before the party left the North, towards the end of October; when even Sir John and Bertie began to feel that it was time to depart. Thoughtful as ever, it occurred to Jane and Herbert that the return to Wancote, which could scarcely be avoided longer, and which by this time Sir John and Lady Manners were in secret alike pining for, could not be equally welcome to Agatha. It was therefore laid before her that Jane had never yet had a visit from either sister by herself, — had not had one of those long, comfortable, chatty, stay-at-home

visits, which are the delight of the youthful married woman; and that it would be a good time for such an one now to take place, since they were themselves going down to Herbert's little abode near his father's Devonshire seat, on the very day when the others were returning to Wancote. They could thus meet by the way, and carry Agatha off, to have the benefit of their escort on her journey.

It all arranged itself too well, not to have been made to suit, by the accommodating Cotterills. Agatha was only too glad to go, and a cousin was procured to be a companion for Hester, who, her mother judged, ought not to have too much leisure for solitary wanderings.

After her Devonshire visit was over, permission was further requested by Agatha, who found it pleasant to be made much of, and welcomed everywhere, to extend her absence. Several people had asked her to come to them, which hospitality she was inclined to accept; and in spite of herself, Lady Manners was again feverishly expectant of some interesting results. With the last week of March, however, Agatha returned as she went.

Lutteridge was still deserted by its lord, but Constance was there—had taken up her abode at the Manor, as usual, the autumn before, to fill the house once more with guests and gaiety.

"It is not here that anything is likely to happen," reflected the mother, still, in spite of her conscious integrity, blushing for herself. "My poor girl's story is of too recent a date, and too widely known, to make it likely that any one in this neighbourhood will come forward for her hand. To be sure it happened a year and a quarter ago! But will other people remember that? *We* may know that she has been mercifully enabled to bear up through this trial, and even to get over as much of it as one would desire to have pass away, but will others give her credit for so much? I do hope"—energetically—"our kind friends will not go about publishing everywhere, that Agatha never means to marry!"

PART X.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"'TIS AN ILL WIND THAT BLOWS NOBODY GOOD."

"Be cheerful; wipe thine eyes,
Some falls are means the happier to arise."

LADY MANNERS had more grounds than she was aware of, for supposing that such an assertion would be made. It was generally understood in the neighbourhood that Miss Manners would live and die an old maid, that Hester would find a mate somewhere else, and that Colonel Lutteridge would never come back to the Manor.

"I don't know, indeed," was Constance's reply to all interrogation. "My brother-in-law says nothing whatever about it. I believe he is going to Japan."

"Japan was the bright idea of the moment," she whispered to Hester, once; "but Japan has done its part now, I consider. It must be the

South Sea Islands next time, I think. Never you fear, Hetty; both are entirely suggestions of the imagination. Shall I tell you as a secret, the real, exact, unvarnised truth? He is no further off than the Suez Canal, and I warrant you he never goes out of reach of the English mail!"

But he might as well be by the shores of the North Pacific, supposing he continued inexorable, and Agatha unwedded! Of course Hester knew, had stolen from her mother by this time, the condition on which alone he had avowed his intentions of returning to seek her hand, and although no words had passed between the two with regard to their expectations, each was well aware what made Agatha's handwriting so specially interesting during this term of her absence. Blind folks! Neither one nor other dreamed that the Prince for whose arrival they were so anxious, was actually at their own gates!

But so it was.

"Do you think," hesitated Lady Manners, at last—"do you think, Hetty, that it can possibly be *Edward?*"

"Mamma!"

"Oh, I daresay not, my love," quickly. "I

daresay it is only my own foolish fancy. Don't think any more of it."

"But what made you say so?"

"He comes and goes so often that we never think anything of it, and, indeed, I had overlooked him altogether; but to-day I thought—I fancied,—she seemed so very much pleased about his getting that new living, and so interested in hearing that it was not far from Jane, that somehow—did you not notice it?"

"I was not there. Tell me."

"I may be wrong. It may be entirely a false interpretation. But of course we know what he has felt for her all along, poor fellow, only it had always seemed as if she never *could*. And as it is, I may be quite mistaken now, it may have been merely her way—you know Agatha always has a sympathetic face for everybody,—but she certainly did seem to me to be giving him more of her attention, and interest, than was necessary. To be sure, it was to her, and so entirely to her, that the news was told, that it may only have been that she was pleased and gratified to feel herself still, as ever, the first with him. Poor child! We cannot wonder. He has been so true and steady to her through-

out all these years, that if she should now have given rise to hopes which she does not mean to fulfil, I should be very, very sorry."

Hester was silent.

"You do not think anything of it?" said her mother, disappointed.

"You know, mamma, I was not there; I never did think anything of it before, and if it was only Agatha's *face*——"

"It was not her face alone, my dear,—it was her manner, her voice; but still—well, I will try not to think about it: if it is to be, it will be; but there is no harm, Hetty, in hoping."

There was now something each day to dwell upon—to watch and look for.

It was plain that Lady Manners had not, at least, been mistaken in one thing, that from whatever source it sprang, a new impetus had been given to Agatha's old lover, and that a new hope had arisen in his breast. True, it might have its origin in this, that whereas he had originally been tongue-tied by inadequacy of fortune, he was now in a position to speak, provided he had any reason to think he would be listened to.

In addition to the living which had just been

bestowed upon him, his father had lately died, leaving his two children better provided for than the sons and daughters of country clergymen usually are. Edward had twelve thousand pounds, and an annual income of eight hundred a-year. It could not be termed an unsuitable marriage for Agatha. Sir John would not be justified in objecting on the score of means: the Searles were fairly well-born people, and more than merely fairly well educated; they were a rising, clever family, distinguishing themselves in different learned professions; and since Edward had already gone out in honours, and had made a good start in the world, it might be expected that if fortune continued to look favourably upon him, better things still, might be in store in the future. He might raise his eyes even to Miss Manners, without being guilty of presumption.

He had long and secretly loved Agatha, but with the patient resignation to other claims which is, perforce, the lot of many a humble soul, he had meekly acquiesced in the more brilliant destiny which had seemed at one time to await her; and when it faded away, his heart had ached for her sufferings, rather than exulted in his own recovered chances.

Such a heart must have been worth the winning,—such constancy certainly was worth the rewarding.

But what if Agatha did not see it in this light? Agatha was a person who would not disclose her mind to any one prematurely, and no hints would have availed to draw from her at this crisis, that which she did not intend to make known. Therefore none were attempted—but it was trying, it was a little cruel, if Agatha had known; "so much," as her mother had said, "depending on it."

"There was never any doubt about *him*," averred Lady Manners now, referring to Mr Searle. "But I do wish I were as sure of her. He is a dear, excellent fellow,—and a clergyman too!"

She liked the idea of a clergyman for Agatha now, looking upon him something in the same light in which, if she had been a Papist, she would have viewed a convent. He was the proper, orthodox retreat into which a poor girl who had been unfortunate, and talked about, in her first love, might subside with dignity. The life would suit Agatha. Perhaps—who can tell?—it might suit her even better than that other,

to which she had seemed, at one time, to be preordained.

But the truth was, that any position in which Agatha was found would have appeared to be the one for her; it was only when there was no position at all, no niche in the temple to be filled, that she was at a loss. She was meant to be a wife, and a mother: to be a somebody, doing something, for some one,—and then, whom that some one was, it did not very much matter.

Had he been a leader of the Cabinet, all would have acknowledged that to grace a diplomatic *salon* was Agatha's forte; had he been merely an unknown member of the Lower House, she would still have helped him with his canvass, his election, and his dinner-parties. As a General's lady, she would have been the star of the camp; as a Bishop's, the glory of the diocese. But why multiply examples? In her way she was all that was estimable, and in Edward's eyes she was perfect.

"It would take the poor child away from this neighbourhood, too," sighed Lady Manners, who, when she had once before given the merest passing thought to Edward Searle, had rejected him instantly because his parish was close to the

Manor. "Now that he is no longer to be there, it would all," she felt, "fit in, exactly."

It fitted in only too exactly. Had there been some little hitch on the right or on the left, things would have looked better—have come more within the range of the probable. A heathenish view of the matter, no doubt, for which she took herself to task; reflecting sensibly, moreover, on Jane's peaceful and prosperous course, and on the ease with which their union had been accomplished. Not a bubble had rippled to the surface to break that smooth exterior—it only grew smoother and calmer as their lives flowed along.

Dear Jane! But Agatha was different. She was really beginning to get anxious and unhappy about Agatha, when one fine day the two on whom her thoughts were fixed took her completely at unawares, by demurely approaching with the joyful intelligence written on their countenances.

She could not hide her pleasure. Edward received a welcome such as he could hardly have anticipated, and Agatha was secretly relieved by finding that not only was her choice approved, but that it created no astonishment. Naturally

she knew nothing of Simon's intentions nor of her mother's uneasiness, and had feared to be lowered in the eyes of all, by proving herself capable of forming what could not be called a *new* tie, but might have seemed rather like an old one made to do.

She had been exceedingly touched and gratified to discover that, in spite of all that happened, she retained her place in Edward's affections; and the unsettled state of her spirits, and the return to Wancote, with its present awkward and painful associations, had been so many points in his favour.

Her position, both at home and abroad, was not quite what it had been. She had made a great stride forward, had missed her footing, and had found it impossible to regain the exact place she had lost. She could not now care for society, at least for such society as was comprised in the annual round of dull dinners, which was all that was likely to fall to her lot; nor had she meant, for some time at least, to go to them: to have been a superior object of attention, on account of her interesting and mysteriously-broken-off engagement, could not have been borne.

Gaieties, indeed, were still eschewed by all,

and what was to take their place? After a year and a half of constant novelty and excitement, of change from one place to another, and of one set of people to another, Agatha, in spite of the best intentions in the world, found home dull. She was, for the present, spoilt for "the trivial round, the common task," which, whether it furnished all she ought to have asked or no, certainly furnished all she got.

Edward's visits, and Edward's singing, became a resource. To practise a duet to be sung at their next meeting, to make herself pretty and neat for eyes that were still true to their first allegiance, gave a fillip to the weary hours. By degrees, from being languidly expected, his coming became of first-rate importance.

And then a lucky chance occurred; at the crisis of his fate he was obliged to absent himself for a week, and during that week it rained.

She discovered that he was a loss—that he was missed daily—that, in short, she could not do without him; and having progressed so far, the next step was a short one.

"But mind you, I'll have no dilly-dallying this time," quoth the father; "they must just be married off as sharp as they can, and no one

know a word of it, beforehand. Get the wedding-clothes after it is over, — that's my advice."

"They need not be waited for, at least. They can be ordered, and she can have what is ready," said Lady Manners, joyfully. She was writing as fast as her pen could go, sending the intelligence to her son.

"In one month, from now," continued Sir John. "That is settled. Not a day longer. You may tell Edward so; if he objects——"

"He is not likely to object."

"Very well, very well; if he agrees, well and good; if not, you just say from me that——"

"There will be no need to say anything."

"I don't know that; I know the wedding was fixed half-a-dozen times before, and see what came of it!"

"Only twice; and it was we ourselves who put it off."

"Well, at any rate, if there is the least objection made, I have my answer ready; I shall just say, 'Misfortunes don't confine themselves to May.' Eh? What do you say to that? Isn't that a clincher? Eh?"

"Absurd," said Lady Manners, scarcely

knowing whether to laugh, or be angry. "You would not say anything of the sort."

"Ah! but I would!"

"But what could you mean?"

"Mean? It is pretty plain what I mean! Wasn't she last to be married in December; and was there not misfortune enough, in all conscience, about it then? I mean that there is no saying what may happen, if he does not take care. I should have thought it was as plain as day what I meant—to give him a warning."

"A most unkind allusion it would be, and you are the last man to say it."

Sir John was silent. It had taken him some time to make his excellent answer, and he did not think it should have been pooh-poohed. He liked Edward well enough. Edward never interfered with him, and his sweet tenor voice, singing away beside the distant piano in the evenings, only lulled him to repose. He was not likely to complain of Edward's being a death's-head at the banquet, as he had of that other gloomy suitor of Agatha's; but he was in a managing mood, which must have vent. There was nothing for him to do out of doors, and his wife's suggestion that he should take his daily

walk, found no favour in his eyes. He wanted to talk things over—to grumble comfortably in his arm-chair; not to take the chance of a good wetting, with nothing to show for it, since there were neither partridges, nor anything else to shoot. He had already had one stroll, and a drenching; and having changed his things, he looked at the clouds, and declined another.

"You might put away your letters for to-day," he said, "and listen for a few minutes. I have been by myself the whole morning. Where are the girls?"

"Gone to the train with Edward. I shall have finished directly. I am just sending a line to Bertie."

"You are not going to tell Bertie?"

"Not tell Bertie!"

"If you do, he will have it all over the place. I would not let any one know a word of it beforehand. Not *any* one."

"We must tell her own brother. What can you be thinking of, my dear?"

"He will let it out, as sure as fate! He will have it up and down the country before you know where you are. As well tell the town-crier as tell Bertie!"

"There is nothing to be ashamed of if it is known. But I will warn him that we do not wish it talked about."

"Tell him she is to be married, if you like; but you need not say to whom."

But as the precise nature of the benefit to be derived from this piece of diplomacy did not appear, we may presume it was dispensed with.

"Well, and now, mind, no Cotterills," burst forth Sir John, presently. "Not a Cotterill among them all shall poke his long nose into this affair. And I won't have Constance either."

"We must have Constance."

"Why must? Say nothing to her about it. I'm certain she would not care to come."

"I think and hope she would."

"Why hope? What should you want her for?"

"It would be advisable in every way."

The wedding, for obvious reasons, was not to take place at Wancote; it was to be from Herbert's house in Chesham Place; and as an excuse for a run up to London in June was only too delightful to Constance, she accepted her invitation at once.

Like Agatha, she was glad of a change of any sort.

While the cousins kept so quiet, and so entirely among themselves at the Hall, it was impossible for her to make much ado at Lutteridge; she had hardly till now been aware of how greatly she depended on the comings and goings of that cheerful family circle, how pleasant she had found it to drop in as she passed hither and thither, to hear their doings, and report her own. Now that all was dull and *triste* at Wancote, that everybody seemed in a state of sombre expectation, and that there were no jaunts, no brothers, no fun going on, it lost in her eyes half its attraction.

Edward's wooing changed the aspect of affairs altogether; it was open and manifest to all beholders, and no one took a livelier interest in his success than she. In secret she plagued Hester to give her opinion of his chances, and as much as she could, and durst, she furthered his suit. That is to say, she had the two together at Lutteridge, and let them sing in the music-room throughout the evening, while she and Hetty remained in the adjoining chamber. She would not have been herself if she had not taken the

opportunity to coax a little of Hester's own mind out of her; but it must be said, in justice, that Agatha was her first thought.

A very, very little Hetty allowed to escape—Constance had no idea how little it was; but, judging her brother-in-law only by what she had seen of him, she accepted the meagre allowance of confidence, and caressed her cousin forthwith. "Of course it will come right, my little chick," said she. "He can't be such an utter idiot as to imagine himself bound, like the Flying Dutchman, to wander round the globe for ever. I should not wonder, Hetty, if—if that in there"—pointing through the doorway—"came about, we were to see somebody back here forthwith. What do you think?"

She had no idea how near the mark she had hit, imagining that it was a novel suggestion which she had inducted into the little curly pate by her side. When Hester smiled, laughed, coloured, and turned away her cheek, her companion was really proud.

It may be wondered how she was now so ready to bid good speed to an event she had once dreaded, but she had her reasons, into which we shall presently inquire: having always

preferred Hester to her sisters, she could almost welcome Hester to Lutteridge now.

The new marriage between Edward and Agatha arranged, she prognosticated better times to them all. To Sir John's infinite indignation, she agreed with joy to be present; but since she must be looked upon as a relation, and since scarcely any one else, whether relation or not, was to be present, he was not to be pitied. At least he escaped the Cotterills, one and all, except Herbert and Jane, whom he was repeatedly told he must exclude, as he had bargained for there being none of the name present. He could not see it, grew cross, and wondered what they meant by such nonsense; if they had endured all that he had from that old Cotterill, they would have felt the same. As to Herbert and Jane,—he was always glad to see Herbert—the only one of the Cotterills worth a straw.

He was especially glad to see Herbert an hour after. There was the little fellow, fresh as ever, running by their carriage-window, exactly as he had done, Hetty thought, with a pang, when she and Jem were the travellers to be welcomed; but even to such a recollection, a passing minute only could be conceded.

All must be bright, and tranquil, for the bride's last evening among her own people; and as each one present shared this feeling, nothing occurred to prevent its being so.

The ceremony was slipped through, and put out of sight, early the next morning, a brother of Edward's performing the service, and there being no bridesmaids except Hester. Within an hour the whole thing was done with, and the newly-wedded pair had departed. No greater contrast to the prolonged and magnificent torture attending Jane's nuptials could possibly have been imagined.

"And to think we might have managed it just as easily," groaned Sir John, at the reminiscence. "Escaped that abomination of a breakfast, and old Cotterill, and all! Here it is just one o'clock, everything is over, and we can have our luncheon quietly, with the whole afternoon before us! Rather than have another wedding-breakfast to go through, I would see myself at the bottom of the ocean!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

CONSTANCE AS NEGOTIATOR.

"*Of negotiating.*—It is better to choose men of a plainer sort, that are like to do that that is committed to them, and to report back again faithfully the success, than those that are cunning to contrive out of other men's business somewhat to grace themselves. Use also such as affect the business wherein they are employed (for that quickeneth much), and such as have been lucky, and prevailed before."—BACON.

AT the bottom of the ocean he might in his mind's eye have seen himself, but he did not see himself the cynosure of amused and intelligent glances, as he made the declaration. He did not perceive the look which passed between Herbert and Jane, between Bertie and Constance.

No wedding-banquet, indeed! Was it likely that the two great families of Lutteridge and Manners should contract a new alliance, without rejoicings which should ring from one end of the county to the other?

It was all very well to glide through the

solemn ordeal with bated breath and closed doors, when Agatha, the bereft and mistaken, was borne away—was entering the metaphorical convent of the secluded Devonshire living; but a blithe bridal they must have of it when all these troubles and perplexities should have passed away, and "the king should enjoy his own again." So, at least, thought the gay Constance, and something of the vision showed itself on her countenance. "What is she grinning at now?" said Sir John, to himself. But he was in excellent humour, and did not follow up the subject, as he might, at another time, have done.

"Well, that's done, anyway," cried he, cheerfully. "There's another of them gone, wife." He was with her and his two daughters, no strangers being present. "That's off your mind and mine, eh? Now then, Jane, what's your dinner-hour?"

"Seven o'clock, papa."

"Seven? That's right," heartily. "I was afraid of your eight o'clocks and your nine o'clocks. I am glad to see that you and Herbert have the sense not to change for anybody." They *had* changed—had made it an hour earlier, on purpose to suit his known tastes; but this, he

was not to be told, and happily it never occurred to him to ask.

"Well then," he said, "Hetty and I are going off for a quiet afternoon at the Zoologicals, and we shall be in at half-past six, Jane. I am glad that creature Constance did not get you to ask her."

"Papa!"

"Well?"

"I am afraid—I really did not think at the moment. Papa, I am so sorry——"

"What for?"

"I did ask her."

"You didn't!"

"And she is coming."

Her distress was so evident, that, after the first shock, his feelings as a gentleman prevailed. "Well, I never heard anything like that!" he said, exchanging the long face he had already pulled, for one of comical consternation. "That was Janie all over! To go and spoil my day like this! Ha, ha, ha! But I can tell you it's no joke. So I'm to be pestered by that chatter-box all to-night, as well as all this morning? Well, well! well, well!"

By his "Well, well! well, well!" they knew

that all was right: it would not have been uttered had he been in anything but the best of tempers; and having given her solemn promise that Constance should receive no further invitation to the house while he was in it, the affectionate hostess had the happiness of seeing serenity restored to his brow.

With other sensations Hester had heard her sister avow the civility into which she had been precipitated; it had been exactly what she had hoped Jane would do, and she knew that it had been done, before Jane said so,—she had learned as much from Constance.

She had hardly had a word from Constance, but she felt somehow a conviction that Constance had a word for her.

Not a message—she knew Simon too well for that; but there are other things in the world besides messages. Constance had not thrown that lurking intelligence into the roguish look she had bestowed on Hester from time to time for nothing. Nor had her whisper, "I'm coming to-night, Hetty," meant nothing. Nor had the *diablerie* of her laugh to Bertie, after Sir John's emphatic declaration, conveyed nothing. She knew more than she wished at the moment to

communicate; but Hester fancied, thought, felt sure that at the next meeting it was to transpire. She thought of the evening, and dwelt upon it with a tumult of expectation and pleasure, in the intervals of hurrying from one odorous den to another, throughout the sultry afternoon. She was hot and tired, and the animals were offensive, but how cool and pleasant the evening would be!

It came, and cool it certainly was, but the pleasantness was doubtful. Constance was in a wicked mood, intent on teasing, full of lively nonsense which had but little interest for any, and none for Hester; and apparently innocent as a babe of any intentions beyond enjoying the passing moment. Rarely did she relish playing with her mouse, keeping it on tenter-hooks, rousing vigilance at intervals, and then just withholding the bait, till the poor child was nearly beside herself with vexation and bewilderment.

"And so it is getting cross, is it?"

Hetty had gone into the back drawing-room, deserted by all, and was now followed by her cousin.

Cross? No. Why should Constance suppose

so? She was rather tired; she had had a long walk altogether; and the lions and bears had made a great noise; and the sun had beaten down on her head,—she had come into the back room to be in the shade.

"Poor little coz! Perhaps she would like to go to bed?"

Not at all. She was not in the least disposed for bed; she was going out on the balcony.

"That will do as well; but won't the child be dull there?"

"Dull? No. There are the gardens to look into."

"Would you care for a companion, or a book, or a—letter, or something to read?"

Now she comprehended; now she could not retort.

"Oh, very well. I know how to respect silence. You would rather be let alone. When one is tired, one really can't be troubled with letters, especially to other people."

A half smile on the downcast face before her.

"If you had said you *cared* to have such a thing," continued Constance, "there is a letter in my pocket that I thought might possibly

have interested you. It came this morning from Alexandria, and is not too long, as letters that come from a distance usually are. Travellers' tales are certainly more to the writers than to any one else—at least, in my opinion. But they are public property; and if you *had* happened to care," producing just a corner of the envelope, "it was here, you see."

Still no movement towards it.

"Fine study for a painter," Constance went on. "Pride and Covetousness wrestling for the victory. I back Covetousness. Come, Hetty, make a grab. What! You won't? Then down it goes into my pocket again."

"Constance!" from the other room.

"There; they are calling me. Now, Hester, I give you to one, two, three; if you don't come down on your knees—mentally—before I say 'three,' upon my solemn word of honour you shall not have the letter to-night. Now then, mark me: 'One—two'—well?"

"Oh, Constance——"

"I am all attention."

"Do give it me."

"Does that mean that you are down on your knees?"

"Yes, yes, yes; only give it me. Please, dear Constance!"

"It is 'dear Constance' now, is it? Ha! That is something like. Now that is the proper frame of mind I sought to inspire; you are ready to give me anything I like to name now, in exchange for this precious document! And little enough there is in it after all. Let me see, what shall I bargain for? Or shall I — nay, let me pause," mocking herself in an attitude. "Halt, too impetuous tongue—let me consider——"

"Constance!" came through the folding doors again.

"There; Jane has called twice, so I must go. Well, I suppose you must have your wish—there—catch—and you have got off pretty cheap too. I might have made much more of such an opportunity if I had chosen. One word more, Hetty—for I mean to do the thing handsomely while I am about it—you may set your mind at rest, for I sent the telegram this afternoon."

"The telegram?"

"You will understand when you have read the letter. Then you may remember, and say 'Thank you' to me, in your heart. And as for the epistle itself, I think you may keep it.

There; never say I am not a generous creature after to-night."

She tripped away with a laugh, and Hester was left to herself, with a pale-blue envelope in her hand. The balcony was no safe quarters for such a perusal; she might be surprised at any moment; Herbert was sure to want her, and come in search for her, just when the sheet was unfolded, and could not be put out of sight. If not Herbert, her brother; even Constance was not above finding an excuse to run back to see what she could see.

She waited only a minute to know herself unperceived, then escaped up-stairs by the door at her side.

We will not spy on what next went on, but as the Colonel's note was of the briefest and baldest, such as might have been open to all the world, we may be allowed to transcribe the single sentence, which was to Hester all that Constance had anticipated. It ran thus: "This will reach you about the time of the wedding. I should be glad to know immediately it is over, if you will kindly telegraph to Alexandria. I shall probably take the next boat home. One leaves on the 21st."

"Is he not growing clever?" Constance had laughed to herself. "I am to take it for granted, I suppose, that it is pure good-will towards Agatha which prompts him to be 'glad to know immediately it is over.' It is quite beyond me to trace any connection between a telegram which will reach him on the 20th, and a boat which leaves on the 21st!"

"Well," she said, when Hester reappeared, and she could catch her ear quietly—"Well, Hetty, what did you think of it?"

A smile that could not be restrained broke softly over a happy face for answer—a face that was too shy and proud not to turn aside, yet too grateful not to turn again, and let itself be kissed.

"There was no sort of link between the sentences, I suppose," whispered her cousin. "My telegram could not affect any movements of Simon's, Hester, could they? The idea is preposterous. I daresay he feels he has been absent long enough; I daresay he thinks the strawberries are ripe at Lutteridge now, and that there are other roses at Wancote than those in the garden. What if he goes there and finds us all away? That would be rather cruel, don't

you think? It will not take him above a fortnight to come, Hester — perhaps not so long. Don't you stay too long in London, my child."

"We are to return on Thursday."

"Thursday? So soon? Well, I daresay you will not repent. I shall follow you ere long."

But she had no intentions of following until something else had come to pass, which, to tell the truth, partially explained her exuberant and overflowing sympathy. She could afford now to let Lutteridge go—to see Hester in her place—to wish her well. In short, with the certainty of the prospect, whether she willed or not, and with matrimony on every side, what could she do? She might shrug her little shoulders, declare it was against her inclinations, her interests, and her principles, but the fact came out that she had taken the fancy of a boisterous M.F.H. in a hunting county, where she had been visiting in the winter, and as soon as the season had ended—for, after all, domestic concerns must give way to foxes—he had begun to hang out signals of distress.

He had not managed to get to the point as long as she remained intrenched in widowed state at Lutteridge, but no sooner did he get

wind of the wedding — perhaps it was rather wafted in his direction by sympathetic friends —than he set off hot foot to London, and went straight to Constance's door. Within a few days all was settled between them; and, as it may be imagined, she had not, in consequence, much spare time to bestow on Chesham Place, Sir John's week in town was not further embittered by her presence.

Great was his satisfaction on hearing the news. "That," said he, rubbing his hands as he had never done over one of his own children's marriages—"that will put a stop, at once and for ever, to the bane of my existence, the sight of those ponies in the lane. I wish Ferrars joy of her! I wish Ferrars joy of her! Poor fellow! Rather he than I. What a tom-fool the man must be!" Having said so much, however, and thus relieved his overcharged bosom, he astonished them all. He sat ruminating for some time in silence, and at length raised his head to observe, seriously, "Yet the woman has some good in her; she always liked Jem."

It was plain now to the dullest, that Simon's hour had come. Agatha wedded, his uncle's passion subsided, and Constance provided for, it

only needed favouring winds to blow him home as speedily as winds could blow.

Three weeks, however, had elapsed, owing to delays of one sort or another, since he had received the assurance that all was smooth, ere, on one Saturday night about the middle of July, when Lutteridge was gay with company, and ringing with music and mirth, the traveller arrived. He had not named the exact day on which he might be looked for, but had intimated that he might be with them that week, and of course the intelligence had found its way to Wancote.

Each day Hester thought, "He may be here to-night; by this time to-morrow I shall have seen him—spoken to him——." How her heart beat at the thought! What a mixture of delight, apprehension, shrinking, and longing it gave! She was almost afraid of it—almost dreaded every time she saw Constance, lest she should have to hear that he had come. How should she meet him? Could she look at him? Could she speak?

What would he say? What face would he have on? Oh, not the one she last saw,—not that drawn, pale, rigid, terrible look.

He wrote that he was well—quite well—and strong. She had gathered that he was travelling hard from Brindisi overland,—he must be quite himself again. How would he come to them, first? Would they meet by accident? Or would he appear in state? Or would he just walk in as he used to do?

Every night brought its thousand visions. But every night set in with a full, brilliant moon, fragrant essences from the woodlands, the land-rail's croak from the corn-fields behind, —and no Simon.

"And now," said his love to herself, despondding at last, as she rose and heard the bells ringing softly up the slope one peaceful Sunday morning—"now I have a whole long day to go through, without even a chance of his coming! He would not come on Sunday; and perhaps he will not come to-morrow; and Constance says she does not know when he will come! I think Constance likes to say it. She has no need to repeat it so often. Why did she go and fill the house with people, just when she knew he would dislike it? That Mr Ferrars might be there, I suppose. But Mr Ferrars might have waited a week or so; Simon might have had his first

home-coming without finding strangers in every room. Oh dear, perhaps they will be gone before ever he is here! I don't think I want that. I *must* try not to be thinking about him the whole of to-day,—last Sunday I know I lost my place in the prayer-book, again and again. I will try to be good this morning, at least; and in the afternoon perhaps I may just go to my own seat in the woods, and look at the Manor roof now and then. And who knows? By this day next week he may be there!"

She put on her white dress, and went down. What was it she heard that made her stand still in the entry of the room, with a catch in her breath, a quiver in her throat? The old butler's voice as he stood close to the door, addressing her father within. "The Colonel arrived last night, Sir John."

The day has changed his aspect. All the brightness in the sunshine is not too much for such a day. She must have a rose in her bosom, a chain round her neck,—everything to make her adorned and lovely for such a Sunday morning.

Long before church time she is ready, and so are both parents; and accordingly they are

early, and scarcely any other seats are filled ere the three—there are but three at the Hall now—enter by their own side-door.

The Wancote pew faced that of the Manor in the chancel. The latter was empty, and remained so until nearly every other was full. Constance was late, of course,—who ever knew Mrs Robert Lutteridge in time for anything? Probably she and Mr Ferrars had been loitering about in the gardens, or had dragged the rest of the party the roundabout way through the grounds, that they might enjoy the stroll.

Could it be that none of them were coming? No, that was not Constance's way: she was a great church-goer, once in the day, in her prettiest toilette and best humour. Still she was not apt to be so late as this: she usually rustled in, ere the bell had ceased, especially since Simon had come home, and been particular about it.

Now, however, not only had the bell ceased, but the organ tune was drawing to a close. The clergyman was in his place; and yet the little door opposite remained shut. The last notes of the harmony died away, and all stood up.

Lost in the general movement was the creak of rusty hinges turning, but the ray of sunlight,

which darted at the same moment across the paved floor of the chancel, betrayed to all assembled within, the entrance of the late people.

Hester's eyes swam. It was Constance's bonnet, beyond a doubt — that pretty little pink-and-white bunch of plumes, she had just brought from town—which now appeared in the archway; and it was followed by another, and another.

A black figure in silk and lace, a grey figure, a tiny bustled-out figure all socks and boots,— one after another followed their leader, and with much appearance of trying to make no noise, streamed round the corner, and into the Manor pew. Four chairs were filled; but since the four taken were at the upper end, all close together, it must mean that more would yet be wanted.

So it proved; another minute showed that the ladies had not come unattended.

Mr Ferrars came tramping in on his broad tiptoes, red, unaccustomed to churches, and uncertain where he was to go; another stranger followed, but could give no assistance; and both came to a standstill, looking over their shoulders to some one behind. Before, however,

they could apply for help, a servant conducted them to their places, and Colonel Lutteridge entered, and shut the door behind him.

Almost ere Hester had realised that it was he, their eyes had met.

She hardly knew how it was,—supposed afterwards, with a blush of shame, that she had been staring at him,—hoped, with more blushes, that if so, it had been unperceived by the rest of the party, and fixed her attention on her prayer-book for the next half-hour.

At the end of that, however, towards the close of the second lesson, it was not possible to be satisfied without a look—one look at his face. First her eyes travelled across the floor, then up the wooden panels, carved, and worn with age, then to the folded arms—how well she knew that attitude!—then to the face.

A new shock. A fresh tingling of the veins. He was watching her. He had been watching her for some time. His head lying back upon the panel, he was surveying her at his leisure.

How she wished once more that she had been content to know he was there, or had chosen another time for her inquest! During the prayers might she not have stolen just one

peep at the dark head, and not been guilty? As it was, I fear she did not hear much of them, although I think that in her heart there rose the while a psalm of thanksgiving, which was not unheard; but she had not taken the chance, nor yet another chance when they were singing, and he must have been engaged with his prayer-book. No; she had chosen the very worst time of all, and she was so vexed with herself, that she lost the other opportunities into the bargain. But what was it, after all? She woke up, with a shiver, to find the sermon over, and the benediction being given.

Kneeling for one moment's real prayer, Hester was roused by a nudge from Sir John, admitting of no remonstrance. "Come along, or we shall be caught. Come this moment."

Ere she could think, they were out by their own door, through their own gates, and making for the house as fast as they could go.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

IN THE WOODS.

"Calms appear when storms are past,
Love will have his hour at last."
—DRYDEN.

"I MUST say I think that was rather unkind," murmured Lady Manners, having done all she could to linger, in vain. "Rather rude to Constance, and all. Hurrying away like this! Exactly as though it were done on purpose to avoid them!"

"Not at all," cried her husband, cheerfully, since he had gained his point. "You always say you don't approve of gossiping about the church door. They would have kept us there an hour, if we had once begun."

"Simon just come back!"

"Well, you can see Simon to-morrow."

"I am sure he must have felt it——"

"He could have come after us if he had."

"My dear! You flew off like a rocket——"

"No, no, no; now, Emily, that is too bad. There is nothing of the rocket about me. I am the meekest, gentlest, mildest man imaginable. That was a cruel allusion—that of the rocket." He had on his most wicked look, conscious that he had circumvented them cleverly, and that no one could undo what he had done. "Did I do anything to bring all this upon me, Hetty?" he cried. "Did I not come out in the quietest manner possible? What do you say? *You* did not want to stay, I know. There was no one there *you* wanted to see, eh? Ha, ha, ha!"

It was impossible to respond to so abominable a "Ha, ha, ha!" but as it was seen to be no ill-feeling towards his nephew which had prompted the hasty retreat, but merely his ordinary desire to get away from people he would have had to talk to, he might be forgiven. And then it was but a small grievance—nothing worth wasting a thought upon. Simon was there! He was once again in his old place, and by each of those looks she knew it was not only to his home—it was to her that he had come. During those past two

hours, she had been—she could not but own it—only too happy; the knowledge of his presence had been as much as was needed for that,—perhaps it had been as much as she could, at first, bear; and on it she could stay herself awhile.

She had, indeed, thought to have had more than that one eager leap of his eyes to hers, to dwell on afterwards; more even than that fixed after-gaze,—she had hoped for a word, a clasp of the hand,—perhaps to have brought him back himself with them, to have had him with her now. But as it was, she would not, she could not complain. Happy day! Delightful, beautiful summer afternoon!

Dinner over—the early dinner always taken punctually at one o'clock on Sundays—Hester could not stay within doors. Her school-children were having their holidays, and it occurred to her with some apprehension that, perhaps, some one not knowing this might once more try the river-path. What if he should? She did not think it probable; his former meetings there had been too disastrous; but at any rate she would not seem to invite such an opportunity,—would not go near the place.

"Where are you going this afternoon?" inquired Lady Manners, with a gentle smile. "I would not go too far away, little one, in case any one should come."

"Mamma, do you think he will?"

"I don't know, Hetty; but I should not be very, very much astonished if he did. Should you?"

"I am going to my own oak-tree, mamma, at the bottom of the Strawberry Valley."

The oak-tree, under whose spreading branches Hester sat, hung over a little open bank in the woods, cushioned with soft moss and thyme. It was approached by a pretty vista, named among them the Strawberry Valley, but the valley passed beyond the oak-tree on the left, and brought the wayfarer out at the bottom of the bank. The little slope had then to be climbed, and from that eminence a view of the surrounding country might be obtained, in which the gabled roof of Lutteridge was the principal object. Here, on hot days, Hester was fond of bringing her book, and spending many an hour. It was a secluded spot, easily found by those who had the clue, but as easily passed over by others.

From her perch she had viewed many an intruder emerge from the vista, cross the little opening, and disappear again into the woods, without their having had the least suspicion of her close propinquity.

Yet, if sent for, a messenger could not be missed by her. *He* might be at fault, but she would not; and accordingly, in giving her assurance that she would be there, she felt secure of being found if wanted.

How much our reader now studied of the volume in her hand, we will not say; how often her eye rested on one pale blue, spiral thread of smoke, which rose from Lutteridge roof, we will not inquire. An hour passed dreamily away. Woodland warblings, and the village church bell chiming for the children's service, alone broke the hush over the land.

At length the bell ceased. "Half-past three," said Hester, to herself; "I thought it had been later. Perhaps he may still come. How hot it is, and how sweet the larches smell! Ah!"

She started, and leaned forward, listening intently. Voices there certainly were, or had been, but they died away. It was, in all likelihood, some of the younger maid-servants who

were fond of attending the catechising service, and who, being late, were hurrying through the grounds. It could not have been any one else —any one coming to seek her; in that case she would have heard a step, not a voice,—her mother would not send two messengers.

But even as she weighed the matter over, the voices sounded again, and this time more plainly, nearer than before. Her heart began to quicken. *Some* one was coming, that was certain,—but who, or for what purpose, was yet undeclared.

She listened again.

Men's voices; and one her father's.

Close at hand now, passing beneath, on one side; the next minute they emerged at the bottom of the slope, only a few yards from her feet.

There were two. Her father was, as she expected, one; and by his side was a younger, taller, and more erect form—her cousin.

Their backs were turned, and she had a few moments to steady herself, and feel, know, believe, take in, that he had come. He stood there before her eyes; their first greeting was to take place here among the lone woods—not

in the midst of chattering, prying spectators. Then, it could have been but the ordinary dialogue upon trivial topics which must have passed between them; but now, why should anything be left unsaid? "For, of course," thought she, "Papa will go away and leave us."

Papa, however, innocent as the babe unborn of any reason why the Strawberry Valley had been suggested by his wife for their stroll, neither showed any inclination to go away, nor any knowledge of his daughter's vicinity. The two gentlemen walked forward down the opening, and stood still; Sir John expatiating, as he loved to do, upon coverts, runs, the hatching season, and the chances of its being a lucky autumn. His dissertation served to give the watcher, in her nook above, the opportunity for the swift reflection already given, but she durst not wait to still her palpitating pulses; each moment only made her tremble more. Nor would she, when found, appear to have been in hiding. She rose, and got, somehow, she scarcely knew how, down the bank, treading as noiselessly as she could; but they turned at the sound. Neither showed surprise. Her father went on with what he was saying; her cousin

smiled, and held out his hand, without a word. He must have known all along that she was there.

"And so you see," pursued Sir John, "there could hardly, take it all in all, have been a better year. For if the early spring was wet, we saved all the later broods. Come round now, and I'll show you the new trees we have put in."

"I think I shall stay here with Hester."

"It is no distance—just round this way. It won't take us half-an-hour. A nice Sunday's stroll,—a 'Sabbath-day's journey,' eh?"

"Thanks. I think I shall stay here with Hester."

At last Sir John saw. Three steps brought him to the bottom of the bank, and another three took him from their view among the brushwood. He said afterwards, that it was the cruellest position that ever man was placed in, and that if he had had the slightest suspicion for what purpose he had been inveigled into taking Simon down the Strawberry Valley, he would as soon have accompanied him down the Vale of Gehenna!

The thing was done, however; he had himself escorted his nephew to meet his daughter,

and he could not subsequently tear him from her. He could but take himself out of the way as fast as possible, and that, to do him justice, he did with a vigour of action which would have done credit to many a younger man.

The two, thus left, remained standing side by side, in silence.

"How beautiful Lutteridge looks from here!" said Simon, at last, his eye taking in the undulating sweep of foliage, the broad winding stream, and the blue plain beyond. "I shall learn to love my home."

She did not reply, nor lift her eyes to view the landscape.

"Do you often come here, Hester?"

"Yes, often."

"Have you always seen the Manor so plainly?"

"No. Only since the woods have been cut. That view was opened up this spring."

"I know. I ordered it; but I did not know it was for you. So you were up there?" turning round, to look at her retreat. "It is a pleasant spot. Suppose we go back to it," slowly moving upward to the place she had quitted, and drawing her down beside him on

the soft, warm, thymy bank, over which the bees were humming.

But having proceeded so far, he stopped. She thought that nothing had ever become him so well as that pause; not all that he said, nor all that he did afterwards, were more to her than that silence, which told of a heart too full for utterance.

By-and-by, however, she was in his arms. "Hush, my darling, hush," he said, dashing from his own eye the moisture which had gathered in sympathy with hers; "all is well at last, and we will have nothing but gladness and happiness in this meeting. My Hester's tears have sometimes been more than I could bear, and I vowed to-day, this morning, that I would not, if I could help it, be the cause of your ever shedding another. This little heart has suffered enough; it must never be grieved by me again. You are my own, my very own, are you not? Ah! how your eyes flashed when they met mine this morning, Hester! What a look I had, before you knew what they were doing! These eyes"—lifting her head to his—"always did tell tales, the traitors, and I learnt their tricks sooner than my little cousin guessed. There was once, though—only once, I think

—they played me false. Do you remember? You drew yourself together and gave me such a freezing glance—well, what's the matter?"

"You said you wouldn't."

"I said I wouldn't! And such reproachful accents. Pray, what may 'you said you wouldn't' mean? You never looked less like crying in your life, my little one!"

"There must not be a place left," he went on, after a while, "whose bitter memories we will not wring from it. We will go together to them, each one, and allay the haunting spirits. But"—with an involuntary shudder—"how I have hated the place! I used to wonder, Hester, during *that* three months, whether it would be possible to induce her—my bride—to leave the Manor, and live elsewhere. Even a return to the East would have been welcome. Anything to get out of the daily, hourly sight of you, and the places where we had been happy together. What a time it was! And you never blamed me, my darling; I know you never once said in your poor little heart that I was anything except a fool, who had made a bungle of it somehow. Eh? She lifts her head at that. Little brown

head, I never thought it would lie on my shoulder again. Do you know, Hester, when I used to catch sight of that arch——" stroking it tenderly, "over a window ledge, or the back of a chair, it drove me away many a time? Ah, my child, you wonder to hear me say that? But it did. I could not be in the room with you—be near you—often. And then came that night in the snow, and I knew all. I could hardly believe when it was over that I had escaped—I know not now how I did, except" —bending his head reverently—"that One above looked down to help us both."

She raised her hand, and laid it on his cheek, with a mute caress of sympathy.

"Are you content, Hester?"

"Quite—quite content."

"'Quite—quite content;' once you said you liked to sit beside me very, very much,—do you remember?"

"No; I am sure I never did."

"You did. It was on the river on that November evening—the last we ever had, without the cloud between us. I asked you if you liked to be there—with me,—and you said——"

"O Simon, I was so vexed—so ashamed. I

did not know what I was saying—I was not thinking. Oh, it was dreadful—afterwards."

"It was my fault; but you must forgive me too, my Hester, my own love. I should not have placed you in such a position; and all I can say for myself is that, like you, I did not know what I was doing. But you will have to explain to me still some things that happened about that time, for even now I can scarcely tell what was their meaning."

He never mentioned Agatha. When her name occurred in family councils afterwards, he spoke of her respectfully, or was silent; he sent her a magnificent jewel, and a few words, shortly after this, which even Agatha allowed could not have been in better taste. She wrote back, and there was never any ill-will between them, but, as was natural, personal intercourse was for some time, by mutual consent, avoided.

Hester's mother was, as may be imagined, the one who, next to the cousins themselves, most rejoiced, and was most concerned in their happiness.

She was waiting for them on the terrace, when at last, as the sun began to wend his gorgeous way westward, they emerged from the shades of

the Strawberry Valley, and so entirely did the present contrast with the past, that it was Simon himself who now stooped to bestow the embrace, which she had once declared he would have revolted from.

I think she liked it. I think that no one was more susceptible to such little tokens of affection; but one thing was clear, that when Hester saw the spontaneous action, she turned on her lover a look so radiant, so beautiful, that he was almost ready to repent having brought it on himself at such a moment.

They all remained together outside, till the evening bells began.

This brought Sir John out, still irate, but outward manifestation of his wrath subdued by the sight of his nephew. "Coming to church, Simon?" he observed, carelessly, as if it were quite a common occurrence for his nephew to be sitting in the shrubbery at that hour. Assent was given.

"Will the others be there?" whispered Hester, on her cousin's other side.

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure? Yes. Ferrars has taken all the men

off for a walk, and I heard Constance say that neither she, nor any of the rest, meant to go again. But why did you ask?"

"I want you to come to our seat."

"So I shall."

"Whether they are there or not?"

"Certainly. Whether they are there or not. Hester, get me a rose."

His eye followed her, as she passed from one flower to another; but it was the opportunity, not the rose he wanted. He turned to his uncle and aunt.

"I can't express," he said, slowly and emphatically, "my sense of all your goodness. I hope you will never think that I shall—that I have not felt it as I ought. It is what I cannot speak of, but I shall never forget."

"My good fellow," replied Sir John, taking the whole to himself. "Don't say a word. Make Hester happy, and that is all we want." He was so taken aback by the light in which he found himself regarded, that the latter sentence, which he had found somewhere in a book, was a perfect godsend to him: and thus his consent was given, before it was ever asked.

Lady Manners laughed in her heart. In jus-

tice to her, we must inform the reader, that long before this she had obtained from her husband quite sufficient acquiescence in her wishes to justify her meeting Simon on his walking over that afternoon, with a smile and a direction where to bend his steps. He had never been told of his uncle's hasty refusal to admit any further proposals on his part; that, as Sir John's wife well knew, might remain a secret, and it had been understood between her and her nephew at their last interview, that no further permission need be sought; he was free to speak, unless further and unforeseen obstacles should arise. One whisper from Constance, one look from Hester, had told him that all was right.

"How he watches her!" thought the mother, as she took proud note of the lover's gaze. "How he worships her!" It seemed so plain now, so palpable why they had thought him behind-hand, when poor Agatha was the one in question; it was, indeed, little to be wondered at, that he should have kept his eyes upon the ground, during such a martyrdom.

Then up came Hester with the rose.

Simon took it, continuing to talk to his uncle, and fastened it mechanically in her own bosom.

"We shall be late," said Lady Manners, rising. "Go on with your cousin, Hetty, and we will meet you at the little gate. I have a message to give, first."

"And I shall never get my stick now," said Hester, as they walked on. "But why did you bring it to-day, Simon?"

"I always use it. You would not take it, dear, would you?"

"No. It was if we walked with Jem——"

"Yes. I meant that." He paused, and then added, slowly—

"Hester, I think Jem always wanted this."

He sat by her side in church, and, looking across at the place he had occupied that morning, wondered how he had had the patience to bide his time; while as for her, poor child—may it be forgiven her?—she was in a dream, a trance of bliss, throughout the hour. She had no desire now to see the other door open to admit the Manor party. Their presence, or their absence, was nothing, except in so far as she would prefer their remaining away, had she been given the choice. The evening was too sacred, too perfect, to be broken in upon by the noisy congratulations of Constance, the stares and curiosity of those about her.

No other neighbours went to Wancote Church; it was a small building, exclusively filled by the two leading families, and their dependants. Colonel Lutteridge, sitting in his uncle's pew, made nothing public that had not been known before.

The little service over, he went home with them again; it seemed as if he could not leave them.

"And when may I come to-morrow?" were his final words, when at length the parting could be put off no longer. "Let me come soon, Hester. Think how—how long I have been away!"

"Come," she said, "about half-past ten. Listen, Simon—half-past ten. And come up through the trees there; I am going to look out for you."

"Show me where—exactly."

"Straight up the slope—you know the shortest way from the boat-house. Turn neither to the right nor to the left. Please, Simon, don't."

"Straight up the slope,—let me see; and you think Simon cannot guess the reason why?"

She was waiting, as she said,—but he was earlier than she had told him to be. She came

running to the edge of the terrace, swinging the dew from a great lily as she stood on the steps. "You did not look like it at all," she said, as soon as he would let her speak. "You came on so fast, and you were looking up at the windows all the time; why did you not keep your head down, and walk slower? And why are you before the time, too?"

"None of them were down, Hetty; and I thought at last, I should be nearer the end of your breakfast, than the beginning of ours. I knew you would forgive me, for I grew impatient; and besides——"

"You have not had anything? Come in—ours is on the table. I'll forgive you."

"And how are you to-day, my sunbeam? Don't go in for a minute. I can wait for my breakfast. You look as fresh as that lily yourself, and as sweet. Hetty, may I take you up the river afterwards?"

"Oh!"

"And in the afternoon we are to have all the party over from Lutteridge."

"Oh!"

"What different 'Ohs!' I like my 'Oh!' the best. You will have to be so sharp, my

little one, lest I catch you giving me the wrong intonation, now that I have learned the right one. You will not be able to cheat me, not a hair's-breadth of my rights, Hester. Your time for that is past, my child: the game is played out; your day is over—mine is to begin."

CHAPTER XL.

CONCLUSION.

"Honoria suits a high estate
Much better than I hoped; how fate
Pets her with happiness and pride,
And such a loving lord beside."

—PATMORE.

EXUBERANT and vociferous as Constance would undoubtedly have been in private, she was sufficiently well-bred to refrain from being publicly demonstrative: with Admiral and Mrs White-Griffiths, Mr and Miss Ferrars present, she would not offend. She came, with her bevy, about the middle of the afternoon, and they were received on the lawn by the ladies and Colonel Lutteridge.

He did not now look "as if he were going to be hung." His fine countenance had never been more genial, more inviting; and he who generally stood apart, was, on this day, the centre of the group.

Fluttering muslins and pretty parasols surrounded him, and he bore the infliction bravely. He was appealed to, questioned, chattered at, and he had an answer and a smile for every one.

"He is bewitched," declared his sister-in-law, with a twinge of envy passing through even her cold and sceptical soul. "The whole man is transfigured. Gracious! What wonders Love can do! And Simon is charming, to be sure, when he likes,—so handsome, so distinguished-looking! That dash of grey on his temples rather increases than detracts from his appearance; he would be the most noticeable man in any company," her glance passing on towards her burly red-faced knight. "My bluff Hal is all very well, but he should not be standing there, to provoke comparisons. He ought to be giving me a little of his attention, besides; Hester is not to usurp all the languishing looks that are abroad."

With which she whisked her fox-hunter off, ere he knew what he was doing, and ran full tilt against the unlucky Sir John, who was creeping along behind the laurels, in the hope of effecting an escape, unobserved. Thus captured, he was forced to return, and be presented to Mrs White-

Griffiths and Miss Ferrars, and—what he disliked still worse—to the Admiral, to whom he knew some attention, as a man of note, was due; and not all his recently acquired toleration of his niece could make up for her having been the cause of thus spoiling his afternoon. He scowled at her even at the time,—even when, having deposited him in a basket-chair, which wheezed directly he attempted to get out of it, she left him between the Admiral and his wife, and turned to the gayer group herself; but it was not till all had departed that he could unbosom himself as to her offence.

"I knew if any one saw me, who it would be," he then began. "I knew her little eyes would ferret me out, if no one else's did. What was she doing, meandering down there with Ferrars? Are there not places enough at Lutteridge for meandering in, without bringing him over to infest Wancote? I thought you were all at the other end of the lawn—I made sure you were—and Hetty had told me I should be safe, if I kept away from that side; so I was just hoping to sneak off through the shrubbery, when what do I hear but that little shrill laugh of hers—the nastiest little laugh any one ever had—and

there were both of them before me, without my having a chance of getting out of the way!"

But this was, as we said, for private ears, after the visitors had taken their leave. In spite of the frown which involuntarily followed the author of his misfortunes, Sir John, at the moment, was the most attentive, the most gallant and courteous of hosts,—equalling his nephew in cheerful *bonhomie*, and both of them distancing alike in demeanour and appearance the other gentlemen.

Mirth, laughter, and lively prattle was the order of the day; whilst here, there, and everywhere, the blushing Hester radiated like a star with life and happiness, stepped from one to another in her pretty white draperies, and had need of all the shade her broad-brimmed hat could give, to hide the light within her eyes.

So thought her lover, as he proudly followed her with his; so thought Lady Manners, owning a thrill of maternal exultation in her child; and so thought even the obtuse and indignant Sir John, softened, in spite of himself, by the fair vision.

"Did she not look like a white fawn?" he said, when he and his Emily were left alone at

last, sitting on the bench round which the group had been assembled,—and after silence had fallen for a time between them.

"A white fawn," he mused; "the last I saw was in the park at Briddlecombe. It was prancing about under the trees — the prettiest sight you ever saw. Hester looked like it just now; where has she pranced to next?"

"Only into the house for my shawl."

"Has she not gone off with Simon?"

"No; he left with the others. He and the Admiral and Mr Ferrars went away together."

"Ay, so they did; and they wanted me to go with them."

"Why did you not? You would have had a nice walk."

"Would I? Catch me! No, no; I hate walking with Admirals, and people. If Simon had been alone, I would have gone with him."

"I am sorry you should have lost your walk."

"All through that provoking little minx! But as it happens, I don't so much care; it is almost too hot for anything to-day, and Hetty and I are going to the garden."

Comments and conjectures, meanwhile, were rife in the barouche rolling back to Lutteridge.

"Most devoted, I'm sure," simpered Miss Ferrars, alluding to the hero of the hour. "As he ought to be; she is a dear little thing. But you say the other sister is handsomer."

"I always thought her so, but," said Constance, doubtfully, "I really don't feel so sure of that as I did. Hester, this afternoon, looked——"

"Quite lovely, I thought," declared the other lady. "And such a sweet expression. I don't know when I have seen such a picture as she and Colonel Lutteridge made, when they stood together. Did you observe them? It was once, only for a minute,—there was no nonsense, no pretence of keeping always beside her—but she came up to say something, and he stooped his head to listen,—it was charming."

"I missed the Arcadian scene," replied Constance, with a fine shade of irony in her tone. She could now and then be brought to bestow praise herself, but she did not like to have it extorted from others. "But," she continued, "I am really glad of this marriage for poor Simon's sake; he would have been so utterly forlorn and benighted after next month, if he had had no one to look after him. He is not a

man who can manage for himself, and I should have felt quite barbarous about leaving him uncared for, and alone."

"Is it likely to be soon?"

"I asked, but was told it had not yet been considered. Hal," said Constance, with a little laugh, "was much more importunate."

"Most inconsiderate, I thought," said Hal's sister; "but men always are. He thinks he is to have everything his own way, and that there is no possible reason why the marriage should not take place to-morrow!"

"You forget, ladies," suggested the elder one with a smile, which was not without significance, "that this is, with Mr Ferrars, the dull time of the year; as there is 'nothing doing' with him, he wishes to embrace an opportunity which will not occur again, till next spring."

But as such a speech pleased neither the sister nor the wife in embryo, it was suffered to pass, and the subject was dropped. Constance was, however, really curious to know what arrangements were being made between the cousins. As soon as she durst, she again taxed her brother-in-law. Was he to be married, or was she to be married, first? Was he in a hurry, or

was he willing to give her the *pas?* Would it be possible to have a double wedding?

At the last suggestion he almost shuddered. It seemed to him a profanation, the bare idea of his fair young child's standing at the same altar as the shallow, worldly woman at his side. No arts would have induced him to consent to such a proposition, but luckily, before he had time to answer, she recollected that there was a difficulty. She had forgotten that her bridal robe must of necessity be different from Hester's, and candidly allowed that it would not do, —"it would spoil the look of the thing."

"But when is it to be, Simon?"

"We have not fixed the day."

"Soon, I hope?"

"Yes, soon."

"Before the autumn?"

"Certainly before the autumn."

"And you will have it done properly, I hope? You will have a right merry gala this time? It ought to eclipse Jane's altogether, considering that not only Wancote but Lutteridge is *en fête;* there should be no end of roast-beef and ale, bells ringing, flags flying——"

"What are you thinking of, Constance?"

She started at the sternness of his tone. "Thinking of? Why, Simon, to do honour to your bride."

"Have you already forgotten that it is not yet two years since you wanted me to do honour to another bride?"

"Of course I have forgotten. We have all forgotten. That is past—obliterated——"

"Past, but not obliterated. I owe it to poor Agatha——"

"'Poor Agatha' indeed! The vanity of mankind! 'Poor Agatha' is as happy as the day is long; and no doubt congratulates herself a thousand times a-week on her good luck in escaping from you, and finding a man with whom you can bear no comparison."

He coloured, and was silent.

"Now, Simon, you are saying to yourself that what I assert is very likely true."

"I was; but, Constance, you mistook me. When I said 'Poor Agatha,' I merely felt for the painful position in which she had been placed, at the time I was referring to."

"I believe you were; and since, with all your faults, vanity is the last that any one would think of imputing to you, I will go so far as to say

to your face, that if Agatha Searle thinks she has benefited by the exchange, no one else will be disposed to agree with her. Edward may be all very well, but—— Come, I'm not going to say what I think."

"Constance," said he, seriously, "I am not much at the best; but even such as I am, Agatha could never have had *me*. She would have been my wife merely in name. Agatha never knew me—she was never at ease with me; I am persuaded that she was often glad to escape from my presence—that she hardly knew how to get through the hours we had to spend together. She has found a husband incomparably better suited to her in Searle. He is an excellent, admirable——"

"Spare me the recital of his virtues! So you and Agatha found the time hang somewhat heavy? And what about little Curly Pate? The hours pass more quickly in her company, eh?"

He smiled.

"And what of Hal and me? Shall we suit each other? Are we at ease in each other's company? Is he a proper husband for me?"

"You ought to know best. He seems a nice fellow."

"That's all you can say for him? No matter,—you never go into raptures, not even over Hetty. Aha! I thought that would touch him up! Seriously, however, Simon, I want to know about this wedding. It is not to be done in a corner, as Agatha's was?"

"No, it is not."

"Is it to be at Wancote?"

"Yes—at Wancote."

"And—and properly done?"

"Quite properly done."

"Yes, I know what that means," said she, discontentedly. "There will be a beneficed clergyman, I suppose, and it will be duly registered. You are laughing at me in your sleeve."

"Indeed, Constance, I was not laughing—much. But the fact is, that the more quietly our marriage-day is kept, without defrauding our poor folks of their holiday, the more we both feel that it will be consistent with good feeling and good taste."

"You shall have all honour done you, Constance, however," he continued. "Though your wedding be in London, it shall be gaily celebrated at the Manor. I will leave word that nothing shall be spared."

"Leave word, Simon. Are you to be married so soon?"

"Within a month."

Accordingly on a sunny afternoon, one day before the month was out, Sir John and his nephew might have been seen coming out of the library at Wancote with calmly satisfied countenances, and on the very best of terms. They had been signing the settlements; and as soon as Simon's back was turned—as soon as he had found his way to Hester's corner, where, as a matter of course, she had preceded him—Sir John drew near to his wife.

"He has made the most tremendous settlement," he whispered, arching his brows to add to his impressiveness. "I had no idea he was worth one-half as much. It appears he has never touched a penny of his first wife's fortune, and it has been rolling up at compound interest all these years. All the better for Hester. She will hardly know what to do with all he wants her to have, at once, for her own use. I could not stop him! He had settled it all in his own mind, and she will have—I can't tell you all what!"

"It will not spoil her," said her mother,

quietly. "She might once have been spoilt by *love*, but never by *money*. Now, I think, I hope, that even love such as his may be given our Hester safely. I am not afraid for her."

"I should think not. Every girl will envy her. She will have the first position, the finest place, the best shooting——"

"The best of husbands."

"Pooh—hoo—hoo! Well, he may be; I am not going to say 'No;' but let me tell you, Emily, it adds something to the value even of the best of husbands, when he makes the best of settlements."

Never in his life had he emitted so much worldly wisdom, and the self-applause engendered by it helped to carry him even through the wedding-feast on the next day, which, though abbreviated, had not been entirely put on one side.

The corn was standing in its sheaves over all the land, and the harvest moon was shining full in a cloudless sky, night after night, at the time the cousins were wed. It was a blithe, homely bridal. There was neither the fume nor fury of rejoicing which had attended Jane, nor the feeling of "a good job well over," with which poor

Agatha had been, as it were, smuggled across the Rubicon.

"They can make something of our home-coming if they wish," Colonel Lutteridge had said, on hearing that disappointment had been felt amongst the villagers; "we shall not be away above a short time, and they can give us whatever reception they choose, on our return to live among them." And accordingly, in consideration for certain doings three weeks hence, for which Mr Lewis was already making mysterious preparations, the marriage-day was allowed to pass quietly. They knelt side by side in their own village church; and he held her hand, and vowed to love and cherish with a voice that shook, and a heart that swelled at the words; and she,—she had not words at all, but only a whisper, lost to every ear but his.

Not one among the few present but felt something of honest sympathy and participation in the joyous moment.

Even Constance, covered with lace from head to foot, and restless with interest, excitement, and desire to be herself attended to, was, in her way, struck. "It does one good to look upon our bridegroom's face," she said. "See how

high he carries his head as they go down the path! He has won his princess at last, and he looks every inch a prince himself. I declare," she added, as she followed with the rest, "Hester ought to be something more than a mere mortal, by the idolatrous gaze he bends upon her,—and she is only a little pet of a woman, not at all angelic. But she does look bonnie, does she not? Whatever she was as a bridesmaid, she is all we could wish as a bride."

Lady Manners heard as though she heard not: her own thoughts engrossed her.

Afterwards, ere the two left, these had assumed more shape: she had marked all—seen much that had passed, by others unnoticed. "So considerate for her, so tender over her," she whispered, to herself. "Guarding her as though she were some fragile flower, that no rough wind must ever blow upon. All he thinks of, is for her,—what will please her, what she will like, what will save her care or trouble. My Hester does not know how rare is such unselfishness. Herbert indeed is all that is amiable—no one can be kinder—but Simon is so much more unobtrusive. Everything is done without a sound—with scarcely a movement. He is coming now to say Good-bye.

Even that, he takes care to do before she is ready, that he may not intrude upon her own farewell."

Aloud: "Simon, I know what you are come for."

She took his hand in both of hers, but could not speak. Nor was speech needed, between two who so well understood each other. A minute sufficed for the parting, and he had gone, as she had divined he would.

He waited at the carriage door, where Bertie also stood, sublimely content with all that had taken place, since he shared the preference of Constance for having Hester, rather than Agatha, at the Manor.

"Hetty always does cry, you know." He felt that it was right to prepare his new brother-in-law. "She is the only one of us who is at all given that way. Jane's emotion was very feeble, and Agatha went off as cool as a cucumber. But I expect Hester—— Good gracious! I thought as much!"

Simon turned his head aside.

"I say," said Hester's brother, reassuringly, "my good girl, don't pay us all *too* much of a compliment. Simon will not thank you for that.

By George! There! Close the scene. Good-bye." The carriage rolled away.

"At last!" said Simon. "Hester, at last!"

. . . . .

"I have just seen our late Colonel," wrote Captain Whately, a short time after this, "with his little cherub of a wife. Considering the muddle the poor fellow had got into at one time, he appears to have picked himself together, and made his way out of it, wonderfully well. I could not imagine what swell I had come across, for there was no end of a fuss at the place where we were,—and all at once I recognised the Lutteridge liveries. It appeared I had just arrived in time to see the start, for they were off in half-an-hour afterwards, in great state, for the first return home. She is quite a 'little dear,' and he looked as jolly as a sand-boy."

Every day increased the satisfaction felt by all concerned in such a union, — weeks and months as they passed, only served to develop more and more the happiness of the wedded pair themselves.

Gradually Hester grew to her position, encouraged by a husband who felt that the support

of her dignity in public was not incompatible with the most tender and caressing care in private, that she might be to him still his child, his "little one," his petted darling, while to others she was mistress of the Manor, and one of the first ladies in the county.

"She is learning of him, much," said the observant mother, not above owning that her daughter had yet something to learn. "Agatha has softened since she has been under Edward's gentle influence, and Herbert has made Jane lively, but I own I did not expect to find my little Hetty practising Simon's stately ways. Dear child! What a happy lot is hers! I cannot think of those two apart, she seems so entirely a part of him, and he of her. He holds the very ground she treads on sacred; while she, unconscious as an infant, accepts it all—all his tender love and devotion, rejoicing in it, as in the sunshine, but taking it, nevertheless, as though it were her own by right. I love to look on his serene brow, to see his contentment in her presence, his pride in her affection. He had not prepared his mother's rooms for Agatha! Constance had never even seen them! I thought it was a curious excuse that they were too gloomy

and old-fashioned, but I can understand the feeling now. Do you know, my dear," she went on, having hitherto only spoken her thoughts aloud, but now addressing Sir John, who was present,—"do you know that little Hetty has the dear old suite of rooms in the left wing, which were my own mother's, and which have never been used since Simon was a boy? They were all ready for her on her arrival, and Simon had had a doorway opened through to his own sitting-room, which is never to be closed—she is to have access to him at all times,—and her easel and writing-table are in the round window, beside his arm-chair. They were there together when I was over this morning; he busy with some new leases,—what an interest he takes in the property now—he is always planning and thinking of some work to be done,—and Hetty was sitting on a footstool at his feet. Little idler! He said she was helping him, but it was too palpable an excuse! He declares he never does anything without consulting her. So like Simon! Always putting others forward,—he is one of a thousand——"

"Ay, ay—go on! go on!" jeered her own long-suffering lord, at last. "That's it, Emily,

for about the hundredth time within the last week. Now begin, enumerate the list of his perfections once again. That's the style. Just what I always said. Every one of you is besotted about the fellow. Jane would have had him too, if he had asked her!"

THE END.

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